

Many Paths:

Stories of Healing from Substance Use

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By Pam, Steve, Shauna Moore & Friends
Kettlepot Press

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By Steve Moore, LICSW, Pam Moore, LICSW, Shauna Moore, LMSW and Friends

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All proceeds from this book go to the Addiction Research Foundation to further research and education addressing Substance Use Disorders.

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Other Books by Pam Moore:

Show me The Way- How To Unhook and Live Free

Unhook and Live Free - The Workbook

Inward to the Kingdom: A Six-Week Journey

The Natural Pathways of Recovery, by Pam and Steve Moore

We are grateful for the courage and honesty in these stories. As we read them we noticed strong and powerful emotions in ourselves. This of course touched our history of wounding and trauma.

These stories of recovery are raw and often unflinching in their details and honesty and could be activating in many of us.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Tony Morris (December 1, 1953 - May 26, 2022) and Sarah Harkless (July 13, 1957 - November 28, 2024).



Tony Morris

Tony Morris who was the person who helped Pam out of her own path of destruction. He was the first good man she had met in her life. Sarah was a true angel in this field who helped so many. She gave Pam her first real job in this field and believed in her when she did not believe in herself. She gave her heart and soul to help others recover. Her smile was radiant.

Neither were substance abusers themselves. They gave of themselves fearlessly and completely. They both always supported not just our family but countless others who struggled with addiction . We are forever grateful to them both.



Sarah Harkless

We want to thank our cohorts who have found their way out of the abyss and now help others to find their path.

We want to acknowledge those who work in this field who did not have an issue with abusing substances. They are true heroes. This is not an easy field to be in as there is so much heartache involved, both from the loss of those with substance use disorder and the chaos we can create as we avoid addressing our issues with substances.

We would also like to acknowledge the persons who bravely shared their stories in this book.

It took so much bravery to be this vulnerable and willing. Thank you

Many Paths: Stories of Healing from Substance Use

And also, as always we want to acknowledge those who have struggled with substance use disorder, those that recovered and those that are still struggling and those that did not make it.

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Introduction

Over many years, while working with people who have substance use disorder, we have watched how people are given a label without understanding what it really looks like for them. We know it hurts the individual and the whole treatment field. Just saying a person has substance use disorder is quick, easy, and billable. We end up missing so much about the individual and what their very personal recovery is really going to be like. We have worked to understand through research and experience that only a truly individualized approach can help. With all of our beings we try to change this both within ourselves and within the community. Even with knowledge and skills there are days we fall back into the more traditional cookie cutter method. We wish there was an easy 1-2-3 (or even the 12 steps) that fit for every person all the time. We are all too unique for that to be true. Instead our hope is that this book will demonstrate that while there are certain things we have in common, each individual has a unique solution to their problem. We wondered how we could help people see the individual stories, with the common threads, but also the important differences.

So we asked people in the community to write their story for this book. Many courageous people agreed. These folks mostly have long term experience with recovery. The only instruction was what brought them into their version of recovery and how they did it. We intentionally did not give any other instruction. We also wrote our own stories. (Pam's is the longest - "I tried not to dictate to myself what to write either"). Our experience of writing and their reports have often used the word "therapeutic" which means painful but good. We appreciate their willingness to be vulnerable and share with you, the reader, their journey. Our collective hope is that to be witness to each individual, charting their own path, will help the substance use community and maybe even the world to see that we all find a way. As Steve has always said "Most people do get better from substance use disorder they just do not get better in the way we think they should."

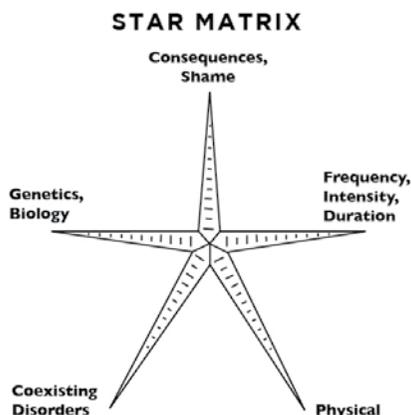
Introduction

We felt moved by every story in this book. People face incredible challenges to find a new way of living. We also understand that not everyone makes it through to a path and finds their way out of addiction. We believe that these stories, and what they imply about all recovery stories, are vitally important.

We want to demonstrate the dramatic truth of individualized recovery. Even when people are doing a similar thing on the outside - meetings, sponsors, etc - they are walking that path differently from the person beside them. We honor those differences and embrace individual change processes.

Below is a review of the Star Matrix Assessment System[®]. We think it is a method to visually show these vital differences. Our desire is that it is used in the world as a model to help with assessing the individual difference in each person's substance use while acknowledging the places where there is similarity.

The Star Matrix Assessment System[®]



Star Matrix Assessment System[®] is a system based on research and understanding that there is more than one path to dependency on mood altering substances and therefore more than one way to conceptualize the problem.

There are multiple components that affect the most important question in all substance abuse disorders. That question is "why?". Why would a person continue

to ingest mood altering substances despite severe negative consequences or the threat of negative consequences? An assessment should answer that question considering all the possible factors that may be involved. There are five major domains that research has identified as factors in the multi-factorial etiology of substance use disorders that are commonly called alcoholism and addiction. They are:

- Genetic Predisposition and Biology
- Dependency, including Frequency, Duration, and type of use of the substance
- Co-existing mental health issues and past traumas
- Consequences of Substance Use, Mental Health, and Traumas in life
- Physical factors, including all other Disorders, Physical Pain, Diseases, etc

The Star Matrix Assessment System[®] considers all of these five domains and their relation and weight to one another for a more detailed and nuanced picture of the whole person's substance use disorder. The system utilizes both objective and subjective weights as the measure of each area.

How the Star Matrix Assessment System[®] is used in this book:

There is a diagram of each individual's Star Matrix at the end of each story. It is based only on the story as it is told. By the end of this book, we hope you see that there is more than one way for recovery to look and healing manifests in many different ways. One of the difficulties with diagramming the Star Matrix for each story is the limit of how each individual chose to tell their story. This is what happens in life, also. We address what we know, and this might change with more information. Our thinking when we developed the Star Matrix was that this would be a living, breathing model meant to change with time. An example would be that Pam's genetics have not changed over the last 38 years, but since 1987, my frequency, intensity, and duration have. In 1987, they would have been a 10 on a 0-10 scale. She used IV every day with meth, a highly addictive substance. Today, she is completely abstinent, so it would be a zero. So this part for her has made a shift from one extreme to the next. At the same time, because of

Introduction

the aging process, she has moved from one to a four due to arthritis and other joint issues. During her years sober, her Star Matrix has changed on multiple occasions. When Steve got sober, he believed there was no genetic connection for him. He used to say he was the first Moore alcoholic. After he had been sober for a time, he asked his grandfather and discovered there was a long line of Moore alcoholics; it was just never discussed, so he did not know. His genetic link was not known. So as you look at your own pathway, know that there is not a permanency but an ever-changing model that can move in either direction as we gather information and we change. And our recovery process changes as well.

The stories in this book were from people's heart and what seemed important to them in the telling of their own personal recovery story. If we did a complete assessment on them, their Star Matrix would most likely change. It is not the purpose of this book to be assessing them. This book is really a companion to the Natural Pathways of Recovery book. For that reason, we have not included an explanation of each person's Star Matrix. We want to know we are each unique individuals that have both similarities and differences and that every path has its own special recovery process.

In Part II of the book, three members of the Moore family have each written our own stories. What makes this part different is that we were all three involved in a very big adversity in our lives together. We wrote about our history, both in recovery and not in recovery, and also about the times when life hit us hard, throwing us down, and how we found a deeper, richer sense of recovery. This life event did not involve drugs or alcohol; it involved a pain much deeper. We each had to face very difficult times we were sure would never end. So, Part II is the descent and ascent into a completely different relationship and life together. That is the ever-changing nature of the true recovery process.

“Keep coming back, it gets better, then it gets worse, then it gets weird, then it gets....”

SELF-PORTRAIT

David Whyte

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned,
if you can know despair or see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living,
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

David Whyte, Self-Portrait, from River Flow: New & Selected Poems.

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Part One:
Stories of Recovery

My Unique Path to Recovery

Willie Boy



One of very few 'sayings' heard around SMART Recovery is "Patience, Practice, and Persistence" (or simply "PPP") to remind ourselves of:

Being patient with ourselves

Practicing what we learn

Being persistent in our efforts



My name is Andy. In the following dialogue, I am going to attempt to represent my journey of reaching an addiction-free lifestyle. I will attempt to recall the story through my own eyes. However, please understand that memory is a funny thing. A person's memories can easily be biased by their own beliefs. This bias, or adaptation, of your memory is not intentional. I will simply try to tell my story to the best of my ability as I remember it.

I have for as long as I can remember viewed myself as different from most of my peers. I believe this level of self-evaluation produced a need to be seen. At the same time, I feel that I am a very introverted person. As you can see, there is a discrepancy between these two feelings. Please pay attention to me and see me, but not so much that I start to feel uncomfortable. Perhaps these are normal adolescent thoughts. Perhaps it is unique. Either way, it led me to make some choices that started my path to substance abuse.

When I was young, I got along with basically everyone. I was not put into a social group. I could just as easily blend in with the jocks as the tree huggers or the

nerds. However, I did view myself as rebellious. We had a neighborhood group that was known to play pranks such as sneaking out, toilet papering houses, and all manner of pranks. It felt wonderful to be able to pull off pranks and show my peers our work. This was all well and good; however, in high school, attention drawn from rebellious activities turned into more social activities. This lust for attention shifted away from pranks.

One simple way to garner attention was to be able to engage in substance use with friends. In my mind, being the only person able to provide alcohol was a big thumbs up in the social sphere. On top of that, being able to ingest more alcohol than others, while still being able to participate, felt great.

As time moved on to college, access to substances and free time to engage in them increased. At this point in my life, a balancing act begins to emerge. I have a drive for attention and the wonderful feeling of being under the influence. I am also balancing this with the need to complete my work and manage my normal activities. I begin to realize that if I want to continue to engage in these activities, I will need to be able to support myself.

During college, social events typically evolved around substances for me. As a result, my social network also revolved around these same activities. Have a party, smoke, and drink. Go to the lake, smoke, and drink. Go camping, smoke, and drink. Go hiking, smoke, and/or drink. Further, these social activities with the development of a reward system for completing my everyday activities. Finish a semester, smoke, and drink. Finish an exam, smoke, and drink. Finish an assignment, smoke, and drink.

While I was developing these habits, I was also reinforcing my belief that substances are not problematic for me to engage in. Please remember that I am still playing my balancing act. Am I doing all my work? Check. Am I doing well on my scores? Check. Are my finances balanced, and are my bills paid? Check. Well, okay, then I can engage in substance abuse, and I will be fine.

As time passed, I was able to graduate from college. However, I didn't pursue my degree. I had a job that enabled me to make enough money to live

comfortably. My reward for finishing a day's work, making sure I had touched base with the current people in my life, and that my regular chores were done, was to engage in substances. I had lived for so many years with no issue that I truly did not believe that substances were withholding any part of life from me. I thought that substances were enhancing my life. I also believed that substances had no negative effects.

Post-college, my social network had devolved to a group of very close friends. Most of these friends were the only people who shared my interest but could also keep up with the quantity of substances being used. I had one friend, whom I was related to by blood, who was my closest friend. We shared almost every evening together, drinking and smoking. Our belief that we shared was the fact that we were able to engage heavily in substances, but also maintain our lives. We believed we both had good jobs, good relationships, and a good quality of life. One quote we truly believed was that our bodies, somehow, were able to cope with massive quantities of alcohol better than other humans. We could ingest enormous amounts of alcohol and still function. Even when our ability to develop memories had long shut down, we could still function in our surroundings.

All of this gave us a false sense that we were okay engaging in substance abuse activities. In the back of my mind, though, I did start to notice a little voice asking if I was happy. While this little voice began to gain momentum, my best friend in the world started dodging some of our hangouts. In hindsight, I believe this was because his body did not feel well enough to get together. Either way, I started to feel angry and confused as to why this was happening.

This behavior continued until one day. On that day, my friend was supposed to come over, and we planned to go canoeing together. However, he did not show up at 10 am. I had just spoken with him the evening before. We laughed and talked for hours, all while drinking and playing games together. When he didn't show up by lunch, I went to check on him. That is when I found him. He was lying on his couch, as if asleep. However, I could see right away that he was pale. My heart sank. Next, I touched his foot, and it was cold. I knew immediately that there was no coming back if a person was cold. I proceeded to call 911 and perform CPR as suggested, but I knew he was dead. No illegal substances were

found in his system. The death was a result of fatty liver due to prolonged alcohol abuse and the side effects thereof.

I was devastated. Prior to my friend's death, my life plan was to continue having "fun" with my best friend until a likely premature death. Now, he was gone. I was not actually sure what to do next. What I did know was the grief that I felt. I also witnessed the grief that reverberated through everyone this person knew. He was a well-loved individual, and he left a hole in the hearts of friends, relatives, co-workers, and anyone else whose life he had touched. At this point, I realized that I did not want this outcome for myself.

I started to formulate the idea that I would benefit greatly from eliminating my addictive behaviors. However, I did not have a path forward to do this. I was familiar with the 12 steps. I also realized that I did not subscribe to the 12-step path to sobriety. Up to this point, I believed my body was in relatively good condition. I exercised and spent a lot of time outside, so why not? However, the death of my friend shattered this idea. I decided that I should see a doctor and evaluate how poor my body health was. In doing so, I asked the doctor for different support avenues. One of those avenues was the Moore Institute. I was able to get counseling from one of the counselors at the institute and started attending weekly. By itself, this counseling was an enormous help. I was presented with viewpoints I had never considered before. Furthermore, the counselor I attended suggested that I start attending an in-house group named SMART Recovery.

I remember attending my first SMART Recovery group very well. We worked on a tool called the cost-benefit analysis. The first thing we wrote on the board was: What are the benefits of ingesting mood-altering substances? No one had ever presented that fact to me before. I thought, wow, here are some of the reasons why I engage in these activities. Of course, as SMART does, the consequences or negative effects of the activity are set right next to that to counterbalance and outweigh the benefits.

The following few months, I continued to grieve for my friend. I still have a huge hole in my life where they were. I did, though, continue to attend Smart Recovery. I started to work through the simple handbook that goes along with

the group. After finishing an activity, I would reward myself by engaging in substances. I continued to attend. Sometimes with a friend or my girlfriend. Sometimes I would attend alone. I continued to witness how engaging in addictive behaviors had affected my life. I started to realize that my life's priorities included and mostly prioritized my substance use. I also started to realize that my substance use had stunted my growth in life. My focus had been on achieving happiness through substances and the activities associated with them rather than enhancing my life to achieve that goal. Furthermore, I witnessed the immense impact the loss of my best friend had on everyone around me.

I started to tie all these things together. Also, I realized that I did not want to impact those close to me in the same way that my friend's death did. The combination of these ideas gave me the courage and motivation to continue attempting sobriety. At the same time, I was still actively engaged in mood-altering substances.

One day, I decided to attempt an activity with no substances. I hiked with a friend, and I did not engage in any mood-altering substance. It was an interesting experience, as I realized it was still engaging and fun even though I was not enhancing the experience. This activity showed me that it is possible to participate in life without leaning on substances. With that knowledge empowering me, I decided to attempt sobriety.

Over the next months, I continued to experience life with no mood-altering substance. I had many occasions, urges, and opportunities to engage in substance use. However, the tools I had learned in SMART Recovery helped me choose not to engage in those addictive behaviors. I built short-term coping mechanisms to choose not to partake in substances. Some of these mechanisms were as simple as smoking cigarettes or even just going to sleep to avoid urges. Even though these mechanisms may not have been particularly healthy or ideal, they did enable me to stay sober.

After 1 year of sobriety, my life started shifting. Associations with people who were built on substances started to evaporate. Even my relationship with my girlfriend was eliminated due to this fact. At the same time, my relationships

with family and sober friends strengthened. I also landed a new job based on my choice of career (rather than the one that I worked in just to pay bills and enable my addictions). I started to decide on clear goals and plans for my future.

Not everything was wonderful. I also started to realize that I had deep-seated anxiety. My substance abuse had masked that feeling. I now had to cope with these feelings, among others. SMART Recovery tools were instrumental in helping me deal with situations where my discomfort levels were so elevated that I was motivated to engage in addictive behavior. On the same note, I also used SMART Recovery tools to choose not to engage in substances in places and activities that I normally would. All the while, I continued to attend SMART Recovery meetings. The effect of the meetings also helped maintain a level of accountability while at the same time creating a supporting social network.

About two years into sobriety, I went on a cruise with a friend. I went on a date with someone who happened to sign us up for beer pong. I knew this activity was high risk, but I had been contemplating engaging in addictive behavior for a while. This opportunity presented an excuse to attend a substance-based activity under the guise of a date. I did choose to drink during the date. The date itself was not even fun. I continued drinking into the night.

Towards the end of the night, I worked on a cost-benefit analysis to analyze the benefits of my behavior that evening. I realized that I really did not gain any major benefits by deciding to engage in addictive behavior. At the same time, I created enormous risks to my sober lifestyle. I also realized that I had been attending many less meetings prior to this cruise.

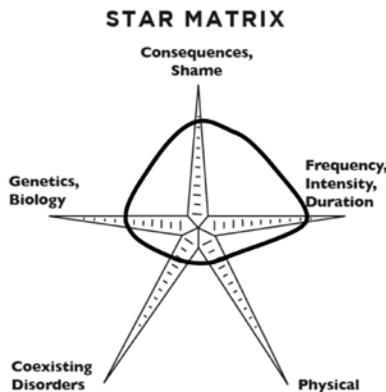
After I had this occurrence, I realized that I needed to revisit my maintenance of my recovery journey. I saw that my lack of meetings and support likely allowed me to lose focus on my goals of sobriety. I decided that the best way to ensure that I would continue to attend SMART Recovery meetings was to be a part of the meeting itself. I also saw this as an opportunity to help people who were interested in defining their own path to sobriety. I did this by becoming a certified SMART facilitator and committing myself to being able to facilitate the meeting. I now had accountability to attend SMART.

Since becoming a certified facilitator for SMART, I have facilitated meetings for nearly 7 years as of 2025. I have seen numerous others become facilitators as well. I have developed valuable, healthy, and promoting relationships with people who come to the meetings. I still see some of the attendees regularly from the beginning. Other people come and go, but we are available every Tuesday for anyone who would like to end addictive behaviors.

Though the journey was long and traumatic, I am extremely happy to be sober today. I have achieved things that would have been impossible if I were still actively engaged in substances. My career has vastly improved, I have a family, and best of all, I am still alive. I miss my best friend dearly. I think of him every day and wish we could undertake this journey together. At the same time, I thank him for giving me the courage to change.

I miss you, brother.

I love you.



Special thanks to all those who have helped me on this journey!

From Seeking to Finding

Elizabeth



What could I say to you that would be of value, except that perhaps you seek too much, that as a result of your seeking, you cannot find.

When someone is seeking, it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking; that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed with his goal.

Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal. You, O worthy one, are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose.

Herman Hesse



The first time I used drugs was when I was an infant. My parents were mired in their own problems, and they could not tolerate my needs, so they medicated me. When I would cry, they would put paregoric, an opium tincture, in my baby bottle. I went from a human with feelings that they did not understand to a compliant extension of themselves. They could go about whatever they were doing without interruption. I would lie in my crib, dissociating on drugs, silent and alone.

My first shame-based memories involve sneaking into the medicine cabinet in my parents' bathroom, searching for orange baby aspirin, Chloraseptic spray, or Pepto-Bismol because the sugar in those substances calmed me down and helped

me dissociate from the pain of my environment. We did not have sugary snacks in our home, so this was my only option to soothe myself from the chaos and abuse surrounding me. I can still feel the coolness of the Chloraseptic spray on my throat, the orange taste of the aspirin, or the chalky pink liquid going down my throat and making me float away, even if just for a second.

I loved going to church because there were sugary snacks. I can remember giving myself a pep talk each Sunday to execute my plan to get multiple donut sticks without being noticed. I would go through the line in the church kitchen quickly, microwaving the donut stick for 8 seconds so the sugar on the top would crystallize and melt at the same time. I would run out of the kitchen, shove it into my mouth, feeling the sugar go down my throat, caress the top of my mouth, linger on my lips. I would devour it because I wanted to eat it alone. If I did that with others, I could not truly enjoy the drug-like quality of the experience. I would then go back through the line slowly with a story. I would grab a coffee cup, pour coffee, then go to the donut lady and say, “Dad sent me back to grab him a coffee and one of those donuts after seeing mine.” Then I would heat it up and go eat it by myself. My face flushed out of shame and fear of potentially being caught. Sugar was a warm hug to me. A friend. A comforter. It was at a young age that I combined pleasure with shame.

This began a lifelong pattern of searching for something to avoid feeling spiritual pain, along with the shame that accompanied my need for something outside of myself, something I had to hide, lie about, and secret away. I abused food, achievement, drugs, shopping, approval, alcohol, work, and love to medicate. As with all addictions, I needed more and more of whatever substance I was abusing to be able to dissociate from the pain that was around me. The more I used, the more I avoided the reality of my life, and the more painful experiences racked up because I was operating in such a way that I was disconnected from the reality of my life. Trauma became a constant. Striving to push that away was second nature. Trying to make difficult people love me so that I could feel worthy became my mission. Addiction became the only thing I had that made life bearable. I could not see a life without a medicator. I was dedicated to the path of avoidance.

”Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we

could live, and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves. Obviously. But where and how were we to find this Power?" Big Book P.46

Through the years, I had tried everything to curb my appetites because the constant seeking was exhausting, never satisfying, but nothing worked. I tried psychotherapy, psychodrama, trauma programs, Buddhism, meditation, various 12-step programs (OA, AA, NA, Alanon, ACOA, Co-dependents Anonymous), changing jobs, changing relationships, diets, isolation, restricting one mediator but another would pop up in its place like a game of wack-a-mole. The problem was that I used the solutions like a buffet, but still grasping and clinging to the belief I did not need to fully submit, the belief I had some modicum of control. In my mind, I thought I could outsmart the need for seeking, the substances, and the need for approval. If I just worked hard enough on my trauma, I would be OK. If I just lost weight and stopped eating sugar, I would be fine. If I just found the perfect romantic relationship, I would belong and be worthy. Ultimately, I did not want to give up control. I did not want to admit my powerlessness because false power was the foundation upon which the house of cards of my life had been built.

At the age of 48, I was falling apart. My use of drugs and alcohol had become primary, the other medications on the back burner. Luckily, drugs and alcohol cause me to become extremely depressed, so my mental health rapidly deteriorated, making me hit a bottom much quicker than some. Within 9 months of using various substances consistently, not working any longer, and desperately trying to avoid the pain from a recent traumatic experience, I was faced with two choices:

1. Commit suicide
2. Go to treatment

I really looked at option one seriously, but I couldn't go through with it. I had grown up with a mother haunted by her mother's (my grandmother's) suicide. On one hand, I thought that if I were successful in my attempt, my daughter would get my life insurance and be able to finish college debt-free. On the other

hand, I knew that for the rest of her life, she would wonder why she was not enough to make me want to live. I couldn't do that to her, so I begrudgingly chose option two.

On Christmas Eve, I went to treatment. I still was not willing to say or admit I was an addict. I was willing to admit I was on some prescribed medications that were not working well for me (leaving out my unprescribed medications at admission), knowing that, because I was on controlled substances, insurance would have to pay for my treatment and detox. I had a carefully put-together plan of going to this treatment center, getting off of drugs (if they made me) for a short period of time, working on my trauma, and then re-evaluating my use of substances at the end.

I went to a co-ed trauma treatment center that also dealt with addiction, and they quickly stated they were going to take me off the controlled substance I was on. Rapid detox. Yet other people in the treatment center were allowed to stay on the same medication and go through treatment. This pissed me off. How dare they think I was worse off than some of these other patients? Didn't they understand I knew what I was doing and needed drugs to cope with my panic attacks? It was at that point that I left that treatment center to go to an all-women's Big Book/12-step oriented treatment center in Texas, where no one was allowed to stay on controlled substances. If I was going to be miserable, so was everyone else.

I was a difficult patient in the beginning. I would not admit I was an addict. I was dismissive of the classes and the 12-step focus. I spent more time telling them what I was not going to do than actually working to find a solution. Being a perfectionist, I would do the step packets because I wanted them to see how much I knew. If I am honest, I wanted them to think I was smarter than they were and knew the steps in a way they couldn't comprehend (insert eye roll). The staff just let me be difficult, but would confront me on how angry I was. In my delusion, I had convinced myself that I was a pretty chill person, a victim of circumstances, not of my own making.

I completed the step 1 and 2 packets, still grasping and clinging to this belief

that I was not an addict. I look back now and try to understand why I was so resistant to admitting that. It would have been so much easier just to wave the white flag. To stop the war. To surrender. But despite years and years of internal strife and wreckage, I would not do it. I left things out of step one, preferring to focus on the more palatable medicators. I did step 2 half-heartedly, using my extreme religious upbringing and sexual traumas as a shield for why I could not really believe in a power greater than myself. I was resilient, and they were now telling me that this was a defect, not an asset. But then I did the step 3 packet, and things changed.

When I read pages 60 to 62 of the Big Book, I could no longer deny that I was an addict. This was me. Had always been me. It would always be me unless I did something about it. I was able to see how my self-will had been disguised as resilience; my relationships were often transactional and built around my selfish needs. I had fooled myself into thinking my motives for helping others were pure when the truth was, if things didn't go how I thought they should, I would then become resentful. I would shove it down until I couldn't take it anymore, and then I would tell you off, and you would become dead to me. I didn't need you anymore. I didn't need anyone.

My self-pity had been my best friend. Give me some candles, a dark room, and a Smiths CD, and I would nurse my victim-hood for hours. I would much rather run your show than actually look at the part I am playing. And when you inevitably did me wrong, I could say I knew it all along. I would own up to some things I was doing, but I would rather focus on you and your conduct towards me. I was, as the Big Book states, "A producer of confusion rather than harmony." I saw in my examples on my step 3 paper the impact my addictions and addictive behavior had on my own child. But somehow, instead of feeling deep shame, I felt hope that I could even see that, admit that. I could finally see that I could not fix myself.

When one completed the step 3 packet at my treatment center, they had to go to the staff and get on their knees and pray the third step prayer. Of course, I had nixed doing that on day one, rather loudly and repeatedly, saying, "You cannot make me pray. I don't believe in God. I have rights. You cannot force religion on

me.” I had made fun of a Christian song that one of the staff members played as a request for one of the patients in the group. I loved to steal people’s joy related to religion and a relationship with God. I would force my belief on you, showing you in one way or another, if I am going to be miserable, so will you. I would make you face the reality that there is nothing in life to protect us. We are all alone, and you better see that. I honestly was so delusional that I believed I was being helpful. Just running the show without a contract.

I will never forget the moment I knew my life was changing as a result of the steps. It was January 11th, 2021, a cold Texas morning. I held my completed step three packet and walked into the room where the staff was huddled. I said, “I have finished step three. I am ready to pray.” I got on my knees. I don’t really know what the staff was thinking because, for the first time in a long time, my actions were not based on what they would think. I didn’t need to understand their motives to be OK with mine. I knew my motive right then was not just to live, but to actually be alive. I recited the prayer. I felt a warmth over myself. The warm hug that I had always sought out through addictive means came to me when I surrendered.

The staff then handed me the fourth step packet, and I thought they said, “Now you need to do the fourth step Christians.” Without any hesitation, I said, “OK, no problem. Tell me how to do the fourth step Christians.” I was willing. They then laughed and informed me that they had actually said, “Now you need to do the fourth step questions.” I laughed, not out of shame, but out of freedom. I knew I was willing to do what it took.

I continued doing my step work in treatment, extended my stay two additional weeks so that I could get more internal work done. The fact that I had participated in years of psychotherapy trying to find a solution turned out to be helpful to me now. I had already worked on healing many traumas, and now saw that the 12 steps were the trauma treatment I needed. The 12 steps helped me to move from victim to survivor. From treading water to swimming. From going at it alone to asking for help. I finally saw that my addictions had given me a false power to keep going in life. They kept me in delusion, constantly seeking, never satisfied. I came face to face with my hungry ghost, felt compassion for the life

she had lived, but was now ready to tend and befriend her, rather than to run from her presence, pretending she didn't exist.

When I did my fourth step, I found it to be enlightening. I saw the patterns in my resentments. I saw the depth of my fears and how they were keeping me stuck. I saw my conduct in interpersonal relationships and the unfair expectations that I put on others. The staff member who heard my fifth step wrote three pages of character defects based on what I had just confessed. I agreed with all of them, except one, which I asked for clarification on. "What does it mean when you say 'wasteful?'" She looked at me and said, "You are wasting the talents that you were born with. Many people are not lucky enough to have the talents you have. You have harmed many by not living in truth." OUCH. She was right. I took so much for granted, always focusing on myself and my pain and trying to somehow avoid it at the same time, not focusing on my gifts, the things I had been given, the privilege I had.

When I came home from treatment, I got a sponsor and worked on the rest of my steps. Doing my amends was a very spiritually freeing exercise. I have had to continue in the amends process throughout my sobriety because, as I became more open, I saw more things I had done to harm others. I went to AA/NA meetings, worked the steps, read recovery literature, but I was still stuck in fear, operating out of it.

"Fear is an evil, corroding thread; the fabric of our lives is shot through with it."
Big Book

At 3 years and 9 months sober, I was betrayed in my marriage in ways that I never could have imagined, and I immediately made him move out. Things I had thought to be true over a 21-year relationship were lies. I found out that the man I married had betrayed me over and over and over, yet wanting to be loved by a difficult person, I would put the blame for the marital problems on myself and keep trying to change so that I could feel worthy. I found some of his own writings from years before and read about the abuse he had purposely inflicted on my daughter, his step-daughter. I had been so stuck in the cycle of seeking, delusion, and fear that I had not understood who he was. I had allowed him to

blame me for not being a good parent, being too loving, too permissive, too feelings-oriented, not understanding that it was all a front that he put on me because he hated my child and enjoyed taking his anger out on her. Behaviors of his that had never made sense, I finally saw clearly in black and white. My daughter had been sacrificed because of my dedication to avoiding pain and my fears.

The day after I kicked my husband out, I started going back to AA meetings just so I would not be alone with my thoughts. I had gone to meetings since coming back from treatment years prior, but I refused to make friends there. I was friendly-ish but preferred to be a lone wolf in my program. I would talk to my sponsor routinely and work the steps, but I stayed stuck in fear. In 2021, I had written on my fear list that I was afraid I would not want to be with my husband when I was sober. Who would I be without striving to make a difficult person love me? I went to a divorce lawyer in 2021, 2022, and 2023. I was too afraid to leave him. In 2024, I was finally able to leave, only because what he had done was so horrific that I could not stay and have any self-respect or stay sane, which allowed me to be vulnerable enough (desperate enough if I am being honest) to fully enter into relationships with others in recovery.

My relationships, up until this point, had been transactional. I would give to you so that I would not owe you anything if I needed to run. Now I was opening up to strangers in AA meetings, owning my defects and clinging to the hope I heard from others. I found a home group within a week, one where I actually felt comfortable and safe. I had never found a home group before because I was not willing to put in the time to go to a lot of different meetings to find the place where I felt at home. This group became my anchor. I made friends there. People who accepted me for who I was at the time. People who did not want anything from me other than to be honest and vulnerable. I made friends. I went out to movies, to goat yoga, festivals, kayaking, blueberry picking, to dinners and coffee, to the makeup store, to exercise classes with these people. I opened up to them. I trusted them. I gave back to others as I could. I became the chair of my home group as a way to be of service. I gave women in sober-living rides as a way to get out of self-pity.

I sat down with my daughter when she came home for Christmas (almost 4

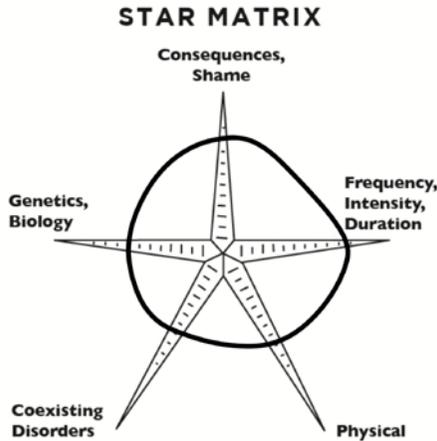
months post-separation) with a four-page list of the ways I had caused her to feel powerless and caused unmanageability for her by staying in that marriage. She let me read them to her one by one, and told me some I had not thought of at the end. She said that she could see how hard I had worked on that list and that she could tell I had really put a lot of thought into it, which meant a lot to her. She said she forgave me, but that it had hurt her. She said that for the first time in 21 years, she saw the mother that she had lost to that relationship, compounded by other addictions, I used to cope with the constant striving to be loved by someone who could not do it.

The past 10 months have been the most difficult of my adult life because I have had nothing to abuse addictively to get through the emotional pain. I knew that if I was going to come through this, I had to feel that pain. I had to truly learn to lean on others. I was terrified that I could not do it. One month into our separation, I remember coming into my home, falling onto the floor, and sobbing so hard that I could not breathe. I was talking out loud to the God of my understanding, saying over and over again, “I can’t do this. I can’t do this. I can’t do this.” I actually thought I was dying from spiritual pain. I called my sponsor and allowed another human being to see me in my most vulnerable state. I hung up in the middle of the phone call out of shame at my pain, but she called back. She basically told me you can do this, but you cannot do it alone. She was right.

Since that day, I have been able to confront fear after fear after fear, getting stronger each time, less reactive, calmer, all while going through some of the biggest challenges of my adult life in this divorce process. My husband wasn’t going to make it easy for me to leave, and he has used every single bit of power and control he could find to try to break me. But because I reached out for support, I didn’t feel alone. I feel connected to others. My relationship with my parents is completely different than anything I could have ever imagined. They have both been extremely supportive of me during this time. I struggled with shame related to the impact my addictions and actions had on my daughter’s life, but I worked on this in therapy and with my sponsor. Seeing how my relationship with my parents, whom I had long blamed for many of my problems prior to treatment, had continued to improve, I knew that my relationship with my shame would dissipate in relation to my daughter as long as I stayed sober and continued doing

what I was doing. She forgave me. I work on forgiving myself.

I feel connected to a higher power, which I don't have to explain or understand. I try to accept that I am not in charge, that I am lovable, that I am not perfect, that I am not alone. Recently, I found my fear list from treatment, and since leaving my husband, I have been able to challenge every single fear on that list and have come out of them all for the better. It was only through admitting my powerlessness over my addictions and my constant seeking to avoid pain that I found my personal power. I genuinely feel that at the age of 53, I have finally found peace, and that only came because I stopped searching for it.



The Healing Journey

Michael



There are moments when you become aware not only of what you are doing but also of yourself doing it. You see both 'I' and the 'here' of 'I am here'- both the anger and the 'I' that is angry. Call this self-remembering if you like.

(Views From the Real World)

Gurdjieff



I came into recovery in 1982. Actually, it was a bit of a fluke. I was teaching a fitness course for the University of Maine faculty at 6 am, and my first hint of what was to come was when a student behind me said, “You smell a lot like Kahlua Sombbrero.” I laughed and said, “Indeed, I do, that’s my favorite drink.” He chuckled, and I began the class. Over the next several weeks, the student would walk with me and at one point asked me about my drinking habits. I said, “Well, I drink two or three times a week. It’s not bad.” After several questions like this, he said, “Would you like to come to an AA meeting with me?” I felt instant shame. He thought I had a problem. “Yes, sometimes I can’t control it, but I’m not an alcoholic, I’m too young,” I explained. He kept gently asking me to attend a meeting with him until, finally, in order to appease him, I went to my first AA meeting. I was shocked. I heard my story told over and over again, and out of the blue, it landed. I’m an alcoholic. I felt this in my heart and soul. I was 32 years old.

As I stayed sober, the fog of my past began to dissolve. One by one, I remembered the times loved ones had said, “Michael, you have a drinking problem.” I winced each time, but assured them I did not; besides, I felt a particular pride

about my drinking. I was good at it, I thought. Nonetheless, the stage had been set for that first day in AA when the light went off. Over time, I remembered the many times I'd been drunk and abandoned my partners, ruined relationships, lost jobs, and gotten sick. The times when I was drunk under the influence and felt my driving was great, yet there were many pure luck moments when I didn't crash and harm someone. The longer I stayed sober, the clearer the past became. It was like a gut punch, these arising revelations. I realized that I had been living in a state of deep confusion for the last 12 years, when I had begun my substance use. Alcohol and marijuana were my primary drugs of choice, but I experimented with Ecstasy, Mescaline, LSD and Cocaine.

I began in AA and was a steady participant for five years. Then I felt something was missing, that AA didn't answer all my questions, particularly around spirituality. Although I loved the spirit of AA—find the higher power of your understanding—the meetings felt repetitive and I was bored, having heard one too many drunkalogues, and feeling my spiritual longing was not being met. So I took a journey. I began with Landmark, followed by the Six Day (the follow-up to Landmark), and then attended Landmark seminars over the next year. There, a Landmark teacher said, “If you do a three-day Zen retreat and sit there and watch your thoughts, all of your suffering and delusions will reveal themselves. Great healing would then be possible because now you have the awareness of having watched yourself and the thought-stream that occupies your daily life. You'll notice that the same themes, the same beliefs, the same delusions repeat over and over in the movie house of your mind, and that by observing all of this flooding clutter of thoughts and images, that magically and very slowly, your mind will start to settle and from time to time you will experience quiet mind. A quiet mind will then allow you to more deeply see the suffering you have acquired over your lifetime, that is, your conditioning from childhood and beyond at deeper and deeper levels.

I began Shambhala Buddhism and started sitting every day. I read books by Chogyam Trungpa and sat with a Buddhist group. Pema Chodron and her book *When Things Fall Apart* became a lifelong inspiration, and I devoured her books.

At year six in my recovery, my life fell apart, and I lost everything I'd built:

my family, my job, my reputation. I went from being the Chemical Dependency Coordinator and Counselor of a big school district to loading planes at the local airport. I'd fallen hard, caught in the grips of a cultural hysteria of that time. I started Jungian Therapy to deal with my grief, and there, my therapist (who would later become my mentor) said, "Read these two books, *In Search of the Miraculous* and *Personality Types*. Read about the Type Four." I did so and discovered, much to my shock, that I fell under the definition of Type Four, which revealed to me another depth of suffering and unconscious behavior that contributed to two of my relationships being utterly chaotic and falling apart, and had set me up for my catastrophe. I became a student of the Enneagram, and with it, via *In Search of the Miraculous* became a student of Gurdjieff and joined a group that met several times a week. There was a remarkable similarity in the Gurdjieff work with the principles of AA. I learned new meditation practices and sacred dances that could take me out of my personality patterns into the deeper qualities of what I have grown to know as my Essence, or True Self. Slowly, the patterns that kept me shallow and on the surface began to relax, and a deeper, more authentic self was revealed.

While in the Gurdjieff work, I was told that I needed outside help, that my unresolved suffering from the past was getting in the way of my being able to absorb Gurdjieff's teaching, and his work on the Enneagram. I began Jungian therapy, and weekly for 10 years, attended sessions, while taking a break from the Gurdjieff work. During this time, I discovered Street Funk, African Dance, Jazz dance, and Creative Dance. For 20 years, dance became my ultimate passion and joy. Along with it, when my life had tanked in 1987, I discovered *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg, an approach to writing that was inspired by her Zen teacher. I became a daily writer and formed four writing groups that lasted over ten years. Writing, dancing, and meditation became the core of my recovery and well-being. And the Zen writing practice became a beautiful doorway to deeper authenticity and connection with people. Eventually, I would write a book about Addiction Recovery and the Enneagram.

Simultaneous with the 1987 catastrophe, I started working as an addiction counselor at a local men's rehab and halfway house. This keeps me deeply connected to the life of addiction and the challenges of trying to recover. My AA

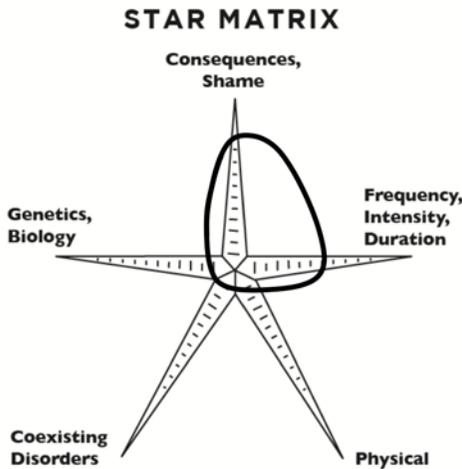
meeting attendance was sparse over the next 12 years. But my spiritual practices of creative dance, writing, journaling, and meditation stayed strong. They were the bedrock of my recovery, along with my work with early-stage addicts (which lasted 12 years).

I began Zen meditation after reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Suzuki. I attended a week-long training, sitting 10 hours a day. I continued my work weekly at a San Francisco-style Zen Center in Portland, Maine. In 2006, I met the authors of *Personality Types* and began training with them on the deep study of the Enneagram. I loved the work, and over the next three years, the Enneagram study started a new spiritual path for me, as I became a Certified, Authorized Faculty member and began teaching the Enneagram, which became my life's work. I rejoined my Gurdjieff Group and have been with them for sixteen years. At the same time, I discovered Eckhart Tolle and began a deep study of his work on meditation and the power of learning to sense the body. In 2010, I discovered the Diamond Heart work begun by A.H. Almaas, and found it went hand in glove with my Gurdjieff work and my Enneagram work. All of my work revolved around gaining more and more presence and more freedom from my automatic patterns acquired in childhood. This became the main focus of my recovery.

Although I felt that I was in the middle of addiction recovery working at the rehab (I was attending a meeting per week) in 2014, I returned to weekly meetings in AA. I found that everything I learned about the Enneagram, the Gurdjieff Work, the Diamond Heart, and other modalities deepened my appreciation of AA and coincided with their principles. I approached AA with a new set of ideas. Also in 2014, I was encouraged to do the Hoffman Process, a 9-day retreat, another deep modality for healing emotional suffering. Along with it in 2006, I discovered Holotropic Breath Work and did this practice throughout the next 20 years. In addition, in 2010, I began facilitating 4 men's groups per week and became steeped in men's recovery. This has been followed by my participation in Illuman and attending their retreats for men. My first exposure to men's groups was in 1987 during the great debacle, and there I met my men's mentor, who said something deeply profound: *You must learn to receive nurturing and support from men. If you don't, you will swamp your intimate partners with your needs and surely sink the relationship.* Truer words have not been spoken. This

had happened two times while sober.

I've been sober now for 42 years. I've been married for 28 years, raised two kiddos, now 28 and 31, and weathered the challenges of parenthood (which were many, with my son getting addicted for years), but have not had to pick up a drink or a drug. In the course of my recovery, I learned that many people begin AA, have a good start, and, if lucky, start working with other modalities. Others hit a shock point, discover that their recovery practices are not touching their deeper emotional pain, and either get help or relapse. AA, when I first began, was very dogmatic, and I considered myself one of their heretics. Over time in my geographic area, dogmatism has softened, and there is more acceptance of the validity of other paths. AA is not for everyone, as Zen Buddhism, the Enneagram, Diamond Heart work, or Gurdjieff work are not for everyone. They worked for me, however. I followed this principle: Believe nothing that does not match your common sense. Don't just believe, discern what you are taking in, and notice what you accept and what you reject. This was different from the AA principle of let us think for you. Although this is a necessary first stage of recovery, ultimately my task is to learn what is trustworthy within myself. Inner trust has deepened over the years.



Killing Myself Back to Life

Wes A.



*Thank you, God, for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes
(i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday;
this is the birth day of life and of love and wings:
and of the gay great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any—lifted
from the no of all nothing—human merely being doubt unimaginable You?
(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

e.e. cummings



My life, like most people's, has been a mixture of miraculous moments, slow-burning experiences, and traumatic events. When asked how I was, the reply was always I'm good. Quite often, I would also use the phrase, I'm blessed. These phrases would fly off my tongue with ease, and at the time, I felt that they genuinely captured the Essence of my spirit. I lived in the black and white of good and bad. I couldn't appreciate and honor that most of life is in the gray. Extremes were my nectar, and although I told myself they were an inconvenient fact of life, they actually served as a dysfunctional compass on how to navigate life, and they served as a reminder that I was able to feel and that I was real.

I had learned as a young child to self-soothe. The ability to fold my soul so tightly that it enveloped itself. I could go within myself and block out everything

Killing Myself Back to Life

around me, being teleported to nothingness. When my father's anger or any other painful emotion would take birth, I would retreat to the place I carried inside me. No one else could go there, even for just a short visit. Actually, my best friend, my dog, Susie, was my constant companion and would lick the tears off my face in the before and after periods of this journey into numbness. I was just a child, but I felt that I deserved whatever punishment I had received. I had a tough time understanding how people can have a bright light but also a darkness, because my dad was such a wonderful person in so many ways. I was too young to understand until I grew up and saw the same light and darkness in myself. As a young child, I thought that I must be broken, and I began to feel shame for the first time.

As a child, I preferred being alone and spent most of my time reading. I could be transported immediately to other realms. I would dream of running away to a place that was over there. The problem with getting over there is that you really never arrive. As an adult, I began to fully understand that this was a type of dissociation. One foot in front of the other, block out sounds, sights, and any feelings. Especially, those feelings that shouted at you are a nothing. You are weird. You are unlovable. Traumas can include things that are done to you, and just as important, things that are not done for you. I have been the recipient and the author of both. Dissociating was my protector, soldier, savior, and then, like a nuclear weapon, ended with complete devastation. What started with shielding my shame with childhood imagination evolved into a nightmarish War with each and every substance that I could utilize to numb myself.

I don't have any memories before the age of six. I'm not sure why, really. I have emotions that were deeply rooted by then, but no memories of where they were born. I do know that I was unable to hear for the first few years of my life and refused to go anywhere without my mother to communicate for me. I referred to myself as WaWa. I was very close to my mom and felt safe with her. She was my touchstone and hero for many years. I was the oldest of three: one brother and one sister. We had a good childhood, and my parents worked hard to provide a loving and stable life for us. Expression of negative emotions was not alright, and I learned, along with most people of my generation, to always be stoic.

I never felt like I belonged anywhere fully. I was a sensitive child and could

not stand to see anything suffer, animals or people. So it always set me apart from most of the neighborhood kids who spent hours hunting and injuring birds and other small animals. I would become overwhelmed with emotion, and I felt like I could almost feel the pain that the injured bird was feeling; it was so real and so intense. I was also a protector for classmates who were being bullied, which would often result in me being bullied as well. That same ability to experience deep empathy led me to the career of Social Work. I learned that rather than a curse, it was a spiritual gift. I only recently fully understood how crucial self-care is for those of us in the helping/ healing professions. I remember going to see a therapist and telling her I was empty. She reflected and asked me if I think I may actually be full? Full of carrying the suffering of others for decades?

I reflect back on my childhood and the relationship that I had with my dad. Through my recovery journey, I have been able to find peace with the fact that he showed love in very different ways than I needed, but he did love me. He always showed up and tried to help me navigate the madness of my addiction in the ways he knew how. By accepting this, it has allowed me to show grace and compassion to the addict part of myself that I hated and resented for so long. I truly believe that most people do the best they can with what they have to work with. That same awareness has helped me to work through and resolve the shame I carried for not being the best father that I could be to my own son. Recovery has been an emptying and rebuilding of ideas that I had carried for decades.

I was raised in a very conservative Southern Baptist church in a predominantly conservative neighborhood, and all I knew about gay people was that homosexuality is an abomination and that you burn in hell. I remember praying in the woods at a youth retreat for God to heal me. I was so scared of what I was feeling, and I had no idea what to do. The only thing I knew for sure was that I could not talk to anyone about my feelings and thoughts. I felt totally alone. The shame continued to build and haunt me.

I had become very popular in high school. I played sports, was President of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and voted Most Friendly in my Senior year. I dated some, but never felt the same desire to have sex with the girls that I dated as my guy friends felt about their girlfriends. My friends were astonished that I

could restrain myself. I remember telling them that it was a sin to have sex before marriage, and that is why I was waiting, but later I realized that my misunderstood sexuality was the crucial factor in my success at early celibacy.

My life quickly changed in the second part of my senior year. I drank for the first time and had my first sexual encounter with a friend. It became public knowledge, and the remainder of my senior year was an absolute nightmare. I lost the majority of my friends and sank into my first serious depression. However, through intensive therapy and personal growth, I realized that I pushed some close friendships away because I was lost and afraid. My situation was a lot to navigate in Alabama in 1984. I navigated it the best way I knew how, by disconnecting and dissociating from others. I would handle it differently now, both internally with myself and externally with others.

I discovered the gay community the summer after my senior year, and I hit the ground running. I began to drink heavily on the weekends and began to experiment with other drugs. My first real sexual encounter was with two men that drugged me and then raped me. I remember being so confused about what happened and telling myself it was my fault. I put it in the back of my mind, and it did not surface for almost two decades, when I saw these two men at the clinic where I worked. My heart almost stopped beating until I could process with a colleague on how to handle the situation, and then unpack it later in therapy. I had never acknowledged or shared what had happened until that day.

My experiences also included being attacked several times for merely existing. I had a gun pulled on me twice while leaving a gay bar and walking to my car. One of the times was by two undercover officers who had been drinking at the bar and were harassing people as they left. At 6'2" and 230, I was intimidating enough to usually take care of myself and my friends. However, the side of me continued to grow that eventually lived in fight or flight mode. That mode served me well and kept me alive when I found myself decades later in full addiction.

The AIDS epidemic hit around the same time that I realized that I was gay; it was 1985. Our community was devastated, and there was a level of fear that was overwhelming. The stigma and hate from many people ignited to new levels.

They tried to use God to justify their hatred. I lost several very close friends during this time, and hundreds and hundreds of clients. I would share space with them during life-changing situations, working 50+ hours a week, and then smoke weed or drink after work to disconnect and dissociate from the suffering and loss that I had witnessed.

During this time, I began to form a personal relationship with God that was much more intimate and spiritual than I had ever had or imagined. It served as a lifeline for me, and even when I was struggling, I felt God was there, and I came to understand that healing may not happen at a physical level, but spiritual healing is present even in the most difficult situations.

I also witnessed a number of people during that time who were compassionate and powerful advocates for those who were marginalized and suffering. I decided I wanted to spend my life advocating and empowering people who were marginalized, mistreated, and misunderstood because of how God had created them. I felt called to be a Social Worker, and because of the hard work and generosity of my parents, they provided me with the financial support to get my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Work.

I made a group of lifelong friends during my college and graduate school with people who were socially aware and committed to leaving the world a better place through their work and lives. We are still close, and they are now family. That group of family made of lifelong friends has continued to grow slowly through the years, and it is with that unconditional love and support that I survived the chaos of addiction that later took over my life.

My career started at 24, working at an AIDS hospice. I found myself led to work in areas where there was not much support available for people. After two years there, I began my lifelong career working at a public HIV clinic and as a professor of Social Work at the local University. The clients that I served changed my life in ways I could never describe. The lessons center around spiritual oneness and bearing witness to true courage, compassion, and grace. I will always be grateful for those relationships. I loved and felt loved. The colleagues that I served with will always be some of my most cherished mentors and heroes.

Killing Myself Back to Life

I had always wanted a child, and my friends remember me sharing this from college on. I was unsure if I would have a child with a close friend or try to adopt. I decided to become a foster parent in 1994 and had the blessing of caring for several children. In 1996, a three-day-old baby was placed with me. DHR called and brought him to the clinic where I worked. He was the most beautiful being that I had ever seen. He radiated God and goodness. He later became my son. He is 29 now and is the most important person in my life. He is absolutely amazing and has accomplished remarkable achievements in his life. He shines both externally and internally. He inspires me to be the best person that I can be, and he has shown me grace and compassion during my addiction, and I use him as a touchstone on how to show grace to others.

My drinking and drug use were mainly recreational, with occasional binges, until 2006. The tools I used to deal with stress before then included working too much and food. Both allowed me to escape from myself for a while. I never fully realized the trauma that I carried both personally and professionally, and how I used other things to soothe my pain until those things were gone.

In 2006, I had gotten up to 375 pounds. I had tried every diet ever known multiple times, but to no avail. So I decided to get gastric bypass surgery. The results were immediate, and over time, I lost almost 150 pounds, but that is when my real nightmare began. At 39 years old, every time that I drank, I would black out / also known as brown out. I would be awake and “functioning” but could not recall anything that happened. I found myself in very dangerous situations on a regular basis that resulted in both physical and mental injuries. I sank into a World of sick and violent people, and I felt at home in this new village. I was drowning in self-hate and shame. The average person would just stop drinking, but I had the perfect storm for Substance Use Disorder: family history of chronic substance abuse, personal trauma, lack of self-care, and I became lost very quickly.

My first treatment was in 2007, a year after a gastric bypass. I was 40 years old, and so much had changed in my life so quickly. During the next 18 years, I found myself in almost every treatment center in Alabama (private and state-funded) and was a resident at five different sober living facilities. I would get sober and clean for a while. The longest that I was sober was seven years, but I never felt like

sobriety was a gift. I viewed it more as a punishment or consequence. I worked the 12 steps several times and sponsored numerous people, but there was an inner peace that was missing. I tried to find that peace by helping others, but something was still missing.

My relapses would be intense and painful for me and the people in my life. Sometimes they would be for a few days, and other times for months. I used every substance that there is and used it in every manner possible. I was willing to do anything to get more, and eventually lost my values and moral compass. When I stopped, the shame would be so intense that the only thing that would make it better also made it worse... more drugs and alcohol.

My dad died while I was in the psychiatric ward for a 6-week stay. And I was unable to say goodbye to him. I had placed barriers in my relationship with him to protect myself, but I am now beginning to understand and appreciate all the ways he said I love you. He helped me with my son's adoption process and showered him with love and affection. He would pack up my belongings (along with other family members and friends) and store them for me when I would lose my job or housing and re-enter treatment. I never asked him to coordinate that, but as I sit in my home now, surrounded by my artwork, books, and photos, I am grateful. I could fill a book with the hurts that I have caused to myself and to others. This shame created an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety that kept me spiraling out of control. One step forward, two steps back. I had tried the 12 steps, counseling, mental health medications, and so on, butI could not outrun my addiction.

In 2023, I had over a year sober and was working and active in recovery, but I began working too much. I put everything that I am into helping others, and once again used that as a type of dissociation from other areas of my life.

I picked up again and ended up overdosing. My sister found me and gave me CPR until the ambulance arrived. I can recall the feeling of dread that washed over me when I first woke up. It was a paralyzing fear. I was stuck in a dream where I could not move or speak. In and out of this dark place. Chilled to the bone. The terror set in when I fully realized that I was awake or actually in and

out of the place where nightmares are born. Unable to lift my head, I slowly drifted back to sleep.

My memories during this time are a mixture of reality and drug-induced psychosis. Regardless of what was actually occurring, the emotions attached were all too vivid and real. Deep in your bone marrow, real. After a few weeks, I was aware enough to begin to comprehend that my destructive self-soothing had caused me to overdose, and I was in the Intensive Care Unit. I was not expected to survive. I was too empty and depressed to even turn the television on one time during my hospitalization. My goal was to just make it to another day. Surviving took every ounce of energy that I had left.

My touchstones were the line of visiting friends and family, paying homage to both my light and darkness. Some familiar and some parts of yesterday's stories. I was very fortunate to live, and I spent the next two months in the hospital. I had a team of people who loved me when I couldn't love myself. My friends and family surrounded me and held me up until I began to heal. I was so broken and unsure how to begin my journey back to the beautiful parts of self that I no longer could find. They seemed so distant and foreign to me.

The only art in my hospital room was a print on the wall at the end of my bed. It was a watercolor of Christ comforting a man who was lost and suffering. The following verse was also on this piece of art:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Matthew 11:28

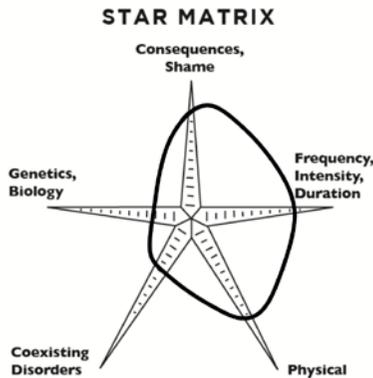
I read that over and over, and I believed it. I had to believe. I wanted to. I sincerely asked for help, believing that promise, and over the next two months, I found the peace that I had been looking for most of my life. I turned over everything(trauma, shame, hurt that I had caused both personally and professionally, fears, insecurities, depression, anxiety, etc) PIECE BY PIECE...I began to recognize and celebrate the miracles that happened daily, no matter how small. I slowly learned to breathe, speak, eat, and walk again with the help of a loving village and with God holding my spirit so closely.

My recovery circle strengthened, and my relationships flourished because I became open and available for intimate relationships again. I slowly began to feel again and understand that I can sit with difficult feelings and navigate them without drugs and alcohol. I had so much unpacking to do, and I know now that it is a long process and cannot be rushed. I reflected on and was able to see and feel just how loved I had always been. My parents sacrificed so much for their children and grandchildren, and never gave up on me even in my darkest moments. I'm grateful for who they are and all that they taught me.

I began trauma therapy, sometimes twice a week, and it was crucial in saving my life. My therapist has been a crucial part of my healing journey. She has been a loving and caring teacher, and I have learned so much about myself with her help. I also see a psychiatrist and receive treatment for depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

I am active in a 12-step group and spend time daily, reading and meditating. I am excited to be on a lifelong journey of being closer to God and to the people around me. I look for ways to be still. In that stillness, I feel most alive and connected.

I have witnessed healing in most of my relationships because I can be present. I will never be able to repay my loved ones for all that they have done for me, but I strive to show my thanks by living a life that demonstrates my gratitude on a daily basis. One day at a time, one moment at a time, I will be still and I will celebrate my chance at another way of life. A life full of small but precious experiences that remind me that we are all connected and that we need each other to be whole and holy.



Untying the Albatross After 60 Years

Anonymous



She needed a hero, so that's what she became.

Anonymous



Stories are part of growing in recovery. We experience recovery by identifying with those stories. But these stories can also be an albatross around our necks by allowing us to stay stuck in conditioned behaviors and belief systems. Oftentimes, the complete denial of reality results from these stories. I know this because I've been listening to and telling various stories to myself for 37 years now.

When I was 28, I began my journey in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse. AA was the most accepted recovery program in 1987, and I integrated the language and 12 steps into my daily life; I sponsored and had several sponsors over the years. I also attended Al-Anon, CODA, and OA meetings over the years. I also had therapy and counseling during this time frame. I'll turn 67 in July 2025. So, for almost 60 years, I've used food, and specifically sugar, as a tool to keep myself functioning on a daily basis.

I needed to use large amounts of brown sugar to numb myself from the sexual abuse from an older brother; this began when I was 7 or 8. Sibling incest is more prevalent than anyone wants to admit; I know this because when I feel safe to share my story, I find so many women open up about their own stories of sibling abuse. Over my 37 years in recovery, I have spent many hours in therapy and counseling to recover from the effects of the incest. But when the "perfect storm"

began in my life, the incest came forward to once again haunt my memories and how I felt about myself. I believe the root of my sugar and food disorder began in that tree-house so many years ago and has continued off and on for all these decades later.

At roughly 25 years sober, I became disenchanted with the 12-step recovery model. I had begun questioning the use of the word GOD in meetings. Living in the deep South, the vocabulary and references to Christianity were a given in meetings. Many AA meetings across the nation still end with the Lord's prayer. But I began looking at the younger newcomers in the meetings and asking myself if I was a young newcomer, and I heard so many references to God and Christianity, would I feel able and open to incorporating the 12 steps into my life? My answer was a clear and profound no!

I needed a recovery program that spoke to my new feeling of independence from traditional God or higher power models. I was also frustrated because I knew I had many emotional issues as a result of the trauma in childhood and from my Naval service. I had gone to many therapists over the years, but the expense was very often prohibitive. I needed a daily program I could integrate into my life, just as I had done in 1987.

In November of 2019, the answer appeared in our lives; several years earlier, we had joined a non-denominational spiritual center that was not based on Christianity, and enjoyed the minister and the people we met there. The minister's talks referenced Buddhism, Sufism, and other spiritual philosophies along with Christianity. There was no dogma to abide by; this immediately attracted us to the spiritual center. By this time, I had become what is humorously referred to as a "bedside Buddhist", folks reading books on Buddhism before falling asleep. I did not consider myself a Buddhist, but I loved the psychology of Buddhist principles. They contained generosity, kindness, and compassion at their core. I was fundamentally drawn to this. The minister knew we were in long-term recovery, so when a young man appeared at the center asking to start a Buddhist-based meeting, he knew exactly who to call.

Together, we immediately began a meeting at the Spiritual Center, and it

quickly grew to 2 meetings per week. Meetings were small, but very intimate, and they were exactly what we both needed. For the first time in years, I felt as though I was going to a meeting where I was with like-minded people and that I was making PROGRESS in my recovery. The young people the meeting attracted were very inspiring to me as well. The meditation aspect of the meetings helped me begin to “soften” around the edges and relax. For the first time in decades, I began to believe I could continue to heal from my mental health issues.

I also discovered a meditation practice, Yoga Nidra, at this same time. I have incorporated Yoga Nidra into my daily life; it is best described as a guided meditation that includes a body scan. The secular name for Yoga Nidra is non-sleep deep rest (NSDR). I invite you to try this practice, as it has helped me to relax and also improved my insomnia. I still have insomnia, but it has improved as a result of doing Yoga Nidra on a regular basis.

In October 2024, the perfect storm occurred in my recovery journey; I was 66 years old and 37 years sober from alcohol and drugs. I realized I'd made a terrible decision in becoming a Certified DUI instructor for the state I reside in. Initially, this was to be a simple part-time job to keep me current with recovery trends and to supplement my desire to travel more in retirement. I had experience in training and had no issues standing in front of folks teaching.

But I found myself incapable of handling administrative and class management duties; any new task involved massive amounts of stress for me. My memory failed me on many occasions; I was shocked by how long I had to study the material to retain it. I realized in May 2024, when going through the certification process, that something was terribly amiss with my mental health. I was overreacting to any new task, small criticisms, or corrections. My faulty memory was most disturbing to me, and my recurring insomnia was becoming alarmingly frequent with no viable solution. Finally, in October 2024, the mental health crisis that had been building since May 2024 came into its final fruition. Crying jags, anxiety attacks, and horrible self-hatred talk in my head were a nearly constant companion. I was sneaking food and over-eating on a regular basis. Abusing food had again become a necessary comfort just to function on a daily basis. I spent much of my day obsessing about what to eat and how much I could eat without

suffering any consequences.

Sleep became an elusive gift, and when I did sleep, night terrors woke me up, shaking, sweating, or crying out loud. The “story” behind the night terrors almost always involved my time in the Navy. This was very disturbing to my husband, who felt completely helpless trying to help and support me. One day, a good friend in recovery asked me why I was continuing to teach the DUI classes; they were clearly very stressful to me. I felt I had to go on to make good my commitment to the people in charge of the program.

Aging and PTSD in veterans is an actual condition that happens to many high-functioning senior veterans. Because the night terrors always involved my service in the Navy, one day in utter confusion and despair, I googled “PTSD and the aging veteran.” What I discovered gave me relief and a path forward. I recognized that what was happening to me was a real mental health condition, and that my mental health was in serious jeopardy. I needed to ask for professional help, specifically from the Veterans Administration.

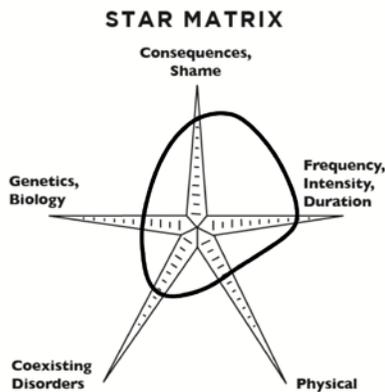
I served active duty in the US Navy from 1979 to 1991. For 32 years after my separation, I chose to obfuscate, ignore, or completely deny the emotional problems that my Navy service had impacted my emotional psyche. Over those 32 years, I was urged on more than one occasion to seek help from the VA, from family, friends, and professionals! Thankfully, I had a dear friend who was also a veteran, and she recognized what was happening to me. This dear friend had great compassion and insight, walking me down the path of asking the VA for help. Her insight and empathy literally saved my life. I currently use the VetCenter for mental health; I participate in 2 support groups, and I have individual therapy sessions as well.

I continue to chair and be involved with Recovery Dharma (RD). I truly believe the slow migration I took away from AA and then beginning Buddhist-based recovery saved my sobriety. I appreciate the Recovery Dharma (RD) literature and meditations; they focus on kindness, compassion, and loving kindness towards myself and others. I am feeling stronger since my mental health crisis 8 months ago, and have even felt strong enough emotionally to start a closed

inquiry circle with 2 other women. Doing an Inquiry circle will help to deepen my knowledge of myself and integrate the 4 Noble Truths and 8-fold path into my life.

I have also begun going to Women For Sobriety (WFS) meetings; they are available both in person and online. WFS began over 50 years ago and has developed a well-organized and empowering program to help women get sober, stay sober, and have a positive support system going forward. WFS is also a secular program; the literature does not mention God or have any Christian verbiage.

Over the years, I had forgotten that recovering from alcoholism, sexual abuse, and multiple emotional traumas TAKES TIME. My recovery journey has happened slowly and has unfolded in STAGES. I think it's a human tendency to want to complete a task, wrap it up in a box, and file it away in a closet. But recovery from multiple addictions and traumas doesn't happen that way; the road is curved, forked with many rest stops and byways along the way. If you become lost or unsure of your recovery journey, please seek help from trusted friends or professionals. Asking for help can be hard; doing it once does not mean you will automatically know, or want to do it again.



Untying the Albatross after 60 Years

If you are reading this and you have many years of sobriety, even six months or seven years of sobriety, and you secretly think you'll never fully recover, please do not judge yourself. I believe that judgment creates separation, so when I judge myself, I am literally creating a void in my emotional life between healing and staying in unskillful and unhealthy behavior. I have a dear friend in RD who created a lovely meditation for himself. I amended his meditation/prayer into the present tense, and when I am power-walking, I will say this OUTLOUD many times. I will also say this to myself in meditation.

Today, I will love myself unconditionally.

I will have a clear mind and radiate an open heart,

So as to be open-handed to all sentient beings.

Grace

Sandi



*Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*

Arundhati Roy



My name is Sandi, and I carry many identities. I am a mother, daughter, grandmother, wife, friend, neighbor, teacher, and learner. I am a member of alcoholics anonymous, Dharma Recovery, and earth-church. I am a person on a healing journey, and this journey has been my most significant connection to the abundant messages of hope (a quiet trust rooted in surrender, not outcome) when I was only ready to look. And I always looked, I just didn't always see...

After all these years, my birth still remains a mystery, one that unfolds both accidentally and insistently. My journey began in Saigon, Vietnam, specifically, during the fall of Saigon when the city was in chaos. I was a baby abandoned and found by parents who themselves were victims of war. To be fair, everyone in Saigon at that time was a victim of war. My memories of Saigon are scattered with Vespas, bombs, strawberries, beaches, my nanny, cousins, sunsets, and a beautiful three-story mid-century home with a concrete garden on the rooftop. The images in the photographs lingered and became silent witnesses to bits and pieces of a story half told.

At three years old, the journey continues to Malaysia. Our family had to flee to safety in the vast ocean because the land was no longer safe. We were caught

in the crossfire between nations and ideologies: terrorism, imperialism, communism, all the -isms that emerged before alcoholism. With bars of gold, our ticket was bought to escape. Exile. Exodus. The vessel, a small boat packed like sardines, only it wasn't fish. It was us. Humans. I remember screams of terror and desperation from families torn apart by fear. I remember my mother telling me we would never go home. I remember seeing the horizon on the third day..

That horizon was Bidong Island, a refugee camp in Malaysia for Vietnamese boat people. Our family lived in a hut built from palms. The beds were hardwood boards, and there were bugs. Food was rationed, and vegetables far outnumbered meat. On the island, meat was a luxury, only distributed on weekends. We longed for it. Funny how the diet of scarcity we once endured is now considered healthy. Still, I had friends, little friends, and we played in the sand, in the water, and on the fallen tree trunks. I remember my father getting drunk and stumbling on the way to the island temple to play cards, always saying he'd seen a snake. I believed him. I remember giant turtles laying eggs. I remember seeing spirits in the banana trees, because that's what the grandmothers told stories about. There was a sign that read: "In memory of the Vietnamese refugees who died on the way to freedom." But not us. We survived, even though my parents felt dead inside. Eighteen months later, we were welcomed to America. The land of the free.

By the time I was five, I had traveled past the Vietnam War, fled a country by sea, lived on an island as a refugee, and flown on an airplane to the other side of the world as an immigrant with no possessions. Motorcycles, boats, planes, and buses... transporting me from one place to another. My mother always said I had a third eye; she would poke my forehead. Perhaps that eye was there to help take the weight off what my other two eyes had already witnessed at such a young age. When people say that someone is an old soul, I think they recognize that they are suffering. My third eye gave people permission to call me an old soul...and many did.

The context of my coming to America experience is essential to my becoming... as a child, a teen, and now, an adult. My perception, I believe, is highly influenced by those early years. I am extremely sensitive to hate, war, colonialism, injustice, racism, fascism, exclusivity, and classism. Although change has been the only

constant in my life, those sensitivities stuck with me. I hate the word fundamental, yet I am fundamentally a pacifist. The irony is that my very birth was a direct result of the Vietnam War. And still, my life is the first evidence of the abundant hope message. War gave me life while I spent my life longing for peace. It does not make sense, and yet, here I am.

Asylum was granted in California. It became home for the second time. For immigrants, I would say California provided the hospitality and the familiarity my family needed to adapt. My parents were in the jewelry business in Vietnam, and it was not long before they rebuilt their business in Chinatown, Los Angeles. We lived in Echo Park, the heart of the city in LA, and I walked to school by myself on my second day of kindergarten. Although the neighborhood has since been gentrified, back then, it was an immigrant-friendly community, though not particularly safe, since Dad was robbed twice while walking to adult English class. Still, I walked, roller-skated, and took the Dash bus everywhere. I loved the freedom of exploring amongst the concrete jungle. I remember spending entire days riding the bus with my dad just to learn the routes, so we would know how to get around town. He fell asleep and would start snoring every time. I love him for that.

As I acculturated and assimilated into the American way of life, my parents remained rooted within their Asian community, not by choice but by default. They just did not have the capacity, not while trying to recover from the destruction of their lives, which they had worked so hard to build. That difference would become a barrier as our story unfolded. I went to Chinese and Mandarin school on the weekends, and after-school tutoring during the week. Meanwhile, my parents worked. Remembering my parents' unrelenting resilience and their determination to rebuild, work hard, and succeed is honestly bittersweet. It was all they knew how to do. It's as if they never had permission to heal from environments that provided no nurture, no rest. They believed money would solve everything. Their motives were bound to traditional values; they were good, devout, and sincere. They loved the best they knew how, and they saved my life again and again. They went from poverty to riches, to poverty again, and back. I use the word riches rather than wealth, because to me, wealth means a sustainable way of life. Due to a lack of education, persecution, war, violence, and unimaginable

loss, which led to deep trauma, they never had access to that kind of wealth in America. I've witnessed the deep trauma that haunted them because it haunted me too, and it literally broke my heart. I've learned that the world endlessly sends distractions to help mask broken hearts. There are countless, and our family has certainly encountered some...

The American Dream fever caught up to us. By the time I was eight, we had become proud U.S. citizens. With those new rights came new freedoms: home ownership and travel. My parents' business was growing, and soon, the big house was bought. We left the city for the suburbs, the heights, the valley, the hills. The familiar immigrant community I knew was replaced with something new. In Echo Park, our neighbors had mostly been Asian and Hispanic. In Rowland Heights, our new neighborhood was mostly white with a mix of multicultural families, but the way of life felt much more American and Westernized.

We traveled often throughout California, to Vegas, the Sequoias, San Francisco, San Diego, Santa Monica, and Reno. The happier moments with my family were on the road: exotic fruits and food, family friends, fancy hotels, giant trees, and riding taxis to Circus Circus with my friends in Vegas while the adults gambled in the casinos. The photo albums are filled with memories. Dad documented the travels, but he cannot remember our birthdays. Photography was his pride and his joy. As the business grew, my parents began traveling internationally, sometimes leaving me home with my grandmother for weeks, sometimes months at a time.

Grandmother was a strict disciplinarian. Her hair reached the floor, always twisted into a bun, and at night she would brush it slowly, sipping her Hennessy. She was cold and stoic, giving more tenderness to the men in the family. That was tradition. Women came second. Every year, she traveled to Paris to visit my uncle, and she always brought home gifts for everyone except me. She said I was spoiled because I was an only child and already had more than enough. She and my aunties would whisper that I was a "bastard," and I remember wondering why. One day, I overheard my cousin tell her friend I had been found on the streets.

From the outside, it looked like I had adapted to suburban life, but the truth

was more complicated. My grades even met the Asian ideal, straight A's on the report card. But as I got older and made more friends, I began to see how different my life was from theirs. Their parents played sports with them. They had birthday parties, were allowed to be cheerleaders, and never had to work on weekends or translate every piece of mail or document.

I had to lie to go anywhere. "I'm going to Joy's to work on a school project," I'd say. Perhaps it's no coincidence my best friend's name was Joy, and it was joy I longed for. We spent the holidays in Vegas, where Dad gambled, while Joy spent the holidays at home with Santa, Christmas trees, and presents. I wanted to be normal. I was too young to appreciate my own culture. I wasn't allowed to wear makeup or shave my legs, so I snuck it on the bus. Boys weren't allowed to call the house, so I turned off the ringer. I became two people. It was how I survived. It started young, and it was exhausting. But it wasn't hard; by then, my parents were busier than ever. Work was their focus. At least that's how it felt to me. Now, as a parent, I understand they meant to provide, not abandon. Still, everything I tried to express got shut down. At home, I felt frozen and afraid—all the time.

Our family was Buddhist. Mom is still devout with her prayers and ritualistic practices daily. Sometimes I wonder if I'm still alive because of all her prayers. We had an ancestral altar in the house where we burned incense and offered food daily to our ancestors. I watched Mom pray, and I learned to kneel by watching her. But I was never taught about Buddhism. Just: be a good person, get As, obey your elders, and work hard. When I got in trouble, discipline came in the form of slippers, belts, and chopsticks. Not finishing my food or talking back could earn me one of those. That was normal in many Asian households. It was during these troubling times that I instinctively knew to pray, to kneel like my mom and ask the sky to make dad stop being mad and my mom stop crying.

In 7th grade, a friend invited me to church camp. That was my first encounter with Christianity. During a service, the "Holy Spirit" filled the room. We fell to the ground and woke up laughing uncontrollably. I was terrified. Someone explained what happened and asked if I wanted to accept Jesus into my heart. I said yes because I was scared, but also because I felt something, I think it was belonging. I returned home with a Bible and told my parents. Dad said I had joined

a cult and threatened to burn it. I'd told them they needed Jesus or they'd go to hell. That didn't help. Dad was an atheist. He participated in Buddhist traditions for my mom, but he believed in nothing.

My parents had high expectations. Be a doctor. An accountant. Make a lot of money. "No money, no talk," Dad would say. But they didn't give me the tools. They just believed I would succeed by will alone. That did not happen. My will and my definition of success did not align with theirs. My spirit had other plans.

Eighth-grade graduation was a big deal, but my parents were working, so I celebrated with my friends' families. That summer, I smoked a Salem cigarette in the hills and loved it. I drank two Corona at a party and kissed a boy in the kitchen pantry. I felt alive, free, and an excitement so life-sustaining, I wanted to feel it again and again and again.

By high school, I had cracked open. Unstoppable, rebellious, and justified. Boys, drugs, alcohol, books, and friends gave me something my home life didn't: relief. I was living in a house that made me feel guilty and ashamed for just about everything. I couldn't be who my parents needed me to be: nonexistent, obedient, silent. So, I lived a double life. And I started to disappear. Eventually, I didn't even try to hide or lie. By this time, the drugs gave me permission to be seen by my family, and what they saw was painful for them to witness and shameful for me to become. But life has a way of moving forward...in spite of ourselves.

The boy I met in middle school while playing Oregon Trail in computer class became the father of my children, my partner for the first half of my adult life. We bonded through our brokenness, even though we shared different stories. His family carried the weight of addiction and cancer, and somehow that American household felt like medicine. They cussed at each other and there was chaos, but also birthdays, holidays, and laughter. There was a grandma who smoked Newports and took heart pills, and she baked bunny cakes for Easter, pineapple dump cakes for dessert, and banana bread from frozen ripe bananas. She told me stories about her past in Corpus Christi, and she told me I had cold hands and a warm heart. It was the first time I felt like I had a grandmother. They took me in without question. And just like that, I inherited American dysfunction like a

cherry on top of intergenerational trauma.

Out of high school, I worked and enrolled in community college. For a while, I thought I might work with children with special needs, until a child at Hope House threw a diaper at me and slapped me when I sang *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* to him at bedtime. I stopped partying. I stopped taking psychedelics. I was 19 and pregnant. When our daughter was born, I experienced an awakening. A desire to be better. She looked like me, which felt like a miracle. I had always wanted to resemble my mother, but the world told me I didn't. The mirror told me I didn't. And now here was this tiny human, who shared my DNA, and I loved her with a depth I did not know existed. I never imagined I would want to be a mother, but being hers made me want to be a mom. Her presence grounded me enough to feel okay in my body, even if only for a while. The healing power of her arrival shifted my relationship with my angry parents. She softened them. Losing their home softened them. Dad's stroke softened them. Dad being forced to retire softened them. Loss has done its work with them; this time, the universe gifted them with a beautiful granddaughter they adored. God's will is like moss breaking through concrete, unpredictable and persistent.

But alcoholism, like moss, finds its cracks, too. It crept into every corner of our life, into the man I loved, into me, into the people around us. Sometimes it felt like a family member, and I should have given it a name. It was its own entity. His addiction was loud and seen, and mine was quiet and hidden. I believed I could fix it, that I was strong enough, spiritual enough, loving enough to pull us through. I prayed harder. Took pills when the prayers didn't work. We were doing the best we could with the brokenness we carried. It was a messy canvas, painted over again and again after every drink.

Ten years later, our baby boy was born, and he stole my heart just like his sister. I didn't know my heart could love anyone else as much as I loved my daughter, but it did, instantly. Love does not run out; it multiplies. He made me want to be better all over again.

But addiction is a thief. It doesn't care about your intentions. It doesn't care how much you love your kids. It demands to be fed. And when it takes hold, it

takes everything. We were parents who loved deeply, and we were both drowning.

We lost his parents to cancer. And the family began to fall apart. I kept praying and working and trying to hold everything together. But my body needed something every day to get by, to take the edge off, just something to make it to bedtime.

We moved to Alabama as a last resort to start over. We sold the house, packed our things, and headed south, hoping for transformation. But the change was only external. Treatments came and went. Restraining orders were filed. The marriage ended. And eventually, I was left to face myself.

A single mother in a strange state, waiting tables and needing a drink or pill to make it through. Survival mode is cunning and baffling; it kept me in bondage to the next “anything” that could give my body the power I needed to live, but never gave me the space for reflection. I told myself I was the victim, and if I kept the spotlight on him, I didn’t have to inventory my own unraveling.

Oh, grace, grace unearned. It showed up anyway. It protected my children when I couldn’t. It gave their father the strength to get sober. And I remember the moment I stopped resenting that and started wanting it for myself.

My doubt convinced me that I was in too deep. Who would take care of the kids if I asked for help? Their father was already seeking treatment. No, there was no one; my family was in California, and they would not understand. I believed I had to do it alone. I could fix it. I just needed the right pill. Pills and prayers. Belief in prayer, faith in pills. I shopped for a kind doctor to prescribe Adderall for my attention deficit and chaos. The power pill made promises, and I made plans, plans I could not put into practical application. So I took more. And more. Until I lost my mind, my integrity, my dignity. I lost my friends, my children, my job, my sanity, my everything. The paranoia from the pills eventually institutionalized me in the psych ward with the grippy socks, laceless shoes, metal mirrors, and doors that locked only from the outside. I told the doctors I just needed a rest, a mental break. They told me I had alcoholism.

A man I dated at the time came to visit me in the hospital and convinced me to

leave, that I wasn't an alcoholic. So, I did and went straight back to the stash, borrowing more power so I could try just one more time to fix everything again. But I couldn't fix it. I encountered what I now know as my first "dark night of the soul". The next eight months were a spiral of desperation. I tried to hide my insanity by doing what I knew: fixing, pill-popping, performing. I read obsessively, searching for the holy grail, some miraculous cure. But instead of healing, it all shattered what was left of the broken pieces I had been so desperately trying to duct tape back together. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions calls it a "heartbreaking riddle," a riddle I was never able to solve. I couldn't stop. I couldn't go on.

And then grace stepped in again. Somehow, in the middle of all that ruin, I surrendered. I asked for help. I ran out of plans. It was hopelessness and the futility of life as I had been living it. It was grace calling me home. And somehow, even in my drunken state, I heard it. I saw it. I died. And I was reborn.



Grace: Part 2

*When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows,
not the flower.*

Alexander Den Heijer

My sobriety date is 3/3/2011, the day I was reborn. I've noticed it's often the third day that something new begins to emerge. When I finally reached out to my dear friend and sponsor and said, "I'm ready," she took my hand, led the way, and never let go. I took suggestions from her as well as those who had walked the path before me, people armed with facts, lived experience, and fierce compassion. I listened. I worked the twelve steps. I started sponsoring women. At the time, I didn't know what conventional wisdom was, let alone how much I needed it. I was raised in survival mode and chaos, completely ignorant of the very tools and resources that help people to live well. But in recovery, I came to understand it as a common solution, the scaffolding that slowly restored me to sanity and eventually to society.

My recovery began with an invitation to “keep coming back,” and that welcome led me into participation through service to our community. Over time, it became an initiation into a fellowship of the spirit, one that continues to shape me to this day. That beginning, the connection, the belonging, the structure, was powerful enough to give me sobriety. But it wasn’t enough to heal the deeper wounds, the suffering, the trauma, the unspoken pain stored in my body. When it surfaced, I had to keep going. I had to enlarge my spiritual life, to change, to grow, essentially to listen to my body, my breath, and my story.

Here’s what I’ve learned along the way:

I’ve learned that there are many paths to recovery, and what works for me may not work for another person. I’ve also learned to be watchful because orthodoxy, dogma, and fundamentalism can creep into even the most sacred spaces. Over time, I’ve come to see that the only way out is through; I have to feel the feels. I’ve discovered that the opposite of faith isn’t doubt, but certainty. That pause, especially during uncomfortable or painful moments, is more powerful than any action. I’ve learned how to be in a relationship with my fears, anger, insecurities, discomfort, and pain, and how to do the same with others. And I’ve learned that I must do that, because eventually the universe reveals that it’s the only path to peace. I’ve learned how to be vulnerable by telling the truth about myself and exposing my insecurities. I’ve learned that beating myself up doesn’t make the problem go away; it only complicates it. There is no bypassing reality; it has to be confronted to be healed. And let me tell you, it’s messy. But I’ve also learned that when I ask for help, help is given freely. Sponsoring has taught me that it’s less about fixing and more about simply being there for others. It’s a relationship, not a transaction. I’ve learned that adaptation bends more toward God’s will than my own plans and designs. And maybe one of the most freeing lessons of all: “I change my mind” is four powerful words.

I have healed, and am healing, as I continue to encounter life’s new suffering, while also suffering with those who are oppressed. We now have the technology to witness so much love and pain, both locally and globally. I carry that knowing in my body, and I try to stay in solidarity; however, some days I’m not okay, and that’s okay.

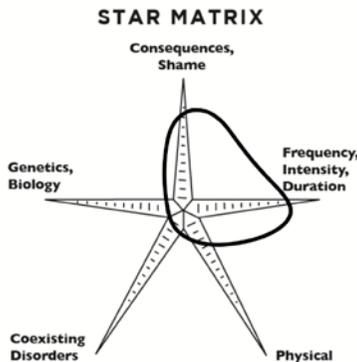
This journey has given me so much more than I ever thought possible. It's given me a healthy relationship and a marriage grounded in recovery. I never thought I could love again, but I did. And I do. My husband is on his own path of healing, and we've learned to support each other by listening to those who've built strong, enduring relationships. He is a wonderful stepfather to our children and grandson, and we share two fur babies whom we love with everything we've got. My new in-laws are kind and welcoming, and I adore them with all my heart. I have the kind of extended family I once only dreamed about, one that gathers together on holidays, all of us: the father of my children, his wife, my husband, our children. It's not perfect, but it's real. And it's us.

My daughter healed when her parents healed. Our son is on the same path. They never cease to amaze me. Because of what they've been through, their story, they recognize pain in others and respond with kindness and compassion.

I've learned to honor my family and my culture, to see resilience in our struggles. Even my grandmother, to whom I made amends at her grave, has become a well of strength and wisdom. My people have always loved me, even when we didn't know how to say it. They've enriched my life in ways I now cherish.

I don't have all the answers, but I've learned how to stay. How to tell the truth. How to ask for help and offer it in return. I've learned that healing is slow, honest, relational work. And I'm grateful every day for the life that keeps unfolding, not despite the brokenness, but because I was finally willing to tend to it.

Grace always finds a way...



My Story

Anonymous



The strength of a woman is not measured by the impact that all her hardships in life have had on her; but the strength of a woman is measured by the extent of her refusal to allow those hardships to dictate her and who she becomes.

C. JoyBell C.



I was born in Southeast Alabama in 1952. That makes me 72 years old today. As I write, I am aware that I can remember only about half of my life, either from blackouts, trauma, or sheer denial. Today, I am appreciative of every moment. The ability to be grateful is one of the greatest gifts of my sobriety, as well as the many friendships I enjoy. There was a time I had no true friends, just people who really cared nothing for me. I know a new freedom and a new happiness, as promised. I have come to believe that accepting hardship truly is the pathway to peace, as we pray in the Serenity Prayer. I do not regret the past. My prayers have rarely been answered as I thought or hoped they might, but rather in ways I could have never imagined, and through people showing up in my life. I have learned that my feelings and thoughts are not nearly as important as my actions. Father Martin said, “God can move mountains, but you better bring a shovel”. Christ said, “Faith without works is dead”. Rebecca said, “Praying without action is merely begging”. I believe that how we live is our real and final truth, not what ideas we believe.

I was born into a family of alcoholics and otherwise disordered people. My father had the perfect life of an alcoholic: he worked for himself in the country,

he was his own boss, set his own hours, and if he didn't feel like working, he got someone else to do it for him. He did exactly what he wanted to do. My extremely codependent mother told him not to come home intoxicated in front of us kids, so he didn't. We were always tucked away in bed when he would stagger home. I am sure there must have been fights galore between my parents, but I was never exposed to any of them. We looked pretty good on the outside.

What I do remember, my childhood reality, was being raised by an exacting, angry, and very controlling mother. She was also extremely belittling and critical, wielding shame like a sledgehammer. Actually, I used to compare my mother to a steamroller, someone huge and powerful who would slowly run right over you and from whom you could not escape. Small wonder that I grew into a frightened, angry, full-of-shame teenager. My negative self-talk was so pervasive that I would sometimes hit my head on the wall in an attempt to make it stop. I took my first drink at age 13; for many years, this was the formative memory of my life. Today it has faded, but I still remember the way the sun felt on my skin, the way it sparkled on the water, and the way that warm beer felt going down my throat. I remember thinking, "I have found the answer!". As soon as that alcohol hit my brain, I was a goner.

I didn't feel the deep pangs of shame that were my constant state of being, nor any negative feelings about myself, nor any anxiety. I thought I was free the first time I lost my freedom.

It wasn't three months until I was drinking to blackout, drinking alone, and hiding, lying, and deceiving everyone around me. By the time I was in high school, I was hiding beer in my car and sneaking off at lunch to drink it. Naturally fearful that I would be caught, I developed a strategy that fit perfectly with my obsessive-compulsive nature: Perfectionism, excellence would be my cover!! So I proceeded to make straight A's and almost excel in everything I attempted, the whole time harboring a deep, dark secret. This enabled me to rationalize my drinking, but did nothing for my opinion of myself, which was subterranean at best. I did conform to the small town social structure, and I had plenty of dates. I drank to black out on social occasions, so I had lots of first dates, and not too many second dates. I was told I was a belligerent, hostile drunk, a pattern that caused

me much grief, especially after I came to the attention of law enforcement. My first arrest was in 1974, the charge was Driving Under the Influence and Resisting Arrest. I was arrested several times for this exact same charge until I graduated from resisting to assault. By this time, I had managed to graduate from college, Magna Cum Laude, move to South Florida, fall in love with a gambling-addicted drug dealer, and enter a subculture of illegal big money. This was Miami in the 1980s, the hotbed of the cocaine wars. I tried various substances during this time (coke, MDA, etc), but I had a weird thing happen. It became instantly apparent to me that I loved each and every one of these substances, so I put them down. I actually recoiled from them because I knew I had an alcohol addiction. I thought it was my life force! Of course, this enabled me to rationalize, once again, my tendency to drink myself into oblivion. From 1983 to 1989, I was arrested 5 or 6 times for DUI. I was also under the Meyer's/ Baker's Act. That's where you are not arrested, but held in jail for 72 hours to assess your mental capacity. I was found, on each of these occasions, wandering the streets in a state of alcohol-induced delirium. Finally, I was court-ordered into treatment. This began my journey of 12-step recovery. I actually enjoyed 12 Step meetings, largely because I am a social creature. I got a sponsor, attended meetings, got a service position, and... worked the steps!!! As an aside, I will be the first person to tell you step work is not the entire answer, but it's a good start and a foundational framework for recovery..

Here I will give you a brief synopsis of my 12-Step work:

I had absolutely no problem with Step 1. But here I came face to face with the first paradox of recovery: In order to gain power, you first must be powerless. Now I know I have all the power I need (courtesy of my Superpower (aka Higher Power) as long as I don't drink. It's very empowering to be powerless!! I also had no problems with Steps 2 & 3. I've always believed in a power greater than myself. I see it every day I walk in the woods, or go to the beach, or hunker down in the face of an upcoming hurricane.

Step 3 states we "came to believe". My wise sponsor pointed out that this is a step of evolution and that through right action and right living, Step 3 will manifest in my life. Over a period of a couple of years, as I recovered and observed recovery all around me, it dawned on me that I actually had "come to believe".

I had a belligerent and hostile attitude toward Step 4. I took up arms and went to war against Step 4. As an accomplished liar, why would I even admit my wrongs? Where would I be without the ego-sustaining wall I built around myself? Who would I be? I was nothing less than furious over Step 4. A perceptive person pointed out that since I had lied, deceived, hidden, run away, rationalized, minimized, avoided, and intellectualized my drinking behaviors (for starters), I could take Step 4 in small, manageable increments in order to avoid re-traumatizing myself! I started taking my inventory a few months at a time. This took me about a year. I don't know if this would be a good idea for everybody, and it certainly is not as prescribed by the big book, but it worked for me. My sponsor and some friends actually took me out to lunch to celebrate my completion of my fourth step.

My fifth step was not a litany of everything I discovered in Step 4. It was rather, as the step states, a look at the exact nature of my wrongs: the ways I harmed others and myself. The ways in which I had been selfish and self-serving. The ways I allowed my ego to remove me from the God of my understanding. They were surprisingly few, but all ego-driven human fallacies, for example. My 5th step took about one hour. It was all about healing, and the power of relationship (admitted to God, Myself, and another).

Step Six is another paradox. We must admit we have defects of character, but then do nothing about it until we are "entirely ready" to let God do the job?? Once I invited God into my heart, I became entirely ready.

Step Seven was perhaps the most meaningful step for me. It was very cathartic, and I look at it as the most important step in my personal recovery. To ask God to remove my shortcomings includes the wrongs I have done to myself. Step Seven is all about forgiving oneself and others. We can never truly guide our own transformation, but God can. If we truly admit this, our shortcomings become unnecessary and totally unhelpful. Step Seven was a deeply spiritual experience for me. Through asking God to remove my shortcomings, it became apparent to me that prayer is not a way to get what we want, but a way to form a relationship with God. To remain humble is indeed the pathway to peace.

Steps Eight and Nine are pretty straightforward. Go make amends.

Step Ten is part of my daily practice, just like prayer and meditation. This brings me to Step Eleven, the most often ignored, or brushed over, but the most important practical step of all.

The thing I would like to stress about Step Eleven is the neuroscientific basis of meditation. Since most people have about 60,000 waking thoughts daily (not counting subconscious or sleep-induced thoughts), it's really important to figure out which thoughts will bring me peace or which thoughts will cause me to suffer. Meditation, like everything else in recovery, is a practice, a discipline. Each day of my life, I begin with prayer and meditation. I spot meditate throughout the day when I am faced with indecision, anxiety, or even angst. I believe the Big Book refers to this as "Pause and Prayer". I use meditation apps, I read everything I can find on the power of meditation, I read the Synoptic Gospels, and I follow history. I believe in learning from my ancestors and from history. I don't think I have any answers, but I learn from those who came before me. Being present in my mind helps me to respond, not react. Meditation helps guide me to be the person I want to be and shows me the path to take to become that person. One of my goals in life is to be my whole and authentic self, no matter what circumstances I may find myself in. Meditation shows me how to do that. Carl Jung said, "He who looks outside dreams. He who looks inside awakens". Jesus Christ said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is Within". Enough said.

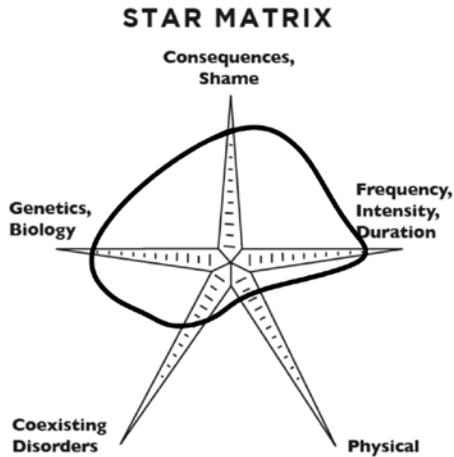
I would like to say I stayed sober forever after my first immersion in AA, but that has not been my path. After 12 years of sobriety, I relapsed. I neglected my spiritual growth and allowed the exigencies of life to cloud my reason. I moved away from my support group without bothering to build another. The result of this was that I struggled on and off to stay sober for about a decade. I would get a year or two and then relapse. During this time, I managed to get yet another DUI and a couple of PIs. I spent some time in jail. I devised a suicide plan. But then a funny thing happened. When I was in jail, I discovered there were several inmates who were functionally illiterate, and they started coming to me to help them with understanding their legal documents, how to add up their bills from the commissary, and how to read elementary-level books. From this experience,

I learned that I owed it to them to be of whatever help I could. And I learned so much from them about how to survive and endure in spite of every obstacle imaginable. I was reborn in life in jail.

I'm going to close with a saying I like, I found somewhere online:

IN CASE YOU FORGOT

3. *You are a soul wearing a human disguise.*
4. *You are here to remember who you are.*
5. *What you love is the key to your purpose.*
6. *Your challenges are meant to trigger your growth.*
7. *There are no mistakes, only lessons.*



Unique Path

Randy Hall



If the path before you is clear, you're probably on someone else's.

Carl Jung



For every unique individual, there is a unique path of recovery that is best. This is the wisdom that I heard at the start of my recovery journey. As I recount my story in the following pages, please remember that I do not know you. I do not know what will be helpful to you on your path. In fact, I do not know much about anything, to be honest. I just know my experience and what has worked for me so far. So, please take what works for you and leave the rest.

I struggled with substance use disorder for over twenty years. During the day, I would ingest huge quantities of amphetamines to fuel my ability to work hard and be “successful.” At night, I would consume large amounts of alcohol and marijuana in order to come back down to earth and maintain some semblance of a circadian rhythm. I was an exceptionally “high achiever,” but I was also just exceptionally high all the time. I was locked in a cycle of violence against myself, but my actions also had extremely negative karmic consequences for those close to me. I seemingly had no capacity to sit with my own uncomfortable feelings, and I lacked understanding of “why” I seemed to act in such impulsive and compulsive ways.

Was I genetically predisposed to act in such ways? My family tree definitely featured a substantial number of people with substance use issues. Did I

have co-occurring mental health disorders that I was trying to self-medicate? Psychiatrists have certainly suggested that ADHD and depression could have been significant causes of my addictive behavior. Did I suffer from a physical injury that drove me to use substances for pain relief? That seemed to be the case when it came to the opiates that I was briefly addicted to after a hellish health ordeal in my thirties. Did I use it because of emotional trauma and attachment injury? Absolutely. My childhood programming created several irrational beliefs in my mind about how drugs could help me be “better” by achieving more and feeling less. Did I remain stuck in addictive behavior simply due to the frequency, intensity, and duration of my use? Definitely. Twenty years of habitually using substances grooved deep neural pathways in my brain. Were there other causes and contributing factors that I still do not know about, even after seven years of intensive therapy? No doubt. In sum, there are a lot of reasons “why” I showed up in the self-destructive ways that consumed my life for over two decades.

Knowing “why” is good, but the important thing is to learn “how” to stop. And to figure that out, I was going to have to ask for help, which was a BIG problem for me. You see, I had never learned how to ask for help. As a child, there were sometimes painful consequences for needing help. So I began to fear appearing “dumb” or “needy,” and I started trying to figure out everything on my own. When I was a child, I put on a mask of competence and self-reliance, and I refused to pry it off until I was almost forty years old. It was a mask that simply responded “I’m fine” or “I got this” when others saw I was in peril and extended a hand to help. It was a mask that became heavier and heavier over time. A mask that almost suffocated me.

Like many people, I grew up in a family culture permeated by alcohol use. I was taught that alcohol is just what adults drink. At the dinner table, children get a glass of milk and adults have their booze of choice. Alcohol was presented as a “magic elixir” - the solution to all life’s problems. Sad? Have a drink to feel better! Happy? Have a drink to celebrate! Therefore, it was “normal” when I became a teenager and started to drink with my peers. Everyone was doing it, so why wouldn’t I as well? However, I noticed something was wrong right away. My friends could pick and choose when they drank. But I drank all the time, even when I seemingly did not want to. And I would drink until I was sick and then

immediately start bingeing again.

When I was twenty-one years old, I tried to tell my parents I had a problem. They pointed at my stellar grades at one of the best colleges in America and said, “No son, an alcoholic is someone who cannot function due to their drinking, and you are functioning extraordinarily well!” The message was that life was just a game. You were supposed to work hard and play hard. I was apparently “winning,” though it certainly did not feel that way. I knew that what they were saying was false, but I chose to ignore my intuition. In that pivotal moment, I abandoned myself, and I would not ask for help again for the next fifteen years.

Growing up, I had been taught that money and the things that it could buy would make me happy, so I decided to become an attorney even though I hated the law. I also had a fixed false belief that I had to be the “best” attorney or I would be a failure, so I abused stimulants because I thought they would help me outwork and outthink my opponents. This seemed to work at first, but I eventually became increasingly manic. I was a corporate defense litigator, and it was my job to crush individuals who were simply seeking fair compensation for their injuries. I was very good at being a lawyer, but it took a toll on me spiritually. I did not want to feel that dissonance in my head and heart. So, every morning I would get up and take amphetamines and look in the mirror and say, “You are a sociopath, you can do this today!” It was the world’s worst pep talk. But I wanted to believe that I was a sociopath because then I thought I would not have to feel bad about what I was doing to people.

By the time I was thirty-three years old, my drug and alcohol addiction had taken a massive toll on my mind, body, and spirit. I started to become concerned that I would overdose and die if I could not figure out how to stop. I had an irrational belief that if I quit being a lawyer, then I would quit being a drug addict. So, in the midst of a massive speed binge, I walked into a dimly lit conference room and told my law firm’s partners that I was resigning.

Obviously, my plan did not work. I just became a drug-addicted teacher instead. I taught English at Carver High School in North Birmingham. I loved being a teacher, and I was very skilled at helping my students grow both personally

and academically. On my “good” days, I was like Robin Williams in “Dead Poets Society” - incredibly helpful and engaging. However, when I could not find any more amphetamines, I would go into withdrawal and ingest even larger quantities of alcohol and marijuana than “normal” to relieve my pain. There were many days when I was physically present but mentally and emotionally absent.

My family, including my three young daughters, suffered from this “Jekyll and Hyde” routine as well, never knowing which dad was going to show up. I was frequently suffering from intense physical and mental duress due to my substance use. I also had a magical belief that I could continue to harm myself in this way forever, and there would be no real consequences for me.

I was wrong.

When I was thirty-six years old, I was coaching my daughter’s youth soccer game when I felt a tingling in my toes. It was the strangest sensation - like both my feet were falling asleep at the same time. By the end of the game, the tingling had ascended up to my knees. I thought to myself, “Better not tell anyone, they might find out what you have been doing to yourself!” By the next morning, though, both arms and both legs were tingling all over. Soon, my whole body felt like it was on fire, and I could hardly move or breathe. I was rushed to the ER, where I was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), a rare autoimmune disease.

The doctors still do not know exactly why I got GBS. It could have been from an upper respiratory infection that I had two weeks earlier. It could have been from some questionable chicken enchiladas that I ate at the beach ten days prior. It might have been from a surgical infection from a small procedure that I had undergone about a week earlier. Or - of course - it could have been from neurotoxicity in my brain caused by the fact that I was bingeing on three different types of pharmaceutical-grade amphetamines at the same time. The doctors assure me that it is hard to know for sure whether my drug use contributed to my GBS, as there is only a very small sample size of people who do to their body what I was doing to mine. Ultimately, though, the reason why I got GBS is not as important as what would happen next.

I spent the next forty days in the neuro-ICU, totally conscious but locked inside my body. I was constantly on the verge of death and needed life-saving procedures numerous times. I was paralyzed from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I could not eat or drink, so I was fed through a peg tube. I could not breathe, so I underwent a tracheotomy and was sustained by a ventilator. I could not speak or communicate with anyone in any way. I was withdrawing from all of my drugs, and I had intense neuropathic pain all over my body. Even worse than the physical pain, though, was the psychological trauma. I suffered from psychosis. I had hellish hallucinations and depraved delusions. I felt like I was in the realm of the hungry ghosts. Most days, I wished for death. I would have killed myself if I could have. Thankfully, I could not.

I was eventually moved to a special care unit where I was weaned off the ventilator. Next, I went to a world-class physical rehabilitation center called the Shepherd Center in Atlanta for four months. I slowly regained movement in my limbs. I did several hours of physical and occupational therapy every day. I eventually learned to walk, talk, and take care of myself again. During this time, I had no access to my substances of choice. I was in intense pain and having lots of anxiety, though, so I began to abuse opiates and benzos to cope. However, I realized that those drugs were going to kill me very quickly, so I stopped taking them after a short while. Finally, after nearly six months away from my family, I returned to Birmingham.

My experience with GBS and my time at the Shepherd Center profoundly changed my life. I promised myself that if I made it through that extremely difficult ordeal, I would start to take better care of myself. And, if my life had been a Hollywood movie, I would have learned my lesson and never used addictive substances again. But that is not the way it worked for me. Nothing outside of me was going to save me from what was happening internally.

After I returned to Birmingham, I wanted to “celebrate life” with friends and family, so I started using again. I also now had a new trauma from my health crisis to deal with. I tried to drown my pain with substances. However, my body had atrophied to basically nothing. I could not use substances like I had before. I quickly spun out of control and pushed myself again to the brink of death. My

partner Jessica had finally had enough. She urged me to get help, threatening to leave me and take our three beautiful ginger daughters if I did not. I did not fight her. I knew I would not live much longer if I did not figure out how to stop. I knew it was time to change.

Thus, when I was thirty-eight years old, I took the first steps on my recovery journey. As I recount the path that I took to you, please remember that I was incredibly privileged to have a supportive family and access to the best resources that money could buy. I recognize that such resources are not readily available to everyone. I also think that it is clear that systemic oppression exists in our society, which is intended to deny many people access to the resources that helped me change and heal my life. This lack of equity is not OK. Lack of access to therapeutic resources is a major cause of suffering in our country, and I hope we can collectively correct this injustice through much-needed systemic reforms. I mention all of this at the outset, though, as I feel it would be disingenuous to tell my story without acknowledging that I had far more access to resources than most people do.

My recovery journey began with a very short, unsuccessful stint in outpatient treatment. I attended the Intensive at The Moore Institute for five days. During that week, therapists Steve and Pam Moore introduced me to the inner work that I would be asked to do as part of the program. Frankly, it scared me to death. I did not want to do it. To be honest, I did not really want to stop using it. So I left the program on that Friday, telling everyone that I had been “cured.” I was not cured, though. In fact, I had been using the entire week. The next day, I broke into a safe in order to steal some amphetamines. I then proceeded to go on a monster binge that could have easily killed me.

At that point, it was clear that I needed a higher level of intervention, so my therapist recommended that I undergo “the werewolf treatment.” I did not know what this meant, so I asked and was told that I was like the guy in a horror movie who transforms into a werewolf. The only way to keep that guy from hurting himself and others is to chain him to a rock. That’s what I needed - to be chained to the rock. Later that day, I checked into the inpatient Addiction Recovery Program at UAB Hospital. I can still remember the feeling in my body when I

heard the door lock behind me. It felt like a wave of relief. I felt like I was finally safe from myself. I was free from self-harm, and I was thankful that someone would have eyes on me at all times.

I spent forty days as an inpatient at UAB. During this time, I learned that if I did what I had always done, I would get what I had always gotten. Every night, they would take us on the “druggie buggy” to another Twelve Step meeting somewhere around the greater Birmingham area. This was a valuable practice as I realized that, next to every bar and dealer’s house, there was a room of people who were coming together to share and heal. This was emboldening to me.

However, there were many aspects of the Twelve Step groups that did not appeal to me. I did not like the overtly religious principles underlying the program. I also considered some of the “unwritten” rules and practices, such as the sobriety chip system, to be flat-out shame-inducing. Most importantly, though, I felt like I saw a lot of people with a lot of sober time, but I did not see a lot of people with a high quality of life. When I looked at many of the “old timers,” I realized that I did not “want what they had.” In sum, the Twelve Step programs simply did not resonate with me as an individual. I knew I needed to find other pathways.

The first path that I found that worked for me was SMART Recovery. SMART stands for Self-Management and Recovery Training, and it is based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. The program is evidence-based and stigma-free. The SMART Handbook is chock-full of tools that helped me learn how to (1) build and maintain motivation to stay sober; (2) cope with my urges; (3) manage my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and (4) live a balanced life. SMART taught me that the main problem with my beliefs was that I believed them - I never questioned whether they were rational or helpful. By observing my beliefs, disputing harmful ones, and replacing them with effective new ones, I was able to make wiser choices and cultivate a harmonious life that I did not want to escape from with substances or addictive behavior. Throughout my recovery journey, I have regularly attended the SMART meetings at The Moore Institute, and I now lead many of the groups as a trained facilitator. I am so grateful for SMART, and I consider it one of the most important pillars of my recovery program.

While I was in treatment at UAB, though, I had a feeling that SMART would not be enough to keep me sober, especially since there was only one SMART meeting a week in Birmingham. One of my therapists had once told me, "Listen, you were a hardcore drug addict, you are going to have to be a hardcore person in recovery!" I took that advice to heart, and I set about figuring out if there were other tools and fellowships that I could use that would complement SMART Recovery.

One day, as my inpatient stay was winding to a close, my therapist walked by and asked me if I wanted to talk to the hospital chaplain. I had never been a religious (or even spiritual) person, so I said, "No, thank you." "OK," he said, "but what about a Buddhist chaplain?" Now, this intrigued me for some unknown reason. Despite having one of the best educations that money could buy, I did not know anything about Buddhism. On that fateful day, I was also very bored. So, I said, "Sure, why not, send up the Buddhist guy!"

A bald and bearded man named Al Cotton appeared a short while later. We sat in a side room with a floor-to-ceiling window as a storm passed through downtown Birmingham. I told him my story, and he listened attentively. Then he told me about the fundamental principles and practices of Buddhism. He taught me about the First Noble Truth - "In life, there is suffering." "No shit," I thought as I looked out the window of the psych hospital. Next, he told me about the Second Noble Truth, that craving was the cause of suffering. This also made sense to me. I not only craved drugs and alcohol, but I also wanted my life to be different from what it was. Finally, he instructed me on the Third Noble Truth, that there was a way out of the cycle of habitual suffering, and that the way out was the Fourth Noble Truth, known as the Eightfold Path. He briefly illustrated for me how following an ethical framework like the Eightfold Path could help me suffer less. The path that he described resonated deeply with my own human experience. He told me there were Refuge Recovery meetings in Birmingham where they used Buddhist-inspired practices to change and heal their lives. I immediately asked if I could attend one.

UAB took us on the buggy to a Refuge meeting that weekend. I remember walking in and immediately feeling at ease. The room was dimly lit, and everyone

was talking and laughing. We did a loving-kindness meditation, and I felt a feeling of lightness in my chest at the end. I could not identify it at first, but I eventually realized that it was self-compassion. It felt euphoric, like coming home after an arduous journey. I knew at that point that the Buddhist-inspired path was more aligned with my spirit than the Twelve Step programs. I also felt like I had finally seen a group of people who seemed to be living with ease. I wanted what they had. So I started attending more and more Refuge meetings.

Soon after I joined the group, the Refuge fellowship went through a schism, and the Birmingham sangha was one of the first to help create a new recovery fellowship called Recovery Dharma (RD). I have attended multiple RD meetings every week since then. RD is probably the primary pillar of support for my recovery program. RD is Buddhist-inspired, but not required. The vast majority of members are not Buddhists; they are just people who have found Buddhist principles and practices to be helpful to them on their journeys. I myself do not identify as Buddhist, though I do consider myself pretty “Buddhish.” For the last several years, I have meditated and used mindfulness practices every day. I have used the Eightfold Path as an ethical framework for living my life. I have used RD’s trauma-informed tools to move through difficult emotions and live a life of authentic joy. I am so grateful that we have such a thriving RD community here in Birmingham - including three meetings a week at The Moore Institute - because it has been in those circles where most of my healing has happened.

Even though SMART and RD have been my primary pathways, I still chose to work the Twelve Steps in early recovery. I was lucky to find a sponsor named Grayson who guided me through the Narcotics Anonymous Handbook over the course of nine months. This practice was incredibly helpful to me, and the non-judgmental way that he worked with me has become the model for the way I have worked with many others over the years.

Once again, though, I must note that my life in early recovery did not resemble a Hollywood movie. The trajectory of my recovery path was far from perfect. During the COVID lock-down, I fell back into old patterns of impulsive and compulsive behavior. I also battled new process addictions like overexercising and bulimia. Addiction crept back into my life and made things unmanageable

once again. I knew that I needed to ask for help again. I started attending a relapse prevention support group run by a local therapist named Maggie Banger. Maggie used the Enneagram to help me understand how to heal my core wounds. I am so grateful for Maggie's compassionate approach to recovery, and I have continued to study the Enneagram and believe that it is a profound tool for self-growth.

I also sought additional treatment back where I had started my journey - The Moore Institute. I spent a couple of months in the Intensive, the Moores' holistic and individualized outpatient treatment program. Over that span, it was clear to me that the Moores did not care how I got better - they just wanted me to get better. They used their Star Matrix tool (as well as the Enneagram) to help me figure out exactly what was leading me to harm myself. They assisted me in gaining a deeper understanding of how my genetics, trauma, and irrational beliefs were fueling my attempts to escape from reality. They helped me understand that recovery was more about self-acceptance than self-improvement. They taught me that we were all a little broken, but that we could learn to be better at being broken. They helped me learn that the object of recovery was not to feel happy all the time, but rather to simply feel whatever I was feeling without running away. They showed me a process for crafting a relapse prevention plan that I have continued to adapt as my journey has evolved. They, more than anyone else, taught me how to care about myself enough to actually take care of myself.

I am very grateful to the Moores for the kindness and support they have shown me over the years. I am also so appreciative that they have cultivated a safe and inclusive container for me and others to heal here in the heart of Alabama. In addition to the Intensive, they freely provide community space for almost all of the peer support meetings that I have attended over the last seven years. I firmly believe that the Moores saved my life by showing me how to cultivate a life worth living. I consider myself a disciple of their principles and practices, and I spread their message about the importance of multiple pathways of recovery wherever I go.

What I learned most from the Moores, though, was that addiction was ultimately about isolation. Substances and addictive behaviors separated me from myself and others physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Therefore,

the antidote to addiction must be a connection to both myself and others. The question thus becomes, how do I best connect to myself and others on a day-to-day basis?

As far as connection to self, I have regularly gone to therapy over the last seven years in order to process my thoughts and feelings. I personally received a lot of relief from doing EMDR, a type of trauma therapy, with a counselor named David Palaia. I continue to do inner work both alone and in group settings, and I am always curious about exploring new modalities. I also do lots of self-reflective exercises, including meditating, answering inquiry questions, and writing poetry. I take care of myself physically by practicing yoga and climbing. Both of those activities help me feel present and safe in my body. I stick to healthy routines when it comes to eating and sleeping. I set intentions every morning, including the “Sobriety Priority,” which means I will not ingest any mood-altering substances for any reason, no matter what. I have learned mindfulness tools, including the RAIN technique, to deal with emotional discomfort. I remind myself that if I don’t have my feelings, they will have me, one way or the other. If I resist them, they will persist and then manifest in harmful ways. So instead of trying to run away from my emotions, I sit down and “have tea with my demons.” I make sure difficult emotions feel seen and heard. I embrace them and nurture them before letting them go. I do this practice several times every day because I know that I must feel my feelings to heal my feelings.

When it comes to connection to others, I try to seek out healthy, reciprocal relationships. I am so grateful that I have cultivated so many authentic friendships in recovery. I no longer have to wear a mask to receive acceptance or validation. My wise friends support me, and I try to support them. We listen attentively to one another and sit together in our shared suffering. We do not need to fix one another. Honestly, there is usually nothing to fix. We simply witness each other’s pain. That is how the healing happens for me - when I am talking to others in the circle, and I can see the pressure behind their eyes. It is at that moment that I know they understand what I am going through. I can see that they believe that I am worthy of love, no matter what I’ve done, and their belief in my inner wholeness helps me believe it too. It feels like my relationships are so much more balanced and serene now. I am able to wisely set boundaries with people whom I

used to let walk all over me. I am much more present with and connected to my daughters. I use the mindfulness tools that I have acquired to help them learn to soothe their own suffering. I strive to continue to show up for my community and do whatever I can to promote inclusivity and equity. I am simply a more gentle and compassionate person to everyone I meet. In short, the harmony that I have cultivated with others has led to a much deeper harmony within myself.

Life seems to continue to get easier, but it is never easy. I am not perfect. I still make lots of mistakes and will continue to do so. However, when I inevitably fail, I quickly remember that I am human. I remind myself that I am worthy of love and compassion, no matter what. I know that I will always be a work in progress. I am OK with that. After all, even a work in progress is a work of art. And yes, the universe will continue to shit on me from time to time. I know this. However, I also know that the universe is not burying me. It is fertilizing me. Everything that happens to me helps me grow.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not note that I have found so much joy and healing through helping other people on their journeys. I have been a leader in the Birmingham recovery community, and I continue to attend and facilitate peer support groups every week. I have mentored dozens of men, and I continue to volunteer to work with people who are new to recovery. I have also served as the President of Recovery Dharma Global, and I continue to promote the RD program and nurture the grassroots community of meetings all over the world.

I have even made recovery my livelihood because I believe that helping others is my “ikigai” or “reason for being.” I am very fortunate to work for a nonprofit called the Addiction Prevention Coalition (APC), where I provide recovery resources and support services to people across Central Alabama. I love my job because nothing helps me more than helping other people.

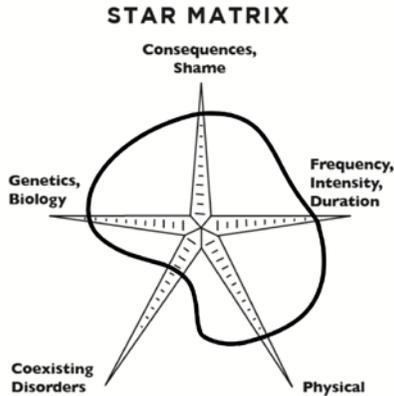
One of my favorite ways to be helpful to others is to tell my story at treatment centers and community events. I always begin my story the same way - by saying that recovery is not “one size fits all.” I note that each of us is unique, so we will all need unique pathways of recovery. I explain how most recovery programs are - in many ways - the same tea in different cups since they all seem to revolve

around both self-reflection (inner work) and service (outer work). But I always encourage people to listen to their own inner voice and create their own path.

Most of all, though, I encourage people to be gentle with themselves. I let them know that recovery is hard, but they can do hard things. I remind them that - although hurt people can hurt people - healed people can also heal people. We can all look deeply at our suffering, alchemize it into growth, and then send healing ripples out into the world.

I hope you read at least one thing in my story that was helpful to you. If you did, please share it with someone else. And share your story too! That is how the ripples happen.

Thank you for bearing witness to my story. I am complete.



My True Story

Louise Walker



To thine own self be true.

William Shakespeare



Sober Date: January 29, 2025 (the most recent one)

I started my sobriety journey later in life, after years of hiding behind different personas. I am thankful to those who helped me recover and find authenticity again. I will talk a great deal about my mother and family, I want to show how the people in my family all had their own masks to protect themselves. This is a short account of losing—and regaining—myself.

I was born the sixth child of a 36-year-old mother (born 1920) and a 42-year-old father (born 1914). My grandfather (born 1875) also lived with my family in a ridiculously small coal mining house on ‘Company land’. My father was a coal miner, like his father and his grandfather. He worked the swing shift which was five days a week 7am, then 3pm, then 11pm repeating every three weeks. Coal mining was physically back breaking and emotionally grueling. Deaths in the coal mines were commonplace. Mother had to keep the children and Papa Hatcher quiet while daddy slept odd hours. My mother always said it was the reason for his bad disposition. However, I have come to believe he was a dry drunk.

My mother stayed home to cook, clean, and raise a family. She had an especially

small two-bedroom company shack. She was responsible for five children, and an aging father-in-law. She had a coal stove, with no indoor plumbing or modern convenience. She had a cow for milk, chickens for eggs, and a large garden, the three oldest children were teenage boys aged 17, 15, and 13 respectively, then came two sisters aged 11 and 8. All the children had work to do at home after and before school.

My mother described the coal mining towns as brutal. Raising children there was treacherous. Not only were people in the community often mean-hearted, but also there were hobo jungles located near the railroad track for the coal company. Mother often talked of taking meals to them because she could not stand for the children of these makeshift towns to go hungry. For years I was mad at my mother until I started putting things in her life together. She worked from sunup to sundown, and then in-betweens. Often while pregnant. God forbid that she or anyone else in the family got sick. My father's answer to her dilemma was to attend church more often or every time the doors opened.

Then mother was surprised by the pregnancy with me. Mother had her hands-full, while daddy wanted twelve children. Mother had an especially difficult pregnancy with me which required blood transfusions to maintain her health and the pregnancy. This pregnancy was so problematic that she was required to give birth in the hospital. All her other births were born at home. My mother often referred to being in the hospital as very unpleasant. She believed the women from the coal mining towns were treated with malice from the staff.

She was most distraught as the Dr ordered a shot to dry up her milk. Women were using formula as it was, at that juncture, believed to be healthier for the baby. While mothers in the mines wanted to nurse their babies as long as possible. It was easier without bottles or milk to buy. It was one less expense and less time consuming. To more complicate the problems, after a difficult birth and extended time in the hospital. She came home with a baby that was colicky and had respiratory problems. None of the milk or formulas would agree with me, except goat milk. So, my father bought a goat for my mother to tend and provided milk for me.

Life was hard for everyone, especially my mother. She simply shut down, she would not get out of bed, she did not feed me or take care of me or anyone else. My sister said after school, all the kids came in to see if I was still alive.' She said my skin was blue and I was hardly moving. My mother's oldest sister, my Aunt Beulah, came to retrieve me and take me home with her.

I am not sure how long I lived with Aunt Beulah and Uncle Walter. They had eight grown children. I was the baby of the house; they spoiled me in every way. I have very tender memories of being with them. They lived on a working farm in a large farmhouse; they had indoor plumbing, an electric stove, and all the modern conveniences of the time. My aunt would rise early and make breakfast for everyone working on the farm and store. She then worked on her farm and then their store. I would spend a great deal of time at the store. I learned to greet each customer with a cheery hello. I thought they were my parents while my parents and siblings would only come by to visit. My sister had told me that I was the lucky one.

Meanwhile, my father bought a country store, retired from coal mining, became an ordained Baptist minister, and moved the family to rooms attached to the store. Mother and daddy came to my aunt and uncle's house to recover me. I do not know how old I was at the time, but I did know that this was not my home. This house had a great deal of violence and a woman that did not stop crying and barely spoke. It had a kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom attached to the outside porch, my parents slept in the living room. My siblings immediately started to take care of me. My father would have periods of terrible violent behavior. My siblings tried to protect me, but I had my turn with the beatings. This was something I had never experienced, and this was when I learned to apply my first mask.

The years passed and life went on for me. I had epilepsy as a child, and I managed my own medication at age seven. At school due to having epilepsy, I was placed in the class with children with learning disabilities, then called the retarded class. From an early age, I decided that I would be an actress. Makes sense? As a teen I did Town and Gown Theater and studied Shakespeare in Europe. Life was on target and then at 16, I became pregnant.

I married David as a good Baptist girl would do and had a beautiful baby boy. My father's finances had changed, and he bought a house for the new happy couple. David was prone to violent behavior. We went on to have two more children. We had two beautiful girls to complete our family. My father built a larger home for us. As long as everything was perfect, things were great.

I joined the family Baptist church and kept a perfect home. I studied the Bible extensively, read Martha Stewart magazines and watched her show daily. I was a cross between Martha Stewart and the church lady unless I made a mistake. Mistakes, real or conceived, were reasons for my husband becoming violent and disturbing the balance of my perfect home.

During this time, I would only have a drink socially, but not very often. In my late thirties, I chose nursing school after finally giving up on becoming an actress. That is when all hell broke loose, my husband strongly opposed me attending schooling of any kind and did not want to waste money as according to him, 'you are not that smart.' The violence got unbelievably bad. He no longer cared if the marks showed as this was such an abysmal offence. I had concussions, cracked ribs, bruises on my throat and body, and a broken spirit by the end of my marriage.

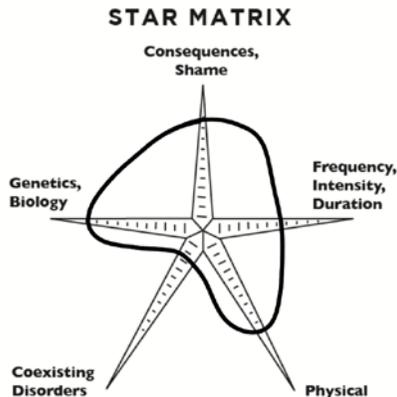
By the grace of God, I was able to divorce him at the age of thirty-six after 20 years of marriage. I worked two jobs, my parents helped, and my new husband encouraged me through nursing school. Nursing school, once a source of chaos in my home, became a lifeline. The long nights spent hunched over textbooks, the frantic mornings juggling clinicals and parent-teacher conferences, all stitched a new sense of purpose into my days. The scars on my body faded, but the invisible ones lingered. My father died in my last semester of school. He was proud of my achievement, and both parents had softened over time. I earned my Registered Nurse {RN} designation after years of commitment and hard work.

Around this time, my drinking escalated from occasional to daily as I struggled with the mental and physical demands of nursing. Like several of my colleagues, I used alcohol to cope with the traumatic experiences of caring for severely ill patients in the Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit at UAB. While I valued making

a difference, the emotional toll and intense environment often felt overwhelming, far beyond what I had anticipated during nursing school. Now, in hindsight, this is when I did the greatest service to my patients and to myself. I felt a sense of accomplishment in managing extremely complicated tasks and an intense purpose of helping others.

I transitioned into nursing management, starting in the ICU staffing pool at UAB, the house superior, then managing the NICU, moving to opening a stroke unit in Atlanta, and later leading the Medical Emergency Team at UAB. I earned my Master of Science in Nursing during this period and eventually managed a nursing unit at the VA before retiring. During my career and retirement, I struggled with heavy daily drinking, consuming alcohol from morning to night during my retirement. My counselor of twenty years remained supportive, continually offering strategies to help me stop drinking. However, I remained a good actress with multiple masks. I now realize she could completely see through my ever-changing masks.

I am now in Alcoholics Anonymous. I believe the fellowship of this local group has encouraged me to stay sober. I still have times when I want to drink, but I do not. I do not want to go back to that life. I put myself and others through so much pain for the sake of drinking to help me forget.



My True Story

Yet, in the wreckage of those years, I learned something about endurance—how the soul can smolder quietly and survive on embers when the flames of happiness seem long gone. I found myself standing at the edge of a world I barely recognized. I was battered, yes, but I refused to be beaten. I had a wonderful life to live and years to make up for due to excessive drinking.

I sometimes glance backward, toward the coal towns of my mother and the battered times of my own young adulthood, and I feel both sorrow and gratitude. The path was treacherous, but it led me here: to a place where survival has given way to something that, at long last, resembles peace one day at a time.

Becoming Aware

Anonymous



Every morning we are born again. What we do today is what matters most.

Buddha



“What got me into substances?” is a question that I think is summarily answered as “rebellion.” I was reared in a teetotal abstinence family, except for one rogue, and of course, my favorite, uncle. I lived in Mississippi, the nation’s wettest “dry state” during grade and high school years. There were three active bootleggers, each within 10 miles of our church and home, selling creek-chilled “tall” cans of beer for 50 cents and pints or half pints of moonshine for a buck or buck and a half. On weekend afternoons, quilts were spread on their front yards for craps and drinking. High schoolers with a couple of dollars were not turned away, and it was the back-of-the-throat, fiery bang and its illegality that attracted them. My dad, a Southern Baptist minister, labeled “drinking” a sin and served Welsh grape juice with broken crackers for communion. I never did understand how he rationalized what the Bible said about Jesus drinking. But it worked for him. Being the “preacher’s kid” separated me from expectations of how to behave. Also, because “the Lord” could call his minister to another church at any time, I never felt like a permanent resident. “Friends” during both grade and high school could be counted on one hand. And I fought, apparently a lot, because it was mentioned 3 times at my 50th year high school reunion.

Howard College, now Samford University, followed a small-town high school, and the big city had plenty of places that sold to minors. The next stop was

Louisville, KY, for a short stop at the seminary, where I arrived drunk enough to pee in the registration office parking lot. A welcoming professor had to step across the stream to shake hands with me. By Thanksgiving, my dorm room wall was decorated with empty whiskey bottles, and I knew that I had no business being there. When I met with the Dean to inform him that I was dropping out, he admitted that I was probably going to be asked to leave anyway.

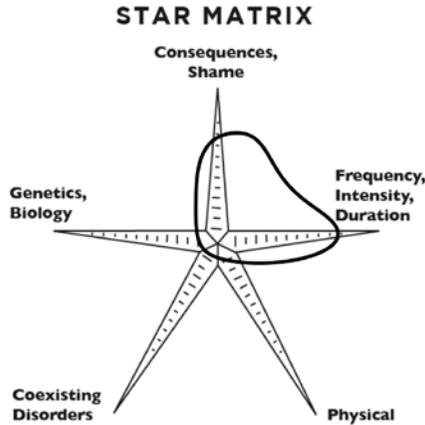
I returned to my parents' house, befuddled but mostly sober, at the time that college grads were being recruited into the Army as infantry officers. Knowing then I could not shoot someone, I enlisted in the Navy. My first Navy boss was an alcoholic who took me on extended lunch breaks at his favorite bar near work. I proudly matched him beer for beer. I also discovered a nearby bar that discounted drinks for servicemen and specialized in blues and jazz entertainment.

I was next transferred to LA, California, to write news articles about the Navy's Sea Lab III. There was a lot of downtime, and service club drinks were cheap. An early discharge because Vietnam was winding down got me back to Birmingham, a great job with another boss with whom to drink competitively, and many nights until the bar closed. Each day's drive home from work included most of a 6-pack. Drinking dulled senses that should have been more attuned to my wife's cancer, which slowly and painfully killed her. Anger and helplessness just prompted more drinking. And it was anger that led to my stopping. Forced to make a meaningless overnight business trip and miss a memorial service for her, I associate it with a fifth of vodka, an overnight in jail, and a DUI.

It is my current wife and best friend who saved my life with her accurate observation. Looking eye to eye, she declared, "You are going to kill yourself or someone else if you don't stop drinking." It registered. A lot of insistence got me to try AA, and its primary value of requiring self-acknowledgment that one is hooked on the need for alcohol. But for some, like me, listening to the circle of repeated stories does not help one choose to stop drinking. That task is a personal choice. Encouragement may feel suitable for some, but the battle to change behavior ultimately lies with the individual. No one else can ease the struggle. It is a lonely battle, but one most worthy of heroic effort. I don't know the statistics, but I do know that change and constancy only occur through our own choice.

It is crucial to be experientially aware that one chooses to refrain from drugs. There is no magic bullet to kill the threat. It was and will always be an individual choice to ingest poisons or not. Sadly, our consumptive culture constantly offers temptation.

Does an alcoholic ever “recover”? We do stop drinking and smoking pot, but does the potential for relapse ever cease? It is possible, but it takes years. It has been 35 years since the last drink, and there are no plans for another. Although still missed is a good Burgundy with dinner and a brandy after. The value of “missing” is its reminder to never go back.



The Cut Window

P.T. Milam



*“Your purpose in life is to find your purpose and
give your whole heart and soul to it”*

Buddha



I was born on May 15, 1982, in Birmingham, Alabama. My mother was Debbie Milam, and my father was Jerry Milam. I was the middle of three boys—my older brother 14 years ahead of me, my younger 7 years behind. We were spread out like chapters in a book written over decades, each of us shaped by a different version of our parents and our home.

When I was two years old, my parents were house hunting. They found a place with a fenced-in backyard, and that fence sealed the deal. It meant safety—I could play freely, unsupervised. But before long, I was climbing over it. That image became a kind of metaphor for my life: always pushing past boundaries, drawn to what was just out of reach.

By the age of five, I was taken to a psychiatrist and diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. I was a wild, playful, energetic kid—full of curiosity and movement—but that energy soon became something to manage, something to medicate, something to fix. Looking back, that diagnosis was a turning point. It wasn't just about attention or behavior; it shaped how I saw myself. I learned early that I was “too much,” that my natural way of being didn't fit into the world as it was expected to be.

The Cut Window

That disconnection—between who I was and who I thought I was supposed to be—set the stage for many of my later struggles. I carried a deep sense of restlessness, of not being quite right, of needing to escape.

By the time I was eight years old, I had smoked my first cigarette. I can still remember the burn in my chest, the rush of doing something forbidden. Not long after that, I was stealing cigarettes—first from the local grocery store, then from the homes of my friends whose parents smoked. There was something about that feeling, that edge of danger and escape, that clicked with me. I didn't know it then, but I was already starting to medicate something inside of me.

At twelve, I took my first drink of alcohol. It wasn't at a party or a celebration. It was more like an experiment—an early attempt at escape, or maybe just a desire to feel something different. I remember coming home afterward and getting caught by my dad. I don't recall the exact consequences, but I do remember the feeling: shame, guilt, confusion. Part of me knew I had crossed a line. Another part of me wanted to keep going.

The summer before ninth grade, my friends from the neighborhood came knocking—literally—on my bedroom window. I had cut the screen out weeks earlier so I could come and go as I pleased, slipping in and out under the radar. That window became a kind of gateway—for freedom, for rebellion, and eventually, for the choices that shaped the direction of my life.

That night, they asked if I wanted to go down to the creek and smoke some pot. I told them no. I still had the DARE program ringing in my ears—drugs are bad, they'll ruin your life. I had already crossed the line into drinking, but something about “drugs” felt bigger, more dangerous. I said I was fine with alcohol but didn't want to try anything else. They shrugged and left.

The next night, they came back. Same knock, same offer. And this time, I gave in.

That was the first time I smoked pot. I don't remember exactly how it made me feel, but I remember what it meant: I had crossed another line. The “no” I said the

first night was already buried under the need to fit in, to feel included, to escape the restlessness I didn't know how to name.

Not long after that, I fell in with a new group of friends. They were into rock and roll—Grateful Dead shirts, Led Zeppelin, The Doors, Pink Floyd blasting from old speakers. There was a freedom in that world that drew me in immediately. These weren't just bands; they were soundtracks to a different way of living—outside the rules, outside the noise of school and parents and pressure.

By then, I was smoking pot every day.

At first, it felt like a lifestyle—music, friends, weed. It felt like I had found my people, like I was part of something. But underneath that, I was already learning how to disappear. Getting high wasn't just about fun; it was about turning the volume down on everything I didn't understand—my thoughts, my anxiety, the chaos inside me that I couldn't explain to anyone.

Looking back, I can see how quickly it went from occasional use to a daily need. It was subtle at first. But soon, the day didn't feel right unless I was high. I thought I had found a way to feel better, but really, I was just drifting farther from myself.

High school was a blur—a mix of pot, alcohol, pills, LSD, mushrooms, and ecstasy. If it could change the way I felt, I was interested. I wasn't just experimenting anymore. I was chasing something—freedom, escape, connection, numbness—whatever would quiet the noise inside me.

I don't ever remember high school being about a future for myself. It was only about what was fun—what felt good or wild or new in the moment. Planning ahead, making goals, thinking about what came next—that wasn't part of my world. I was living moment to moment, trying to soak up whatever relief or excitement I could find.

I got in a lot of trouble—skipping class, smoking cigarettes in the bathrooms, constantly pushing the limits. I was always seen as a troublemaker, the kid who

wouldn't sit still or follow the rules. But deep down, I felt like a really loving human being. I cared—about people, about life. I just didn't know how to show it in ways that others could recognize.

School had always been hard for me, but my senior year was the worst. I was using heavily, and I was sinking under the weight of something I didn't understand. I now know it was anxiety and depression, but at the time, I had no words for it—just a constant sense of being overwhelmed, disconnected, and lost.

I failed two classes that year and wasn't allowed to walk with my graduating class. I remember showing up to the graduation ceremony intoxicated. It felt empty, like a show I didn't belong in. I left early, like it didn't matter.

And yet, somehow, I managed to pull it together just enough to receive a diploma. It wasn't a clean or proud moment—but it was a thread of survival. A flicker of something in me that still wanted to keep going.

In high school, I met the first woman I ever truly fell in love with. We started dating in 10th grade and stayed together for several years—even beyond graduation. Growing up in the Bible Belt, I had internalized a deep shame about my sexuality. There were parts of myself I didn't understand and couldn't accept, so I repressed them. But in this relationship, I imagined a future. I had hopes of marrying her one day. That dream gave me a kind of permission to let go of some of the guilt I carried, especially around sex. I lost my virginity to her in my senior year after prom. It felt like a big moment—not just because of the act itself, but because it was tied to a hope that maybe I could build something real and good, despite everything.

All my friends had already been sexually active for years. For them, it seemed easy and natural. For me, it was complicated—because I didn't just carry shame about what I was doing, I carried shame about who I was.

The problem was, her life was going somewhere, and mine wasn't. After high school, she began attending college in Montevallo. I was working at a Subway restaurant, smoking weed, drinking every day, and going nowhere fast.

I'll never forget the day she broke up with me. She brought a friend with her to my house to do it. I was completely devastated. I fell into a deep depression. I didn't want to get out of bed. And when I did, I was high. My friends didn't know what to make of it—I'd sit around with them in silence, barely saying a word for hours at a time. I was sinking, and nobody around me really knew what was happening.

That breakup was a turning point—a catalyst for a deeper dive into addiction.

That was around the time I started using cocaine. And it wasn't long before opioids entered the picture. It was the early 2000s—the beginning of the opioid epidemic. My primary care doctor was prescribing me 120 pain pills a month. No real questions, no deeper look—just a bottle full of relief.

By my early twenties, I was in the grip of a severe crack cocaine and opioid addiction.

At this time, I lost the last real anchor of stability I had—my job. It wasn't a great job, but it was something. It gave me a shred of structure, a place to go, a reason to wake up. When that was gone, and with addiction tightening its grip, I started to spiral quickly.

I began stealing. At first, it was small, but it didn't stay that way. I stole from my parents—the very people who had given everything to try to help me. I stole from childhood friends, people who had trusted me. I started breaking into cars and businesses in the middle of the night. I would steal cars just to get a ride to where I could find drugs, because by then, I didn't even have transportation of my own.

I was living moment to moment, lie to lie, hit to hit.

Pretty soon, the consequences caught up with me. I started getting arrested for felonies. I was in and out of county jail. The cycle was becoming familiar: get out, get high, get arrested, repeat. Each time, I told myself it would be different—but I didn't know how to stop. I was lost in the grip of it, hollowed out and hanging

on by a thread.

By the time I was 24, I had reached a point where I knew I needed help. I didn't have medical insurance, but I was desperate enough to look past that. In 2005, I entered Pearson Hall—a state-funded treatment center in Birmingham, Alabama.

I spent 28 days there. It was Christmas time, but I didn't even care. Being in treatment during the holidays was better than where I would've been otherwise. Jail. On the street. Chasing a high that would never be enough.

In treatment, I followed the rules. I listened intently. I did my best. But I don't think I fully understood how much work recovery would really take. My heart was in the right place, but I hadn't yet faced all of myself. And I find that to be a common theme—not just in my life, but in the lives of many others I've met on this journey. Most people want to do better, even if they continue to relapse. They're not broken—they just haven't found the missing piece yet.

The night I got out of treatment, I drank alcohol with some friends. I justified it by telling myself it wasn't the “hard stuff.” Not the crack. Not the pills. Just a few drinks.

But addiction doesn't care about your technicalities.

Soon after, I got into a relationship with someone who drank in unhealthy ways, too. I remember one night at a bar—I was drunk, and I saw her kissing another man. And just like that, I was done. I was wounded and angry and full of shame. Going back to crack cocaine felt like the only thing that made sense at that moment.

And once again, I was back to stealing. The spiral picked up right where it left off.

Eventually, I ended up back in the county jail—this time facing a long prison sentence. The consequences had finally caught up to me in a way that felt undeniable. I remember standing in court, broken open, and pouring my heart out to

the judge. I told him the truth: I was struggling. But I didn't want to live like this anymore. I wanted to do better.

At the time, I was on the waiting list for a long-term treatment center run by the Jimmie Hale Mission in Birmingham. I asked the judge if he would consider letting me attend the program before sentencing. I didn't beg to be let off—I just asked for a chance to get help. To be in an environment where I could finally begin to heal.

The judge agreed to let me go, but he made no promises. He was clear that this didn't mean I'd avoid prison. And honestly, I didn't care. For the first time, I wasn't trying to game the system. I wasn't looking for a loophole. I just wanted a shot at a different life.

Something in me had shifted. I was tired. Tired of lying. Tired of stealing. Tired of waking up every day feeling like I was dying. I didn't know what recovery would look like, but I knew I couldn't go back to what I had been.

From court, I was sent to Royal Pines—a long-term, faith-based recovery facility in north Alabama, geared toward men who hadn't quite become homeless yet but were well on their way. I stayed for seven months.

I was desperate. So I fully bought into the Christian path of recovery. I prayed, I listened, I read the Bible. I tried to surrender everything. And in many ways, I found comfort in the structure, in the clear answers, in the hope of being saved—not just from addiction, but from the shame and confusion I'd carried for so long.

I vividly remember the day I left. My father picked me up, and as we drove home, I was overcome with fear. I had spent the better part of a year in a structured, supportive bubble—and now I was about to re-enter the real world. I wasn't sure I was ready.

I got involved in a church and took a job with a father and son who ran a landscaping company. I remember riding in the backseat of their truck, listening to Rush Limbaugh on the radio. It was during the Obama–McCain election, and

I'll never forget hearing them say that Obama was the Antichrist. That moment stuck with me—not just because of what was said, but because it reflected the kind of environment I had entered.

While being involved in church brought some structure and belonging, it also created a culture and mindset that, looking back, was harmful for me. I was around people who didn't truly understand my past—my addiction, my mental health, my complexity. I was expected to fit into a mold that didn't leave room for questioning, doubt, or emotional depth. I felt alone again—this time, surrounded by people.

Eventually, that disconnection caught up with me. I started trying to drink again and take pain pills—this time with the idea that I could manage it. That I could control it.

But addiction doesn't negotiate. It waits. And it was waiting for me.

For a little while, I managed. I did something I never thought I would—I enrolled in college. And to my surprise, I did really well. I made all A's in my first semester. It felt like a new chapter, like maybe I was finally turning a corner.

But it didn't last.

I moved in with a friend to an apartment in downtown Birmingham. That's when my drinking picked up again—quietly at first, then daily. At the same time, I was back to taking pain pills—15 to 20 a day. It crept up slowly, but soon, I was right back in the grip of addiction.

One night, drunk and disconnected, I had a thought that felt natural in the moment: It would be nice to smoke some crack. And so I did.

The next day, my roommate found the pipe and kicked me out—even though I had paid six months of rent in advance using student loan money. That night, I slept in my car.

Soon after, I was introduced to heroin. And that was the beginning of a new

level of darkness. I started using IV heroin every day. It consumed everything. I began stealing again—doing whatever it took to keep the sickness at bay.

Eventually, I ended up back in county jail.

My father bailed me out, trying to help me once again. But just a few days later, the judge revoked my bond. I was incarcerated again—this time with no option to get out. I remember being outside, just before that happened, looking up at the sky. Something in me broke open. I made a quiet, internal vow: I can't do this anymore.

That was February 8, 2010—the day I entered county jail for the last time.

I was sentenced to 15 years, split to serve 18 months in the Alabama Department of Corrections. A heavy sentence—but one I would come to see as the beginning of real change.

In April of that year, I was called from my cell to the first floor of the facility. I didn't know what was happening. I was brought into a room where I found my mother and two brothers waiting for me.

They told me that my father had died of a massive heart attack while cutting the grass for one of my customers in the small lawn business I had been trying to run. They said he died instantly.

It was devastating.

My father was the most loving, kind man I've ever known. He believed in his sons, even when we couldn't believe in ourselves. He always showed up for us, always hoped for more for us. All three of us had struggled with addiction or alcoholism. And now he was gone.

I went back to my cell, shattered. And once again, I committed myself to something different.

I cried that night—but after that, I couldn't cry again for a long time. I had to

survive. The prison system is hard on those who show vulnerability, and grief has no room in a place where you're expected to harden yourself to everything.

But something changed in me.

The loss of my father cut through the fog of addiction in a way nothing else had. His death became a sacred turning point—not just a reason to stay clean, but a reason to live differently. To become someone he would be proud of. To carry forward the love he had always shown me, even when I didn't feel worthy of it.

I spent a few more months in county jail awaiting transfer to Kilby Correctional Facility. Each day felt like a countdown to something I couldn't quite prepare for. Then, one morning around 4 a.m., I was jolted awake and told to get ready.

I was taken downstairs with a group of others to board a white prison bus—destination: suffering. That's how it felt. I had heard the horror stories. Kilby was the intake facility for the Alabama Department of Corrections, and everyone said the same thing: That's where it gets real.

I was scared. Truly scared. That ride—just 90 minutes—felt like forever. Sitting in silence, shackled, your only company the sound of the bus engine and the stories playing in your head. Stories of violence, of chaos, of being swallowed up by a system that doesn't care who you are.

When we arrived, we went through the usual intake process—haircut, strip search, uniform, physical and mental assessments. Everything about it was meant to strip you down, to remind you that who you were before no longer mattered.

After a few days, I was assigned to a dorm with others who were also waiting to find out where they'd be sent next. Kilby is just a processing center. No one stays there permanently. It's a holding place. A limbo between the world you knew and the one you're about to be thrown into.

I remember lying on that bunk at night, the fluorescent lights always humming, the air always tense. I had already lost so much—my freedom, my father, my sense of self. And yet something inside me refused to disappear.

I didn't know where I was headed, but I knew this: I wasn't going back to the life I came from.

Prison life is... interesting.

Picture a massive warehouse packed wall to wall with metal bunk beds. Community toilets and showers with zero privacy. Around 250 people crammed into each building, watched over by maybe two guards—if you're lucky. And outside of going home, people did whatever they wanted.

There was a rhythm to it—loud and lawless. People were drinking coffee at all hours, smoking cigarettes rolled from whatever they could scrounge, doing drugs, hustling for whatever they could get. Some people tried to manipulate others out of their belongings. Others tried to take their self-respect.

It was survival of the fittest. Or the hardest. Or the most numb.

For me, I made a decision early on: Keep my head down. I didn't want to be part of the chaos. I didn't want to get involved in the politics or the power games or the underground economies. I read books. I journaled. I attended anything the system offered that had even a hint of positivity—which wasn't much.

But that quiet decision—to preserve my dignity, my recovery, and my sanity—was everything. In a place designed to strip you of your humanity, I held on to mine. Quietly. Steadily.

I thought about my father. I thought about the vow I had made. I thought about getting out and never coming back.

And every day I stayed sober inside that place, I was building something. Not loudly. Not perfectly. But solidly.

A few nights into my time at Kilby, they called for an AA meeting. I jumped at the opportunity. I had attended 12-step programs off and on in the past, but never consistently. Still, something in me was ready. I needed to be around people who were also trying to live differently.

I showed up at the cafeteria, and there were maybe three other guys. That was it. Four of us—locked up, worn down, and facing some of the hardest days of our lives. But in that little circle, we talked about our struggles. About the desire to stay sober. About not wanting to go back to the lives we had destroyed.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt something I hadn't felt in a while: hope.

Here we were—in the belly of the beast—and we were talking about being different. Searching for something we hadn't found yet. That small meeting, in that dimly lit cafeteria, was a spark.

As we walked back to the dorm, one of the guys handed me an AA Big Book. That became my lifeline. I read it every day. I started at the beginning and took in every word. I wanted to hear everything it had to say about the struggle that had taken my life. I needed to understand the disease—and more than that, I needed to know there was a way out.

One day, flipping through the table of contents, a chapter title stopped me: “A Vision for You.”

I wasn't even there yet in the reading, but that title alone stirred something deep inside. A vision? For me? I had never had one. I had never believed I deserved one. But I was finally ready to imagine something different. Something better. Something free.

I didn't know what that vision would look like. But for the first time in years, I wanted to find out.

I was released from the Alabama Department of Corrections in June of 2011. After spending about four months in a level 4 camp, I transitioned to work release and completed the rest of my sentence there. I was starting from scratch—no job, no money, no clear direction. But I was free. And I was ready.

My mother welcomed me home, and I'll always be grateful for that. My younger brother had moved out and was living with two others in recovery,

regularly attending NA meetings. My older brother was also sober and rebuilding his life. Having both of my brothers in recovery gave me a sense of hope and solidarity. I wasn't alone in the climb.

I started working with one of my cousins installing gutter guards. That led to painting houses with another cousin, and eventually to full-time work in lawn and tree care with yet another cousin. These jobs didn't offer prestige or a big paycheck, but they offered something even more valuable—structure, responsibility, and dignity. They gave me a reason to wake up, to keep going.

During this time, I threw myself into recovery. I was attending AA meetings nearly every day. I had a sponsor. I was working the steps. I began sponsoring other men, chairing meetings, leading discussions, attending business meetings with my home group. I wasn't just staying sober—I was becoming part of something larger than myself.

Then one day, riding in the work truck with my cousin, I had a quiet realization: I don't want to do this forever. I knew there was more I could give and more I wanted to learn. I had started college years earlier but dropped out in the middle of a relapse. Now, I felt ready to return.

I stepped away from that job and enrolled in school full-time. I lived off student loan money at first, scraping by. One night after a meeting, a friend mentioned a new men's sober living program looking for staff. I jumped at the opportunity and was hired. For the next five years, I worked as the evening manager of that program, supporting men in early recovery.

Around that time, my college launched a collegiate recovery program. They were hiring. I applied and was offered a role as a project assistant. Helping to build a recovery community on campus gave me a sense of deep purpose. It felt like everything I'd gone through had led me here—not just surviving, but contributing.

It was during these years that I was introduced to Buddhism, Taoism, SMART Recovery, and Refuge Recovery (now Recovery Dharma). I had been questioning

my spirituality for some time. The structured, often rigid religious lens I had once embraced no longer fit. But the teachings of the Buddha—and the simplicity of Taoism—spoke to something deeper. These paths didn't demand belief as much as they invited practice. They acknowledged suffering and offered a way to live with it, not deny it. I didn't leave 12-step recovery behind—I just broadened my path. I began to see value in all pathways to healing. And I embraced them.

After earning my bachelor's degree in social work, I applied and was accepted into a master's program. I enrolled in the virtual track to allow for flexibility. Around this time, my girlfriend—now my wife—became pregnant with our first son.

Dylan Patrick Milam was born on April 12, 2018. He shares a birthday with my younger brother, which felt sacred to me. It was another thread of redemption being woven into my life.

Shortly after Dylan's birth, we moved to the West Coast. We love to travel, love the outdoors, and were eager for a new adventure. I accepted a position at Oregon State University as their Collegiate Recovery Program Manager. My brothers helped me drive cross-country with all our belongings. I remember dropping them off at the airport and crying the whole ride back to our apartment. I was scared—but I kept going.

We spent four years in Oregon. We had incredible experiences and faced real challenges. But we faced them together. And in the end, we grew through it. We returned to Alabama at the end of 2022. Since then, I've finished my master's degree in social work and became independently licensed to practice in the state of Alabama. Today, I work full-time as a clinical social worker in the federal sector. And in May 2024, we welcomed our second son into the world, Taylor James "TJ" Milam. He shares the same nickname as my wife, Tanya Jocelyn "TJ" Adams.

Between the Oregon chapter and our return home, I took a week to attend a spiritual retreat hosted by the group Illuman. It focused on male rites of passage—a sacred space where men could explore their deeper selves without

shame. That experience profoundly shaped how I now understand manhood, vulnerability, and the ongoing nature of transformation.

Today, my life looks nothing like the one I left behind on February 8, 2010. And in a beautiful way, that's the point.

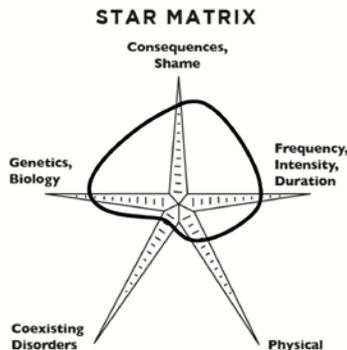
I don't get to meetings as often as I used to. Life is full—work, marriage, fatherhood. But recovery remains at the center of everything. It is the foundation. Without it, none of this would have been possible.

I embrace being a father. I embrace being a husband. I embrace being a therapist. I embrace being a person in long-term recovery.

The band Wilco once said, “Embracing the situation is our only chance to be free.” I try to live that way—embracing it all. Joy and sorrow. Fear and courage. Peace and doubt. I walk the middle path.

One of the books that helped me early on was *The Tao of Pooh*. It explained the principles of Taoism through the lens of Winnie the Pooh. One concept in particular stayed with me: Wu Wei—effortless action. Letting life unfold without forcing it. Flowing with, not against.

My first sponsor used to say, “Be the water.” Don't fight the current. Let it guide you.



The Cut Window

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous promises that in time we will “cease fighting anything or anyone—even alcohol.” That is the spiritual freedom I’ve come to know. It’s not perfection. It’s presence.

This is life now: showing up, being real, staying open. Letting it be what it is, without needing to control every turn. Trusting the path. Trusting myself. And for the first time in my life—I do.

All Things Work Together

E.J. Delone



*We need not say to you that the floodgates of our hearts were lifted
and our eyes were a fountain of tears,
but those who have not been enclosed in the walls of prison without cause
or provocation, can have but little idea how sweet the voice of a friend is;
one token of friendship from any source whatever awakens and
calls into action every sympathetic feeling . . . until finally
all enmity, malice and hatred, and past differences, misunderstandings and
mismanagements are slain victorious at the feet of hope;
and when the heart is sufficiently contrite, then the voice of inspiration
steals along and whispers, [']My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity
and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then if thou endure it well,
God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes."*

Joseph Smith



Notably, my journey to recovery began in a household where the religious and conservative values of my parents, extended family, and church community included complete abstinence from mood-altering substances. So much so that at a young age, I recall attending a birthday party where the host poured me a caffeinated soda (which was not allowed in my household), and I drank it. Ever fulfilling the role of the oldest daughter of six siblings, I dutifully swallowed the guilt of not being the “good example” to my peers and silently acquainted myself with the shame of the rule-following-rebel persona, which would again find me with a vengeance in adolescence.

I began experimenting with substances when I was about 14 years old—primarily alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes. The first time my mother found these hidden in the inner pocket of a jacket in the back of my closet, she exclaimed her shock that this was the closest she had ever been to these substances and the disappointment that it was her daughter who brought them into her home. The developmental storm into adolescence, marked with social transitions, undiagnosed depression/anxiety, degrading self-concept, body image issues, perfectionism, and a quiet rebel yell propelling me from the expected standards of the religious culture, had culminated in an overall challenge of transitioning to high school. It was not outside the typical teenage experience in the 90s, but looking back, there were signs that the patterns of my use were problematic.

My high school years were a vacillation between the familiar cycle of all-or-nothing behaviors: getting caught, shaping up, earning back trust, beginning to dabble again, escalating use, getting caught, quit using to get my privileges back, reintroducing healthy habits, enjoying the benefits of sobriety and then thinking that I could manage recreational use, after which I would prove otherwise as my use inevitably spiraled. During this period, my parents supported my mental health care and treatment of depression by providing access to medication and therapy. Despite the return to substances, these interventions did expand my toolkit of skills and management of depression and anxiety symptoms. They improved my emotional and mental health from the life-threatening symptoms that I experienced. Impulsivity would eventually disrupt my progress, and I would find myself choosing behaviors that were risky and impetuous.

My use went this way, with these types of fluctuations, until the end of the summer after my freshman year of college, when I was about to turn 19. After a couple of years of regular substance use, with increased experimentation in psychedelics, cocaine, and club drugs like ecstasy, I decided it was time to make some changes. I now recognize there were various motivations that were both external and internal. I recall feeling empty, unmoored, and uncomfortable with the reliance I had on the substances. Social events, activities, and relationships seemed unfulfilling if substances were not involved. Often, I was experiencing anxiety about obtaining substances and doing so with impulsive and risky methods.

Towards the end of that summer, I began to have a change of heart about the possibility of revisiting the faith tradition of my upbringing. I figured that if I were going to make the decision that the beliefs, values, and doctrines of the church were not for me, I should at least have a comprehensive understanding of what I was rejecting. So I began with a study of the scriptures, theological concepts, and initiated the process of meeting with a bishop/ecclesiastical leader at my church. This process included a weekly meeting, which was most closely aligned with pastoral counseling. During this period, I was adhering to the familiar cycle of an all-or-nothing mentality where I viewed my drives/urges/cognitions as “wrong or in error” and the standards/rules/guidelines of the religious framework as “right or correct”. Instead of approaching this as an integration of wisdom, values, beliefs, and goals, where I utilized my intuition to make choices, I was prone to follow the prescriptive pattern laid out as the expectation. This approach was due to self-preservation, no alternative roadmap, and limited connection or lack of affiliation to other paths. I orchestrated a 180-degree turn, got sober, and adhered to the standards of behavior required to be a church member in “good standing”, or able to fully participate in church activities, sacraments, and attend religious events. Certainly, there were parts of this that were effective, as there was safety in it.

The truth was that my impulsivity, risk-taking, and pull to emotion-minded decisions were not yet prepared to make integrative, intuitive, and wise-minded decisions. To this point, at the time I was living in a city in the western United States, and I attempted to integrate sobriety into rave culture, underground clubs, and concerts of the early 2000s, but each venture into these spaces left me with FOMO, urges, and anxiety. I ended up distancing myself from friends and social activities that had included substance use. I essentially left behind the relationships and social activities of my college years. I utilized the structures of the religion as someone grasping onto the only rope available and hanging on for dear life.

I started dating an old friend from my hometown whom I had known from our church youth group. Although he had never ingested a mood-altering substance in his life, he was supportive and provided a safe space to land where I was encouraged to continue in the direction of sobriety while also accepting me for my past.

Soon after we got engaged, and within a year, we married when I was twenty and starting my Junior year of college. We spent the next few years living as struggling married students, both working part-time and taking full-time college courses. I recall having one night a week when our schedules allowed us to have dinner together, so that time was primarily spent fully committed to college, survival, and navigating married life as young adults. We attended church together weekly, and I adopted a regular schedule of attendance at a religious event that held ritual and spiritual meaning. I had made commitments to myself, God, and within the framework of our marriage vows to avoid mood-altering substances in addition to adhering to other moral standards. By the time I turned 21, the legal drinking age, I was sober and had never ordered a cocktail from a bar. We graduated with our undergraduate degrees, moved across the country to the East Coast, and I worked while my husband entered a PhD graduate program.

While he was attending the graduate program, I struggled for a couple of months to find employment. I turned to exercise, which had already had an important place in my recovery. I focused on the employment search, got involved in our new church community where I met a couple of friends, and felt very lost, afraid, and out of my comfort zone. I recall times when I would get overwhelmed, upset, emotional, depressed, and experience urges to acquire a substance. I would often use distraction as a way to work through an urge or a trigger to use a substance. I know that the commitment I made within the religious context was an effective deterrent, as it was a reminder of my own decision to remain sober. At that time, it also held some power as a fear tactic that I did not want to “break” my commitment (to God, my husband, etc). I would have the occasional euphoric recall, fantasize about what it would be like to get stoned or have some drinks, but eventually, I would adhere to my sobriety.

Eventually, I found employment working at a state prison facilitating what was termed a “correctional recovery program”. The program was for incarcerated individuals and included a 5-month psycho-education curriculum of group therapy where Addiction Recovery, Relapse Prevention, Anger Management, Emotion Regulation, and life skills were covered. I facilitated one of the groups in the male facility, and it was the first time I read Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. The program used Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Cognitive

Behavioral Therapy approaches as methods of approaching urges, relapse, and behavioral change. As I had not used a program myself in my years of sobriety, I used this time to educate myself on various approaches to addiction recovery and substance use disorder as a disease.

It was at this time that I also revisited my love for art and painting, as it has always been a creative pursuit I enjoy. I decided to create a painting that incorporated the Twelve Steps using symbolic representations of hands doing something that was associated with the actions of each step. The steps (hands) spiraled out from the center of the canvas, from two hands bound by handcuffs and chains. In my employment in the prison, it was not uncommon to see inmates handcuffed and shackled. The paradox of losing freedom in the act of rebellion was one that I had encountered in my own life, even if I had never experienced legal recourse for my choices. Through this painting, I explored the literal and figurative meaning of finding oneself in the chains of bondage through consuming as an expression of “freedom” to then yielding to a higher power to rediscover freedom, choice, and decision. There were aspects of this I had experienced in my journey, and as I learned about the Twelve Steps, it brought me understanding of some of the paths I had taken over the years to remain sober.

In truth, during this time, I also did not have very many experiences where my social network was entwined in substance use, even with alcohol. Many of the people I met were either from church or work. If, on occasion, I did attend a girls’ night out, dancing at a club event, or something to that effect with coworkers or friends, I was usually the designated driver. It was effective that it be this way, as the more opportunities to be proximate to substance use proved to be triggering. The closest I came to a lapse during this time was on a work trip when a coworker and I were sent down to Mississippi to attend a training. On the last day of the week, we drove our rental car to New Orleans and went to Bourbon Street. I had never been to NOLA, and was the designated driver. After a few hours of dancing and bar hopping, I was winding down, but my coworker was still going strong. Feeling uncomfortable, a little stuck, and in need of a pick-me-up, I got in line at the bar. Initially, to buy water, but it was then the urge to order a cocktail surged—the back and forth of the reasons that this would be a perfect time to indulge in a drink became very intense. Until the moment I got up to the bar, I was convinced

I was going to order my first drink at a bar. When I placed my order for two waters, I was both surprised and a little disappointed, but mostly relieved that the decision was over and I had not compromised my sobriety.

After my husband finished his graduate program, we moved back out West for employment and to be closer to my family. I struggled with this transition from working full-time to being unemployed and focusing on some health issues. Once again, I used daily exercise, volunteer work, and the focus on building our first home to keep from feeling lost and untethered. I worked at a volunteer position assisting at a religious service that focused on service. I do recall struggling with a relapse into depression and having some despondent and hopeless thoughts. During this time, we were also trying to start our family, and eventually, our attempts at conceiving were successful.

We moved into our newly built home in a planned community and welcomed our first child. I was grateful to have the opportunity to stay at home with him. I developed relationships with other young mothers and created a small group where we would meet regularly. This served as a key connection as we lived about 30 minutes from any major commercial or retail developments. I recall having moments during these times when the responsibility of having a newborn and the demands of parenting caused me to question aspects of myself, my beliefs, and my worldview. When my son was about one-and-a-half years-old was the point in time when the rise of MySpace and Facebook was occurring. I realize that this caused a challenging dynamic for some in my generation as it suddenly put us in contact with people we had long since lost touch with. Initially, people were not very intentional about the individuals they befriended or requested. It was a bit of a free-for-all of adding anyone and everyone you had ever been in school with, worked with, or come across. For a stay-at-home mom with a young toddler who was experiencing some isolation, loss of self, and increased demands of parenthood, this new platform of performative, non-discretionary posts led to impulsive and uninhibited communications. I got back in touch with some of my friends from high school and college, and attended some home parties and gatherings with my husband.

Once again, it was strange and uncomfortable being around the alcohol and

marijuana use, and I found myself reconsidering my decisions. I did not discuss this with my husband, friends, or family. I had no network of peers in recovery to disclose to, and so my rationalizations, cognitive dissonance, and urges grew. My ten-year high school reunion (in the Midwest) also coincided with this time-frame, and I decided that I was going to attend. This would be my first trip out of state on my own since becoming a mother, and something about the excitement in this set something loose. A week or so before I was to go, I decided to buy some beer from a gas station, as it had been over eight years since I had last consumed alcohol. I drank it after my husband and child were in bed, and the initial euphoria made me feel as if I had found what I had been missing for the last eight years.

I went to the reunion, spent the weekend drinking with friends, and found myself explaining my decision to indulge with a variety of rationales. I positioned it as necessary to protect my husband from this choice, and with this descent into secrecy and substance use, came an avalanche of indiscretions and uninhibited decisions. The use began on the weekends or after my husband or child was asleep. I do not feel as if it is important to highlight all of the particulars of this time, but eventually, I told my husband that I was drinking again, as well as the bishop/pastoral leader at our church. This resulted in me being dismissed from working with the youth ministry and prevented me from being able to attend the ritual/spiritual events I had been attending over the years. I also sought out a psychotherapist to process the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing.

Despite therapy, I found myself shifting my values and beliefs to align with my desires. Eventually, this moving of the mark allowed me to abandon my integrity and cascade into increasingly chaotic behavior. With the help of the substances, I escaped, numbed, avoided, and allowed my self-destructive behavior to perpetuate. I had a period of sobriety from substances when I became pregnant with our second child, but this was a case of being a “dry drunk”. After I weaned him at 1 year old, I resumed the use of alcohol and marijuana. At this point, my marriage was at a breaking point, and my behaviors were the primary catalyst. This was a painful and heartbreaking time in our relationship. The culmination of my choices had truly put me in a position not unlike the one that I had begun painting those few years previously. Locked in a pattern of self-destruction,

unable to disentangle myself from the chain to which I felt bound. It was then that I recognized that my reliance on my abilities and reasoning had failed me and my family. I did not attend any recovery meetings, but it was then that I completed the first, second, and third steps on my own in a way that felt natural.

As I worked through step three, I was cautious. My husband was willing to reconcile, and as we began communicating and brought more of my issues out into the open, his acceptance provided me with increased willingness to examine my errors and repair them. I was circumspect in the process I would take to achieve this. I recognized that in the past, I had been overzealous in my interpretation of God's (my higher power) will for me and had automatically identified His will as the way that I understood the standards, guidelines, and expectations of the church and scriptures. I recognized unhelpful projections, assumptions, and interpretations that, if revisited, would result in a fractured relationship with God. I recognized that doing an immediate 180 would fail me once again. I realized this would be a process, and I was willing to trust that I would seek His will, but I would not lose myself in the process. I turned to Christ and began to build trust in Him, and slowly developed and repaired my relationship and connection with Him in a way that was meaningful. I experienced some incredible and meaningful answers and extensions of grace through people, books, dreams, and artwork. I asked for guidance on where to begin, what to abstain from, and prayed about the way to go about it. I began with behaviors and slowly began to decrease my use of substances.

As I began to decrease my frequency and duration, I would make progress, but then as I came closer to abstinence, I would inevitably increase my use. I was in the process of trying to avoid closing the door and accepting the loss of these substances in my life. Their functions included escapism, stress relief, increased comfort with my body and sexuality, enhancement of pleasure, and euphoria. Retrospectively, I regret not being more open, transparent, and honest about the struggle I was having. Instead of being truthful and vulnerable with my husband, I avoided sharing the difficulties of this process. Of course, I see now that this proved a function in the continuation of my relapsing, but at the time, it seemed my burden to carry. Throughout this time, I continued to pray for help and worked on the Twelve Steps painting. I also began other paintings that depicted

the war within myself, the wrestle I was having between God's will for me and my own will, and the concepts of grace for brokenness.

Eventually, I got to the point where I was having several months in between relapses. I recall during one relapse, I went to a park and used, and then decided it would be my "last time". I threw away the paraphernalia in a dumpster and then went and sat on the grass. As I looked up, I noticed a sidewalk that wound through the park. There was a place where the path met at a crossroads. I noticed that one path led to a place that just stopped at the grass, and the other path led to a large white wall that looked as if it were a blank canvas. The metaphor of the two paths struck me as one had the opportunity of a blank canvas, the other was truly a road that led to nowhere. I wish I could say that this was my last experience with using (it wasn't), but I can say that the meaning of that object lesson stayed with me. In more than one case, recalling this image provided me motivation and momentum.

At this point, I also became pregnant with my third child, which propelled me into another season of sobriety. During this pregnancy, we relocated and had substantial transitions and stress. After my third child was born, I had several relapses. These left me with intense shame and regret. I could not deny the impact this was having on my parenting. I had also returned to using it in secret, and the shame of hiding became a burden. The costs were outweighing the benefits, and I was recognizing this. Rationally, this secrecy made no sense, as my husband was supportive, nonjudgmental, and encouraging. This was essentially about my own denial; it was a way of attempting to avoid the confrontation of my own shame.

I also had some other experiences that assisted me in seeing the impact in a negative light. One event was an experience where I was outside in the sunshine, and as I began drinking, I had an immediate shadow come over me, almost like a dark cloud just descended on my vision and psyche. I could tell that there had been no actual shift in the weather; no clouds, it was a spiritual shadow of sorts. I share these experiences because, added together, they symbolized answers to my prayers. One of the last times I drank was in a rental home we were moving from. I had decided I was not going to drink or use in the new home we had purchased. Instead, I purchased alcohol and went to the empty house as a "one last time". As

I drank the alcohol, I felt nothing; there was a void, it was almost like I was being told “you are finished, there is nothing more left for you in this.” I also had a box of paraphernalia that I discarded that evening.

During this time, I had begun meeting with the bishop/ecclesiastical leader at the church we were attending. I was working towards committing to follow the church standard to avoid substances so that I could return to the ritual/spiritual event that I regularly participated in prior to returning to use after the 8 years of sobriety. I recall worrying about making that type of commitment, as I was uncertain and afraid I would fail. My bishop-pastoral counselor wisely told me, “None of us can say we will not make another mistake. Do you want to make this commitment right now? Is it what you want for yourself, and are you willing today?” Something about that opened up the opportunity to acknowledge that, yes, for that day, it was what I wanted and was choosing.

I had one last relapse after that at about five months. I was visiting family out west and met up with an old college friend. I went to her salon for her to cut my hair, and then we were going to get dinner. She opened a cupboard and pulled out some scotch and said something about her thinking I would enjoy this. I think I mentioned I had not been drinking, but when she poured the glass and handed it to me, I did not decline. After the one glass, I was already thinking, “This is nice, I can do this every once in a while.” Afterward, at dinner, we both had another drink and stayed late talking. That night, after I returned to where we were staying, I had a rush of regret. I decided not to allow myself to go into a toxic shame spiral and instead acknowledged this was a lapse, a slip, a learning experience. I decided to practice self-forgiveness with the realization that it did not mean allowing myself that grace was the same as permission. I prayed for forgiveness, I confessed to God, and I let it go. This allowed me to examine the experience, notice the factors that made me vulnerable, and recognize things that I need to do to prevent a lapse again.

It was about nine months later that I was struggling with some depression and starting to feel like I was “white knuckling it”. I was at church one Sunday, and we had two speakers who were presenting about the addiction recovery program that my church developed using the Twelve Steps as a template. It

utilized the Twelve-Step model but developed a program that aligned with some of the church's religious traditions. The speakers provided information about the weekly meetings that were held and invited those who were struggling with any substance or behavioral addiction to attend. As they spoke, I knew it was time for me to walk into my first recovery meeting. I had progressed past the getting-ready stage and was approaching the stage of willingness to make the changes needed to live a life of recovery. It was obvious to me that for this process to be more successful than the first 8 years of sobriety, I would need to do some deeper work. Although I was not sure of all the work I would need to do, I was willing to begin.

The program had a workbook that included readings, action steps, and a study and understanding section with specific questions and prompts to answer through writing. At this point, I had 3 children under the age of 10 and realized that any commitments I made to accomplishing the steps would need to be realistic for my situation. With our family schedule, the weekly meeting was not feasible at that time, and so I spoke with the facilitators and worked out a commitment that I would attend at least once every 4-6 weeks. At the time I started the program, no one could serve as a sponsor, but throughout the process, there was a married couple who served as the facilitators. They provided support and encouragement to the group.

I began completing the steps in the workbook and worked my way through the first three steps quickly. The fourth step took much longer, but I took my time and tried to be very thorough. I had been attending the meetings every month or so for a little over a year when I was ready to complete my fifth step. The woman who was the facilitator offered to be the "other person" with whom I completed my fifth step.

One key recognition from completing these steps was how lying, deceit, and hiding had become a habitual function that was utilized to protect aspects of my identity. Paired with the use of substances, this act of obfuscation became a means of control and denial with which I relied to avoid judgment and consequences. Throughout this time, I continued to seek insight through self-study into mental health, psychological and emotional literacy, self-concept, and identity. I began reading authors of Jungian psychology, social sciences, and self-help, and followed

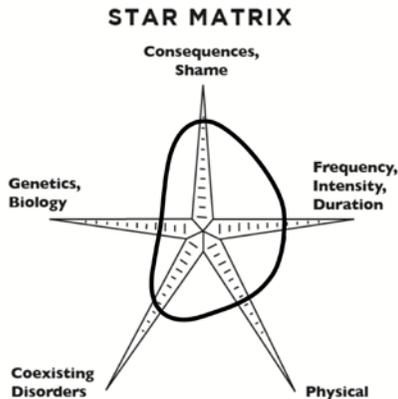
women in sobriety on social media. Women like Holly Whitaker, Brene Brown, and Anne Lamott were some voices that I found healing, support, and solidarity in. I continued to use creative art as a method of healing and introspection. I painted several works of art that included themes of shame, shadow, addiction, resilience, hope, and transformation. I used these resources to work through the difficulty of the sixth step.

At the time I was working through the sixth step, I was having substantial difficulty with euphoric recall, reminiscing about using, and longing for the time that I could still use substances as a solution. I kept the momentum of working through the steps. When I was working on my eighth step, in addition to those I needed to make amends to, I realized that I had some grief and loss to work through regarding some of the friendships I felt were necessary to distance myself from, as our socializing revolved around substance use. The ninth step was awkward and vulnerable, but I realize it contributed to renewing many of my relationships. I continued to attend meetings until I completed the Twelve Steps. It had been about two years since I had walked into my first recovery meeting. Around this time, our family relocated, and I tried attending a meeting in our new area, but it just did not provide the same support and symbolism it had for me previously.

Instead, I continued to use aspects of my faith and spiritual traditions to provide strength, support, and often revisited Step Eleven in the workbook, in times when I felt untethered. I began a new venture to return to graduate school. This process of working towards and achieving this goal provided fresh focus, new ways of engaging in the recovery community, and has allowed me to learn new interventions, theories, strategies, skills, and methods to apply to both my personal and professional life. I also built new relationships with mentors and others in the recovery community who have provided encouragement and support, which has been invaluable in my recovery journey. In some of my current and ongoing personal recovery work I regularly attend sessions with a psychoanalyst, I utilize spiritual practices that align with my faith tradition, strengthen my relationship with Jesus Christ, provide service within my church congregation, keep connection with friends and family, find various communities of belonging, practice mindfulness of my emotions, practice expressive artwork and creative

processing, and try to keep balance in decisions of diet and exercise. In the last ten years of my recovery, I have learned that I must remain curious, humble, and keep finding ways to examine my life and choices through the practice of inquiry, adjustments, restarts, forgiveness, and repentance. My husband has been an incredible example of forgiveness, grace, and support. At times when an urge arises, I am able to share my struggles and communicate with him. Having a safe space to illuminate those urges has allowed them not to have the power to grow. It also reminds me of the consequences, harm, and cost that relapse always incurs. Minimization and rationalization can be devious, and transparency, truth, and illumination have proven a helpful antidote to the tactics of relapse.

Ultimately, I recognize that I rely on strength beyond my own to keep the daily commitment to choose sobriety. Recently, my ten-year milestone of sobriety passed, and the truth is I did not realize it until a couple of weeks had passed. It is not something I track with regularity; the choice has been made, and in moments when the commitment waivers, I acknowledge the weakness, talk about it with trusted people, and renew my decision. I am grateful for the life I currently enjoy, which is most certainly the outcome of recovery, reconciliation, and redemption. I have discovered value in accepting life's realities instead of an ideal, and showing up sober and as authentically as I can. This paragraph from Mariann Budde's book about *How we Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith* gives a summary of the full expression of both the wreckage and redemption of my own recovery journey:



All Things Work Together

“Deciding to start on a courageous journey has the effect of weaving our past experiences into a larger tapestry of meaning. Nothing is lost or wasted. We recognize that our efforts are beholden to those who went before us...When we decide to start towards something that requires courage, we are often creating new possibilities for those who come after us. Our example may be the one to inspire others to turn toward their Jerusalem, whatever the path God has set before them.”

Keep Coming Back, No Matter What

Becky D



My story is about never giving up on yourself and your ability to recover from active addiction and trauma. Recovery is possible, no matter how many times you've tried, regardless of your age or circumstances. I'm a living example of that. I've been to many treatment centers, a few psych wards, and hundreds of doctors to tell me what was wrong with me. I just wanted someone to explain how to do life without feeling fear and pain all the time. I was lost and searching for answers that no one had, at least not in my family. People hurt and traumatized me, so I eventually found comfort in pills and bottles.

I was born in 1966, the youngest of five kids, and the only daughter. Many people assumed that I was spoiled because I was the baby and the only girl. I wished that was the case, but it wasn't. Most of the time, I felt rejection and deep sadness. I was bullied about my appearance and teeth at home and at school, because I was not an attractive child. No one wanted me around, so I frequently retreated to my room, where I felt safe. I don't remember much from my childhood because of all the trauma that happened to me in a very short amount of time.

My mother suffered from mental illness and addiction, which made her moods very volatile. She was so mean and would call me names like stupid, fat, or selfish. My brothers were always in trouble, so there were frequent beatings in the house. I hated the screaming and crying, so I would cover my ears and retreat to my room to make it stop, but it didn't. My room was my refuge amongst all the constant chaos and instability in my house. I tried to make my mom happy, but that usually backfired, and I got hurt even more. It worked best to stay small

or invisible.

My father was always gone working or golfing, so I don't remember much about him until he became sick with cancer when I was eight years old. It was a very confusing time for me. Everything was changing so fast, but no one told me anything about what was happening with my dad. It was scary to watch my big, healthy father deteriorate into half the man he once was. He died a month before my ninth birthday. Everyone was sad, but I didn't understand. To me, he was just sleeping in the casket. I thought he would come back. I looked for him everywhere I went, but he never did. I finally knew he wasn't returning on the day my mom got ready for her first date. What about Daddy? Then it hit me that he was gone. I ran to my room and cried.

My brothers stayed in trouble after the loss of my dad, so my mom thought it would be a good idea to move the family from Houston, Texas, to Brookhaven, Mississippi, where she had help from other relatives. My two oldest brothers stayed in Texas while the rest of us moved. Our family was never the same. We broke up and eventually all went our separate ways. One by one, my brothers left me alone with my mom, and I didn't understand why they didn't visit. I was lonely. In my mind, everyone eventually left, so I started putting up walls to protect myself. I got tired of the disappointment and pain, so I retreated more into myself and became afraid of people.

My mom started dating and soon remarried to my stepdad when I was eleven years old. He was very quiet and hard to get to know, but mom was happy and occupied. While they were newlyweds, I started hanging around older kids in my neighborhood. I tried drinking, but it was more about fitting in or feeling silly. I swore I wouldn't do drugs because of all the pain my brothers had caused my mom by doing them. At age twelve, I started to become rebellious against my mom because I hated her. However, she finally broke me with my last and worst beating when I was thirteen. I was not where I told her I would be, so when I got home, she had me pick out a belt that she used to whip me from the back of my neck down to my ankles. I had whelps all over my body that stung like fire. I wanted to call the police, but they wouldn't do anything, so I decided that I would do whatever it took to keep her happy until I was able to leave the house for good.

By the age of fourteen, I developed an eating disorder after my mom told me that I was fat...which I wasn't. She was so critical of me, so my new goal was to become the perfect daughter. Maybe that strategy would work. It didn't. Nothing was good enough for my mom, and she would let me know. I wasn't smart enough, skinny enough, pretty enough. She loved to embarrass me in front of others to make herself look good or to get a laugh. I kept trying, though. If I did all my chores and stayed out of my mom and stepdad's way, things went better for me – be small and invisible.

During this time, I met my husband. We were high school and college sweethearts before we were married. I spent all my time with him when I wasn't at school, working, or participating in sports. His family seemed normal compared to mine, and I was desperate to belong to one. His parents had their problems, but they supported their kids. That was foreign to me. My parents never came to anything I did. It broke my heart every single time I looked out into the crowd, and never saw my mom. I loved and hated her at the same time.

I did so well in track and cross-country that a well-known member of the community offered to let me use his gym for training. I wasn't used to people taking a special interest in me. It felt good until I realized that he was attempting to gain my trust, so he could sexually molest me. One day, while training, he exposed himself to me and tried to get me to touch him and get into his van. My heart sank to my stomach, so I ran away, heartbroken. He only wanted sex. To not draw attention to myself, I never told anyone for a few years that nothing could get in the way of me leaving home.

While other kids were doing the usual high school things, I was focused on my plan to leave. I wouldn't let anyone or anything get in my way. My senior year of high school was especially hard because my husband, then boyfriend, had left for college. I was sure he was going to leave me for someone else. Everyone else had. I became very depressed and had suicidal thoughts for the first time because I was so miserable. I just focused on earning money and making good grades, so I could go to college the next year. The only escape I had was running until that was taken from me, too. One day during track practice, I injured my thigh, so one of the coaches told me to follow him to the locker room. He started rubbing my

leg until he ran his hand up my shorts and molested me. I ran out of the locker room and quit track the next day. I was devastated, and no one understood why I quit. I had to stay quiet.

I started drinking some that year. It was such a relief from all the stress and pressure that I had put on myself to be perfect. Tension between my mom and me got worse because she didn't want me to leave home. She refused to help me in any way to get to college, because she said that I would only fail and be back home by Christmas Break. That just motivated me more to prove her wrong. I hated her so much, but I had to stay in her good graces. I was too close to leaving home for good. My life would then be great, or so I thought.

Finally, I made it to college and soon discovered that I was completely ill-equipped for life on my own. Fear and anxiety consumed me. I needed a new plan! I knew I was getting married to my husband after college, so I just had to do whatever it took to stay in school. My drinking really escalated my freshman year to where I almost lost my scholarship funds, so I had to cut back. I was not going home. To pay my tuition and buy books, I would sometimes go days without eating, or others would feed me. I earned extra money by writing papers for other students and cutting hair for my beer money. I always had this undercurrent of fear, though, that I would fail and have to crawl back home to my mom in shame.

I survived the college years and got married. We moved as far away from home as we could manage. This was going to fix me. I had my hero by my side to take care of me, and I was going to get an amazing job and be successful. We had made it! In reality, we were poor newlyweds, and I had to take a retail job. I didn't understand that I had to actually work hard for that successful job. During this time, my migraine headaches, which I had since childhood, got worse. My mom had always gone to the emergency room to get shots for her migraine headaches, so I thought that was normal. I had an especially bad migraine one day that wouldn't let up, so my husband took me to the emergency room to get a shot. I never knew what was in my mom's shots until I got my first injection of Demerol. As the warmth took over my body, I realized that was the best feeling I had ever had in my whole life. I would chase that feeling for many years.

As my migraines got worse, I started to see more and more doctors. I felt like a human lab rat with all the different pills that I consumed to get relief from my pain, which was only getting worse. I started hurting all over my body, and emergency room visits became a weekly occurrence. Scar tissue started forming around my hips from all the shots of narcotics. I was obsessed with pain and pills, but didn't know it at that time. Pharmacies and hospitals weren't linked up then, so it was easy to go to different doctors and hospitals for narcotics. I thought I had figured out a system to get enough pills for all my pain, until one day a doctor refused to refill a prescription that would have lasted a normal person at least a year. I had taken all the pills in one month. The doctor spoke with my husband, saying I might have a problem. I would just find another doctor to prove him wrong.

I wasn't getting any younger, so we decided it was time to start a family. Maybe that would help me. I had an easy first pregnancy and felt great. I was so happy. I read all the books, went to the birthing classes, and was ready to be a great mom. Due to some complications, I had to have an emergency C-section and was not able to breastfeed. I felt like a failure. I couldn't even give birth right, so I fell into a deep depression and had pills to comfort me. My migraines got worse, so I spent most days in bed. The merry-go-round of doctors and hospitals started all over again, but worse. I felt complete despair that I had failed as a mom.

My poor husband was exhausted from taking care of me and our son while trying to hold down his job. Finally, a doctor said that I needed to get off all the narcotics before he would help me with my pain issues. I didn't agree, but my husband did, so off to the psych ward I went for a week of detox. Back then, they didn't use detox medications, so I spent most of that week on the floor of the bathroom in severe pain while hugging a toilet and a trash can. I cursed and hated everyone in my life for putting me there. They didn't understand my pain. I needed pills to function like I needed air to breathe. Anyway, I survived my week of hell thinking I was all better. The doctors prescribed Tramadol for my pain and sent me on my way, suggesting that I go to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, so I did, and was horrified and offended. I was not one of them, because my pills were legitimate.

At this point, I just started collecting doctors. They sadly became my friends in a weird sort of way. I would drag my poor son from one doctor to another and look as pitiful as I could to get pills. The tension in my marriage was escalating, so my husband and I thought it was time to have another child to bring us closer together. I immediately got pregnant with twins but had a miscarriage. It was devastating to watch one heartbeat after another die. I needed more pills and had a good excuse to get them now. I hated myself for thinking that, but couldn't give up the pills. I ended up in the psych ward again. This time, I had to do outpatient therapy and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. I knew that I didn't belong at those meetings, but I was struck by the friendliness of the people there. It was the first time I had others interested in me without wanting anything in return.

Now, thinking that I was cured, we decided to get pregnant again. It was an extremely difficult pregnancy, and I was sick all the time, especially with migraines. I had to have pain pills for the pain, so I justified taking them because they were "safe" to use. Self-loathing doesn't even describe how pathetic I felt about myself. Even my doctor scowled at me with disdain during my visits. During the delivery, my daughter and I came close to dying, so I had to have another emergency C-section. I was so low at this point – almost catatonic. I didn't care about anything or anyone anymore. I was completely self-consumed and obsessed with my pain.

After the birth of my daughter, my addiction just got worse. I was having one procedure after another. I even tried pain clinics until I got kicked out of them for breaking their contracts. They just didn't understand my pain. I had to have the pills to function. Finally, my doctor prescribed Oxycontin. It had just come out on the market and wasn't supposed to be addictive, but we all know how that turned out. Not only was it addictive, but the drug also wrecked my body's ability to fight any kind of pain on its own. During this same time, I had also started using benzodiazepines. I just wanted to be numb. My marriage was strained, and I couldn't take care of my kids. Finally, I couldn't get enough Oxycontin from the doctor, so he recommended that I go into treatment at UAB hospital to be detoxed and get a complete physical workup.

So, belligerently, I went to UAB for treatment. The doctor used medications

to slowly detox me from Oxycontin and the Benzos. It was still a horrible experience, though. My body hurt all over, and I was sick. All the tests revealed that I had nothing really wrong with me that required narcotics. I didn't agree with that, but I figured that I would see it through. During my treatment there, I met Steve Moore. I had never heard about some of the topics that he talked about in his lectures. I was skeptical, but what he said made sense to me. It helped to understand the Disease Concept of addiction, the way he explained it. That gave me some hope. I hadn't felt that in a very long time.

As my brain was starting to clear during detox, I started having flashbacks from my childhood about being sexually molested at a very young age. I would see images like snapshots and feel sensations in my body. It was terrifying. These flashbacks continued throughout my stay in treatment, so I scheduled private counseling sessions with Steve and met his wife, Pam Moore. The realization that a family member had raped me when I was three years old was more than I could handle while trying to get clean, so I did countless counseling sessions trying to come to terms with what had happened to me. I started to understand why I didn't trust anyone, and why I felt so much shame.

I did counseling on a regular basis and started attending AA again. I would get various times of sobriety and then relapse. I worked the steps, got involved in group activities, had a sponsor, but would still relapse on pain pills. It was very difficult to work my AA program consistently because my marriage was on the brink of divorce, and we had two kids to raise. My homelife was a mess. After a series of worse relapses, my husband and I separated for two years. It was the most terrifying time of my life. I had never been on my own before, but it ended up being the best thing for me at the time. I got to focus on recovery and start to figure out who I was and what I liked.

Finally, I got some significant recovery time, and I felt on top of the world. My husband and I reconciled and were finally becoming a real family. Then, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I lost my mind. I was so angry at God. I had worked so hard at putting my life back together, and now, cancer. I decided that recovery doesn't work after all and that I was on my own.

I spiraled into addiction, using cancer as the best excuse ever for getting whatever pills I wanted. Against my will, I quickly ended up back in treatment, but I was not interested. I was angry at the world - my soul felt black and dead.

Over the next twelve years, I stumbled in and out of the rooms of AA. I wanted recovery, but on my terms. Finally, I decided that I wasn't really an alcoholic after all. I hadn't drunk in years, so I started drinking. I knew deep down that it was not a good idea, but I did it anyway. It went well for a few months, and then my drinking got out of control. I was drunk every night while trying to work at a veterinary clinic. The job was strenuous, and I kept getting hurt. I needed pills, so I had my dogs put on narcotics for arthritis that I took. To supplement those, I stole pills from the clinic, but got caught. I still didn't lose my job, which I should have. Finally, I started having the shakes in the morning before work, so I would drink hand sanitizer to make them stop. My husband had started locking up the liquor by then, so the hand sanitizer was all I had on hand.

In an act of desperation, I contacted Steve and Pam Moore for help. I had always done well when working with them. I was too good at manipulating others, but I couldn't see them. As usual, I didn't take their suggestion to go to a long-term treatment facility. I wanted help, but I wasn't willing to accept it completely. I went back into treatment again, where I was given Suboxone and a bunch of other drugs. I was higher in treatment than before I had gone in. I completed a couple of months inpatient, before I went to sober living and attended the Intensive at the Moore Institute. At the Intensive, I was exposed to the idea that there could be different ways to work a recovery program other than what I had been doing. We did meditation, yoga, art, and group therapy. No two days were the same. I became aware of other recovery groups like Smart Recovery, Recovery Dharma, and Narcotics Anonymous, which I tried. I also learned how trauma, genetics, and my personal history of addiction influenced the type of recovery that I needed to stay clean and sober. It made sense. No two addicts are the same, so why should our recoveries be?

Unfortunately, I became frustrated with my sober living situation and wanted to be home, so I left sober living and the Intensive early against the advice of Pam and Steve. I had yet to become willing to completely follow their suggestions, no

matter what was going on in my life. Once back home, I continued with Recovery Dharma and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings while exploring other activities that I enjoyed doing. My husband and I were getting closer, and I was working on my relationships with my adult kids. I was actually happy and optimistic about the future. I continued to be sober for six months until I needed oral surgery. It came down to me versus the pain again, and the pain won. I was unwilling to even try the surgery without narcotics or to be honest with my dentist that I was in recovery, so I had a brief relapse.

I got back into AA, worked all my steps over again, and did well for another six months, until I needed more dental work, which I could have done without narcotics, but I didn't want to try. Physical pain was my nemesis. I didn't ask for help or even tell my husband that I got the narcotics for a simple extraction. I thought that I could manage. Pure insanity! This relapse lasted a little while longer and finally ended when I got the dentist in trouble for over-prescribing narcotics to a patient. I felt terrible for getting him in trouble, so I went back to AA again and picked up another of many white chips.

That was going to be the last relapse, but unfortunately, it wasn't. I was exasperated when I found out that I needed knee surgery. I knew I could get sober if only I avoided doctors and dentists, at least for a while, but that wasn't to be. I had the surgery and did very well taking the narcotics as prescribed, with my husband managing them for me. I quit taking the pain pills when it was time and thought I had dodged a bullet! Then I made the mistake of going to my final follow-up appointment for my knee by myself while my husband was out of town on a business trip. Big mistake! I knew that was a bad idea before I even went. The power of the familiar took over my mind, and I asked for a refill. The disease got me again. On the next day, I convinced my psychiatrist to give me Ativan for my nerves. I always had a reason to get whatever I wanted, and I'm not proud of that.

I hadn't had a benzo in years, so I took more than prescribed with my pain pills and overdosed. My husband was unable to get me on the phone, so my son was the one who found me shaking on the floor, still holding a pill bottle. I can't imagine his fear and anger. I made an absolute fool of myself after being treated with Narcan and taken to the hospital. I wore out the paramedics, so I was able to

Uber back home and bust a window to get back in my house, not coherent for any of this. I would see and hear about the destruction the next day. When my son finally spoke with me, he said that he was done with me if I didn't do something different. My husband pretty much said the same. I was horrified at what I had done. That was enough. I was done.

I called Pam Moore and asked what she would recommend that I do. She told me about the 4th Dimension sober living and invited me back to the Intensive Outpatient Program. I had to figure out what was missing in my program. I was so desperate. My attitude and willingness changed because of how bad I hurt my family. I decided that no matter what happened in my life, I was going to see this program through and do whatever I was told. If I couldn't do it alone, then I was going to put myself in a place that forced it. I wanted to live, just not like I had been anymore. I committed to the six-month program and got to work.

I would be tested more than I ever had been during the coming months. I participated in the group and showed up every day willing to do whatever was asked of me. I "embraced the suck," as Steve would say. I had never accepted that I can't take narcotics "no matter what". I couldn't do life on life's terms without pills when the going got tough, or I felt betrayed by God. The cost of addiction finally became too much, and it nearly cost me my life.

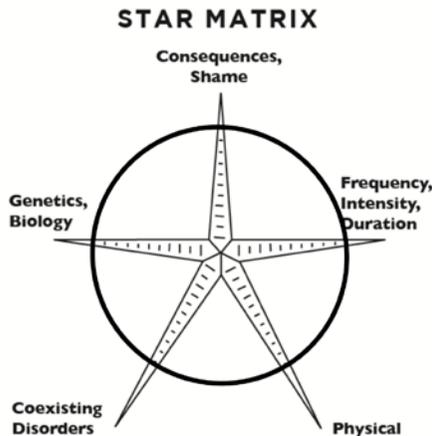
Six weeks into my treatment, my aunt called to tell me that my dad had been found dead and my mom was in critical condition. My legs gave out, and I hit the floor in shock. Fortunately, I was in sober living. My first instinct was to run, but where? I had always run to either drugs or alcohol, so I prayed for God's help instead. I surrendered right there at that moment, and help came. The director of the sober living and Pam helped me come up with a plan to keep me sober while I was left to deal with my dad's funeral and check on my mom. I did everything that was suggested by them. I reminded myself over and over that drugs and alcohol are not an option for me anymore, "no matter what".

I literally felt carried by others through all this. I never could have gotten through burying my dad alone, and I didn't have to. Two weeks later, my mom passed as well. I got to hold her hand and be with her sober as she drew her last

breath. On her last night alive, she was struggling to breathe, so I held her like a child. I felt her body relax, and her breath changed. I told her that I loved her and thanked her for being a mom. I got to see her as just another human being who tried her best with what she had during her life. I started to feel a change going on inside of me. My perspective changed. Life was precious, and I didn't want to waste another moment of my life anymore.

I returned to sober living and did some of the hardest work of my life with Steve and Pam. I processed every feeling and started work on my grief and my childhood trauma. I had such a deep well of sadness and anger that will take a lifetime to process. I learned and accepted that most, if not all, of my pain and migraines came from repressed feelings, especially anger. I just had to start listening to my body. To the surprise of all, I completed the program at sober living and graduated. I was proud of myself that I finally saw something through to completion. It was now time to go home.

I quickly immersed myself back in my AA home group and continued to see a therapist and work through relapse prevention strategies. I started sponsoring other women and doing service work both inside and outside of the recovery rooms. I basically continued doing at home what I had started at sober living and the Intensive. I finally discovered what had been missing in my program. I needed others to help me through this life. I recently got my one-year medallion that I keep on me all the time to remind me that I can live life without drugs and alcohol, "no matter what".



Keep Coming Back, No Matter What

I recently lost my brother to alcoholism. It broke my heart. Just like with my mom, I got to be with him as he passed. He had an awful death. It reminded me how close I had come to dying myself. In fact, I shouldn't be here, so I must believe that God has a plan for me as long as I rely on Him and not myself. I still have a lot of work to do on myself, but I take life as it comes now - one moment at a time. I have much life to live.

I will forever be grateful to my husband for his support through it all, and my kids for still loving me. I also would not be where I am today without Pam and Steve Moore. Keep coming back – no matter what!

The Last Relapse

Jared



The “gift” of tragedy is not destruction, but humility.

James Hollis, *What Matters Most: Living a More Considered Life*



I became a father at 28. That was the year Burt was born—my middle child, between Jami and John. He had this spark: intelligent, good-looking, a kid with a laugh that could brighten any room. I believed I could be the kind of dad who protected that light. But our foundation was already cracking.

My marriage to their mother was volatile. Therapy never took—she didn’t show up. She was battling anorexia, bulimia, and what was later diagnosed as borderline personality disorder. I stayed because I wanted to protect the kids. But when I heard my six-year-old call his four-year-old brother “a fucking asshole,” I knew this wasn’t a home; It was a storm. And the only way to protect them was to get out.

We divorced. She was supposed to stay in Birmingham or move to Atlanta, near her sister. Instead, she vanished with the children—relocated them to Las Vegas with the help of her family. I discovered the move from a neighbor when I showed up for visitation. They were gone. Panic set in. I called attorneys, family, everyone. Eventually, I found out they were in a casino hotel.

That was the first time grief entered not through death, but through erasure. I was a father stripped of presence.

The Last Relapse

She tried to change the custody venue to Nevada. I stopped it. With legal help, I petitioned for full custody. We landed on a compromise: I'd have the kids for summers and holidays. I drove and flew. I paid what she didn't—medical expenses, extracurriculars, travel. She never paid a cent. I never missed one.

Then, one spring, she called and said, "Burt misses you. Why don't you just keep him?" I was thrilled—and worried. Burt moved in with me. I enrolled him in school in Alabama. For a year, I got to be a day-in, day-out dad again. But when I told her I wouldn't keep paying child support for Burt since he lived with me, she demanded that he return to Las Vegas. I knew it wasn't about Burt—it was about money. I sent him back. And I'll never know whether he felt abandoned, confused, or relieved.

As the kids got older, their mother traveled more, leaving Jami—just 18 and starting college—to care for Burt and John. She called me late at night, overwhelmed: Burt was throwing parties; neighbors were furious. I'd guide her from afar, powerless to change what I couldn't reach. Then came college. Burt made it to the University of Arizona. He lasted less than two months. He was expelled for drugs found in his dorm. I flew out, got him a lawyer, and brought him home. He was ashamed. So was I.

He returned to Vegas, tried community college, then UNLV. He got jobs, lost jobs. Tried. Failed. Tried again.

Then Jamie called again—something was off. Burt was angry and erratic. I called John. Same story. That night, I stopped at my pharmacy and asked my pharmacist—someone I trusted—if he could check Burt's prescriptions. He couldn't show me, but he gave me a grave look and said, "You need to check into this. It's not good."

Suboxone. Early refills. Too many pills. Burt later admitted he'd developed an opioid addiction.

I flew to Vegas. He dodged me for days. When we finally met, he told me he'd been seeing a doctor for pain after a car accident—and that he was now on

Suboxone for recovery. That night, I cried in the shower. Not because of shame, or because I didn't love my son, but because I didn't want my youngest child to know what was happening. I needed a place to fall apart privately, to scream where no one would hear. In that moment, I felt helpless—for the first time, truly helpless.

When I returned home, I called my doctor. He referred me to the Moore Institute, where I met a therapist, tough, honest, and in recovery herself. She told me the truth:

A third of addicts find lifelong recovery.

A third end up incarcerated or institutionalized.

A third dies.

“My son will be in the first third,” I told her.

We tried rehab. Outpatient didn't stick—his mother pulled him out. Inpatient followed. My insurance wouldn't cover it, so I paid out of pocket. In Miami, he was caught with heroin inside the facility. They wanted to expel him. I begged them to keep him. They agreed—until the money ran out. Then he was gone. He came back to Alabama. Detoxed again. I took him straight to the Salvation Army with nothing but a bag of clothes and told him, “This is where your work begins.”

It humbled him. He got clean. Enrolled in a recovery program. Found work. Found love. But they say not to start a relationship until you've been sober for a year. They were right. Within six months, it collapsed—along with his job and housing.

He couch-surfed. Rebuilt. I kept reminding myself: I didn't cause it. I can't cure it. I can't control it. He came to one aftercare meeting with me. Got called out for being arrogant. Never came back. When he lost another job, my business partner hired him. I kept my distance.

Then I got a call.

His cousin had visited his apartment. The place was ransacked. Furniture—gone. TV—gone. Syringes in a Doritos bag on the floor. Only a mattress remained.

The Last Relapse

I called the office. Burt was at work. I drove there, took him outside, and fired him. I told him he had 48 hours to leave town. A few months earlier, I'd given him my old car. I'd made sure my name wasn't on the title. That saved me from liability.

He left town. Supposedly back to Vegas.

Two months later, I got a call from him. He said he was in a rehab in LA. A rabbi—a program director—got on the phone to explain that Burt was doing well. When Burt came back on, I asked: “Two weeks ago, our inventory came up short. \$250,000 in merchandise is missing. Do you know anything about it?”

He said no. I told him I wished him the best and hung up. Ten minutes later, he called back. “Dad,” he said. “I did it.” That was the last time we ever spoke.

I gathered my cousin, uncle, and mother. I told them the truth. I feared I'd be fired, that my career was over. But I knew what I had to do. I filed a police report. Played the recording. The detective told me it was too expensive to serve him in California, so I offered to pay. He never followed up. A year later, the detective was arrested for sexually abusing a prisoner.

My family never brought it up again. Four months later, at 2:00 a.m., my phone rang. John.

I didn't answer. It rang again. I knew. My son was dead. John shouldn't have had to make that call. It broke my heart in ways I still don't know how to name.

I called my therapist the next morning and told her, “I think we still have work to do.”

She responded, “Yes. We do.”

Later, I wrote in my journal:

“I'm not mad anymore. The bad things have been buried or softened by time. I just miss him. He'll always be 28. I want time with my family. That's what matters now.”

On the fifth anniversary of Burt death—coincidentally, the first Mother’s Day without my own mom—I wrote:

“I miss them both terribly. But I’m blessed. Jamie named her daughter after Burt. John created a pilot series in his memory. Mable did her Bat Mitzvah project collecting supplies for people in recovery. Each of us grieves in our own way. But I am closer to my children and grandchildren than I’ve ever been.”

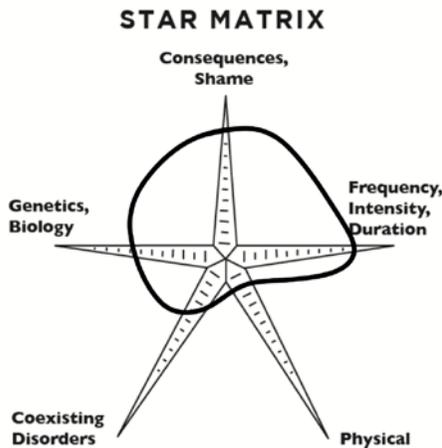
Grief doesn’t move in a straight line. It doesn’t end. But it evolves.

Today, I live in gratitude for my wife, Selene, who has stood beside me with love and resilience. For my children, who turned pain into compassion. For my grandchildren, who bring joy not in place of sorrow, but beside it.

Burt is gone.

But I’m still here.

And that means something.



DOB 02/09/1980 | DOD 05/14/2008

Goodbye Time

B.N.

Is it something we abide by, is it simply a reference.
Most of which I've wasted. This time now is for repentance.

Holding the key to my nature

The devil of my understanding

Life full of sorrow, guilt, and reprimanding.

No matter how hard I fought, the countless reasons I
sought, Is it Whether or not?...This or that, there's always
justification, it was a beast of your creation, you reap what
you sow on this plantation, is it god or damnation? Oh that
time of the month, it's the bearssss and menstruation!!!!
I'm in a fight with will and pride, always abusing time for
being on my side. With one last look inside, it finally
subsides, I'm all out of my 9 lives as I take my last ride.
Will this time be the time I make the right choice, which is
right? Do I Fight for left or seemingly for the right, is it
actually the right choice that leads to the light, or is the left
the right choice that is the determining voice. As I reach
that fork in the road, I give thanks to time, I take nor the
left nor right, as I transcend this path of mine.

There's always been more to the eye, we've been all but blind,
As time waves goodbye, I live or I die. Either way I had my
 chance, If I only knew that time did not issue unlimited
 grants. Instead I gear-up against time for one last dance.
Did I mention I hate baggy pants, my middle names Lance,
and my grandma's from France? Not funny? I didn't think
so either. It wasn't me Ms. Cleaver? This time I'm dead, or
a believer. Whether or not you cease to be, when you see
your life stumbling, grip on to the last determining thing.
 gaze time in the face in the middle of that ring, you start
discovering sobriety and your crumbling life. Time wants you
ditched, it wants to call you bitch. To cut off your dick and
give you nothing to pitch. Fuck time in the ass, it's not even
Swiss. Meaning your opportunity's already missed, time's
 always one step ahead don't you get the gist? No, you'd
 rather piss away what's left of a life witnessed of an
addiction dismissed. If you do not learn the gift of time,
 you will be all but missed.



Key Takeaways from Part One: Stories of Recovery



There are common threads across diverse journeys.

Despite the wide range of experiences, several themes recur:

- **Pain as Catalyst:** Almost every story begins with pain—trauma, isolation, shame, or despair. Pain, untreated or misunderstood, led to substance use. Eventually, that same pain, intensified by the consequences of addiction, became the motivation for change.

- **Recovery as Relationship:** Whether through 12-Step groups, therapy, spirituality, friendship, or family, connection plays a pivotal role. Many people recover through relationships—not just with others, but with themselves, their bodies, and a higher power of their understanding.

- **Nonlinear Healing:** Recovery is rarely a straight line. Relapse, setbacks, and redefinition of sobriety are common. What matters more than a perfect record was the willingness to return, recalibrate, and keep going.

- **Multiple Tools and Modalities:** People use what works for them—and let go of what doesn't. Traditional and nontraditional paths both show up here. AA, harm reduction, Buddhist principles, trauma therapy, family systems work, and spiritual exploration all find their place.

- **Meaning-Making:** A vital part of recovery is not just a search for abstinence, but for meaning—a sense of wholeness, purpose, and belonging. It is not

just about trying to stop using; it is about the desire to live. A life that has purpose and matters.

The STAR Matrix in Action (Behind the Scenes)

The reason we see individual STAR Matrix diagrams for each story is this section is informed by the STAR framework. The variety in these stories reflects the five key domains of the model:

- **Genetics & Biology** – Some people discovered later in life that their family history carried a silent legacy of addiction. Others learned their biology made certain substances especially seductive—or dangerous.

- **Use Patterns** – Frequency, intensity, and route of administration varied widely, as did the types of substances used. These factors profoundly shaped the urgency and type of support needed.

- **Mental Health & Trauma** – Unresolved trauma and co-occurring disorders are present in many of these lives. For some, healing began when these were acknowledged; for others, they were addressed long after physical sobriety.

- **Consequences** – Legal, relational, emotional, physical—each person’s list was different, but consequences eventually pointed toward a need for change.

- **Physical Health** – From chronic pain to the long-term impact of early drug use, physical well-being was a crucial and often shifting part of recovery.

What We Hope Readers Will Take Away

- There is no single “right” way to recover. What works for one person may not work for another. Recovery must be adapted to the individual, not the other way around.

- Stories matter. By reading them without judgment, we witness the full humanity of those affected by substance use. This act of witnessing is, itself, part of the healing process—for both the storyteller and the listener.

■ We need to update our systems. Clinical and community responses to substance use must reflect the complexity shown here. These stories are not the exception—they are the norm. The STAR Matrix offers a framework to help understand that complexity.

■ Hope is possible—even when it seems lost. Many of these individuals survived things they believed they couldn't. Many fell and got back up. Many discovered a life they never imagined could be theirs. And many are now giving back.

As you turn the page into Part Two, you'll hear from three members of the same family navigating recovery not just from substance use, but from deep relational pain. These stories continue the thread—recovery is not just about substances; it's about becoming whole.

Part Two: Stories of Recovery



We decided we would tell our stories back to back. We know that in all families including ours, stories never match exactly. For this reason we wanted to present them together. We each told our story from our perspective. From the beginning of each of our lives to today.

Part of each of our stories is how we each experienced a shared season of profound adversity—showing how recovery wisdom extends far beyond drugs and alcohol into the deeper heartbreaks of being human, and how our family did descend, reckon, and rise together.

We strove for some unvarnished truths. It was a vulnerable experience to not lighten up what happened in our lives. Our hope is to show that adversity strikes sober or not and that when it strikes all of our issues come to the front. We wanted to be as authentic as possible. So there is some unvarnished truth in part II. There are many points where we did not handle life very well. What we did do is, we kept striving forward.

We have included our Star Matrix as well. Our Star Matrix's are from the beginning of sobriety, except Shauna who made different life choices.

On Sorrow and Joy

Then a woman said, "Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow." And he answered: Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that hold your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives? When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight. Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater." But I say unto you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed. Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy. Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced. When the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and his silver, needs must your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet*

Not What I Expected

Steve Moore



Called or not, the Gods will be present.

Carl Jung



What Happened

Near the end of 1989, my choices, mistakes, and problems were really catching up with me. I was in daily survival mode, which meant that every day, my main job was to find a way to get enough mood-altering substance to live. Mostly, I had to try to find enough money to get what I thought I needed to be able to perform in the world. But I was very far down a path of denial and self-delusion about what I could get away with. I was always robbing Peter to pay Paul with a plan to get enough to get it together and straighten everything out. What I told myself was that I could pay everything back tomorrow if I could only get enough for today. It all ended when my employer, who was also my best friend, had to fire me for stealing from him. He drove me home in a company car that was no longer mine and said goodbye and good riddance. I was left with no car, no job, no money, and no answers for my life except to find a way to use some today so I could fix it all tomorrow. My options were limited, and I considered all of them. I thought of walking to a drug store to rob it or stealing from someone else. But I really felt terrible, and I just didn't think I could pull it off. It was not a moral decision. It was a failure. I didn't have it in me, and so I was defeated in my only

real plan. So, I laid on the floor and decided that I was just going to lie there and die. I laid there trying to will myself to let go and die, but I didn't. I had to get up and try something else.



It Works if You Work It

Somehow, I knew about Narcotics Anonymous, and I found a phone number to call. Someone called me back, and a guy named Matt agreed to meet me that night at a meeting place called “We Do Recover”. This was my first 12-step meeting of any kind. It was a frigid and dreary night. I recall arriving at a very rundown building in a rundown part of our city. I guess I was too sick and despondent to be really aware of my fears. I was early and walked to see a scary-looking guy making coffee. He turned around, said “welcome”, while giving me a hug that surprised me. I had no idea what to do, but I didn't ask. I just followed the next person into a room where over the next hour I heard the words “addict” and “fuck” more times than I had ever heard them in my life. It was cold and strange. I left that night with a little hope, but really felt no better. It was the beginning of my recovery journey.

Then I began to follow a fairly traditional path to get better. My attendance at that NA meeting had offered me some small measure of hope, but I still felt terrible, and my family was very concerned. So they found a way to get me into a 28-day inpatient treatment program. Even though I had not used anything for four days, I went into their detox program for a couple of miserable days before I was transferred into the residential recovery program. I had been given a Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and been told it works if you work it. Then I found out that there was a position called cottage chairman that I immediately aspired to attain. I started working on the program, trying to fit in and wanting to be good enough to become chairman of the unit. Even though I still felt terrible, I had a new plan that I had not had before. I knew how to comply, complete a workbook, and present myself as the best. After the first week, I asked my family to bring me some starched white shirts so that I could look better in group therapy. I was motivated to find a different solution.



Life on Life's Terms

After 28 days, I graduated from the program, with an aftercare plan that included attending 12-step meetings (90 in 90), finding a sponsor, working through the steps, and participating in aftercare meetings. I had discovered that after a year of sobriety, there was a way to train as a volunteer helper in the aftercare program of my treatment facility. That meant there would be a new position to work towards. I followed the plan and made an effort to look good while doing it. I did get a sponsor and worked steps, although now I would say not very well. But I did want to follow the new plan, because it was the only other plan I had for living. I began to sponsor people in the 12-step programs. After completing volunteer facilitator training, I became a trusted servant in the program and began giving back. Even though I have been through many twists and turns, I have been continuously abstinent from all mood-altering substances since January 17th, 1990. I went back to school and got a Master's in Social Work. I have been working in recovery almost since the beginning of my own recovery.

Only much later in my own recovery process did I begin to realize that my problems had just begun when I stopped using mood-altering substances.

The only issues that were resolved immediately were those that had been directly caused by using. Many other problems remained, and more life issues and problems were to come. I did not realize that I was not well equipped to grow up and cope with my own life. So I made many mistakes and caused problems for myself and others. Learning to navigate problems, changes, and stress proved more challenging than I had anticipated.



Not What I Expected

I now realize that aspiring to the next level has gotten me through things and, in many ways, has saved me. I can look back and see how many times I have believed that I would “get there” and then be OK. Or that I would “just get through

this” and then I would be OK. Neither of these things has turned out to be true. In sobriety, I have gotten there and gotten through many times. I am still me.

I did not expect to go through so many personal failures. I thought I would just keep getting better if I stayed on the path. Maybe I have. But the path has not been what I wanted or expected.

Because I have now been sober for twice as long as I used, there have been many failures and difficulties. Early on, I thought I was killing it in sobriety and life in general. I was very involved in recovery life, having become a trusted servant in the historic 5 Points AA group, and I spoke out of town, even as far away as Pell City, Alabama. Obviously, I was very sober. At about that time, I discovered that my first wife was having an affair. And she no longer wanted to be with me because she wanted to be with him. I would like to say that I accepted this news gracefully. I did not. And during the period when I was holding onto her leg while crying and begging her not to leave me, I came close to using again. For some reason, I thought if I took her on vacation and acted like I used to, she might stay with me. We went to the beach, and for the only time in my sobriety, I went into a liquor store to buy something for her. That night, I sat on the floor and rolled a joint for her, fixed her a drink, and tried to have fun. Even though I did not ingest any mood-altering substance, I can still feel the terror of how close to relapse I was willing to go to try to save this relationship. She still didn’t want me. So, I left, kicking and screaming.

After two and a half years of sobriety, I found myself living in a rental house with a hefty bag full of clothes and a small black and white TV. It was time for me to reassess myself, be alone, and work it out. Instead, I met a girl named Pam in about two weeks. We were set up by a friend in the program and met at a 12-step meeting. She had five years of recovery and was finishing her master’s degree while working in a treatment center. Finally, I found her. She had not been divorced for very long, and I was not yet divorced. Still, we liked each other a lot. After serious thought and consultation, we decided that we should take it very slowly. We both had a lot of relationship issues and much healing work to do. After we thoughtfully decided to take it slow, we were rarely apart and spent pretty much every night together. We spent the night together on our first date,

but we did not have sex. That qualifies as taking it slow for us.

But the relationship issues and wounds did not magically disappear. We worked those out both on each and with each other. At times, it was brutal and difficult. But we committed and worked. We also laughed a lot both with each other and at each other. There were hard things and beautiful things. My new wife made a determined effort to be a good mom to my three-year-old son. She began to build our life together and to try to help me along my way.

Pam encouraged me to go back to school. I had not been to college and honestly did not know if I could do it. I was afraid to try, and would not have if she had not pushed me. I decided to try one class over a summer semester. After I enrolled, I got fired from my sales job. With Pam's encouragement, I decided to go back to school full-time. I also knew someone who had started a new treatment program in the Center for Psychiatric Medicine at UAB. I went to talk to her about a job, and she hired me right away, even though it took a while to get in the system. Pam had gotten her degree and was working in our field. She agreed to take the financial load. Her one requirement was that I stop smoking cigarettes. I haven't had one since then.

When I went to work in the new treatment program, the manager gave me two clear instructions. Always wear a tie and don't let your hair grow down to your ass. I did wear a tie every day. And I have had a long ponytail since that time. The psychiatrists used to call me rebellious, but I knew it was compliance. I did it because Pam liked it that way. If it's starting to sound like this woman, Pam had a considerable influence on me...well, that is correct.

There was nothing about our beginning together that would predict success. I am sure that no one could imagine that we would actually stay together, and that included both of us. Even with the benefit of all these years of hindsight, I am not sure how we both stayed sober and stayed together. If I were given the list of just the major hurdles and difficulties, it would seem daunting to me now. Still, we are here and together after 33 years.

In that time, we raised my son together, opened a counseling practice that we

still run together, and adopted a daughter. The story of that adoption is beautiful when told from one angle and difficult from another. We had bought our first home together, and I was finishing school. Things were just about to settle down from the chaos of full-time work and school. I had known that my new wife could not conceive, and so we had settled into what I thought was our life. Of course, she continued her own work, and I still remember the night she said, “I want to have a baby.” I thought it was very safe to say – OK. That was the beginning of a very long, multi-year process. We were told no, in so many ways and so many times that I was ready to take No for an answer. Pam was not. Today, I am so grateful for her perseverance and determination because the result is my beautiful 23-year-old daughter, whom I love very much.

I was tough on my son in some ways. I think it was because he was tough and I was younger, and I didn’t know any better. Unsurprisingly, some of it, I now regret. I am not sure what he would think about it. I recall several instances where I would agree to something my daughter suggested, and my older son would look at me and say, “What happened to you?” Well, I have a daughter.

Like many things in my life, I did not foresee the problems that might occur in our family. Most of those problems were things that I thought I could handle with the tools that I already had. I had believed that I could educate my son about addiction and cause him not to go down that path. He claimed it had an effect on him, but by the end of high school, it was no longer apparent. This was also true when he was kicked out of the dorm in his first year of college for using. What followed were many difficult years of attempting tough love and boundaries, followed by some rescue attempts at odd moments in life. Eventually, he married and seemed to be moving on with life. But there was a painful dislike and even hate between my children that grew over time and distance. My son had some struggles that looked familiar to me. On one fateful day, I asked him if he had ever done anything to my daughter, and he said yes and offered a confession that no father should ever hear.

Of course, I had to tell Pam. My wife responded the way a mother bear would. I thought I could fix it all and went into my rescue and repair mode. The ability to lock down and start fixing is one of my greatest assets in a crisis. But I pay a

terrible price for the lock-down, and if it goes on too long, I start to crumble internally under the pressure. This situation was something that could not be fixed. Certainly not right away and maybe not forever. We immediately sought the best counsel that we knew of in our area. Our main role was to protect the innocent and prevent further harm. It meant that I lost the relationship with my only son, whom I love very much. You might say there must have been another way. Many have said that. None have come up with an actual way to protect, do no further harm, and maintain that relationship. People who are not in that situation have the luxury of imagining that they would handle it better.

On the outside, I was handling it pretty well. Pam and I were at odds over whether there would ever be any chance of reconciliation or repair. I wanted to have hope, and Pam saw the only hope as a permanent and absolute boundary. We fought and argued, but we agreed on protecting our daughter. On the inside, I was very alone in facing a loss that I had never imagined.

Looking back, I can see that I had always liked being heroic and rescuing. I was a sucker for being the one who understood and could really help. Even though I could see these things, I considered it to be a relatively harmless conceit and something that I could get away with. For the most part, that was probably true. There was a young woman who was also becoming a counselor. She considered me to be a mentor and someone who had really helped her. I told her about what was happening at home and in my life. It was not a good or safe self-disclosure. And I made mistakes that I had never made before. I began a texting relationship and even arranged to see her at some meetings. By the time Pam took serious notice of the amount of contact I was having with this person, guilt and confusion had overwhelmed me. And so, I made a bigger mistake.

I began confessing to Pam and begging for forgiveness because I felt so ashamed and guilty. This did not go well. I made things much worse. Over time, my wife and I had built on the idea that I could not, or at least would not ever make this kind of mistake. We often said that I had “boundaries of steel.” In general, I was rigid and careful in my relationship life. So, this was a serious departure. It was no small thing. But it was not as bad as it was going to get between us.

Not What I Expected

I do not recall feeling as bad as I felt during the next few months. I felt confused and traumatized by my own behavior. I had bought into the boundaries of the steel thing, and this violated one of my own rules. Never be baffled by your own bullshit. I now see the hubris of both things, and that is part of what got me. I felt terrible. So did Pam and I was the cause. It seemed intolerable to me at the time. I tried to tell the absolute truth about everything I could think of. It did not help. Pam was devastated and very angry. Because I had betrayed her, she could not believe me. It was awful for a long time. Somehow, we decided that I needed to take a lie detector test. I was terrified, and the whole thing was an awful experience for me. When I passed the test, which included questions important to Pam, she felt relieved. I felt enraged. I am easy to anger, but this was different. I felt a fury rise up in me that threatened to explode all the time. But it felt better than I had before. That was bad news for everybody else. Before Pam had been raging. Now I was. She can be mean, but I am big, loud, and dangerous.

I have been told that my anger during this time was the very worst part. It did not seem so to me, and still does not. For a while, my anger was the only thing that saved me. I regret the pain that I caused, but I have compassion for my dilemma. Nothing else had worked. This did. Fortunately, I did not give up trying to find other solutions.

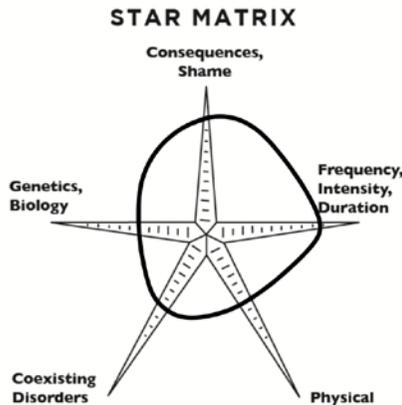
Reading has been a source of salvation for as long as I can remember. I started searching for answers in books. I started going back to twelve-step meetings and attended beginners' groups for a year. I asked an old timer to be my sponsor and met with him weekly. I saw an individual therapist weekly, participated in a therapy group, and attended an intensive therapy retreat. I was trying, but during this period, my primary method of relief was anger. For me, shame and anger are the worst. There should be a novel word for it: Shamanger. It is awful.

I had been reading books by Richard Rohr, and at the back of one, I found a reference to his men's groups that are now known as Illuman. By chance, I discovered that Illuman was having a national meeting in New Mexico called Soularize. Because Richard Rohr was speaking at the event, I arranged to go. Soon, I found myself in a room full of three hundred men who were drumming and speaking of inner work and of becoming an elder. And I found something there that gave

me hope. Soon after, I found a retreat in Louisiana and decided to attend. I now know that at those two retreats, I was exposed to some male wisdom and elder teaching. The things I had been doing helped, but very slowly. The retreat in Louisiana was a real rite of passage for me. My wife recalls it as a notable change in me. Not long after, I began to plan to start an Illuman group in Alabama. It is an important and humbling note that my wife bought my first drum and supported every effort I made. I completed my formal rites of passage in Arizona and started gathering men in Alabama as soon as I got back. That group and the work in Illuman have been and are transformative for me. It led me into Jungian therapy both as a study and in therapy for myself. I have continued that work to this day. It is inner work that makes a difference in the world.

Pam and I made a conscious decision to reclaim our lives. I have watched her work hard to grow and get better. We opened a new community space in our practice and called it C3 for caring, conscious, community. We began to grow again. Our daughter has chosen to become a therapist herself and has joined our practice.

I would very much like to say that it's all good now. Whoever said that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger has never really come up against it, in my opinion. I cannot say that I am stronger in any of the ways that I used to imagine would be important. If anything, I am weaker in everything that I used to believe was manly. I am more sensitive and experience losses that seem to grow daily.



Not What I Expected

I have learned that I will never “get it” or “get there,” whatever that was. I have learned that recovery and wisdom were not what I expected.

In that unexpected place, I found a softness in the brokenness that has expanded my capacity for love. I have remained reliably human. But I am less disappointed with that result. I have been called wise, but that is not my experience. I remain open and will continue to learn until the end.



Realizing that not every moment in life will be deep, or meaningful, or vibrating with energy that would give him the fulfillment that he'd always hoped for, Todd unloaded the dishwasher.

Life: The Never-Ending Discovery

Shauna Moore



*Poetry is often the art of overhearing yourself say things
you didn't know you knew.*

*We need that same skill as an art of survival. We need to overhear the tiny,
inconsequential things we say that reveal ourselves to ourselves.*

David Whyte



Who Am I?

I had many questions come up for me as I worked towards becoming a social worker, especially wanting to go into the substance use field. One of the biggest questions was What is recovery? Is recovery just the act of healing or getting over a wound or problem? If so, I have a shit ton to 'recover' from. Another major question I had while figuring out if I am qualified to work in the substance use field is What is sobriety? What does a pathway look like that does not involve having to get into recovery from a substance, but rather the hand that was dealt to me, and having and keeping my sobriety from birth? For me, my recovery and sobriety journey started the moment Pam and Steve Moore, two substance use social workers, adopted me.

I was almost two, maybe a few months shy of it, but we will never know, as

Cambodia does not keep health records or any digital records for that matter. My adoption story was sweet, and a lot of love and perseverance went into getting me. The efforts my parents went through to get me were nothing short of a miracle, as they were constantly confronted with obstacles. Nonetheless, they were eventually approved, and they said they were overjoyed when they saw a photo of me. From the moment my mom held me, it was clear that I was going to be spoiled, as I had taken my mom's sunglasses and was told I hadn't given them back. By owning a private practice, they had more time to be with me growing up. Like most parents, they played a crucial role in shaping me into the person I am today, but I honestly believe they were more influential in forming my identity than most parents.

Since my parents were in the business of emotions and honesty being a crucial part of the work they did, that naturally seeped into the way they raised me. It was interesting growing up in a family that was so open about their emotions and thoughts. As I grew older, I realized that other kids weren't as close to their parents as I was. I talked to my parents about everything, including who I was friends with at the time, what I did at school, and the homework I had. I once had an assignment in high school that required me to discuss my day with my parents, which was unusual because I usually did that anyway. In class, the teacher asked all the students, "Who has talked to their parents about their day?" Most everyone raised their hands, showing they did, and he replied, "No, y'all don't! None of you talks to your parents that much." I was baffled by this statement, as I had always and would have talked about my day, despite the assignment. It's safe to say that was the most straightforward assignment to do and write up. They also spoke to me about their lives, and I knew a great deal more about them than any of my friends knew about their parents. They were therapists who worked with people struggling with substance use issues, and they were very open all throughout my childhood about their recovery stories. However, I knew more about my moms as she was one intent on warning me of the dangers of using and where all her bad choices resulted in. I learned more as I grew older and became interested in learning more about her past. She's a major reason I never used. She showed me the scars and told me about all the losses she acquired over time and the lasting impact they all still had on her. She painted a really ugly picture, and

it made the idea of drugs and drinking sound like the worst thing someone could do. Her stories also influenced me, particularly when she shared that she started smoking cigarettes because everyone else was doing it, and she wanted to fit in. This further strengthened my decision during my impressionable school years.



To Find Me, I Had to Lose Me

I don't remember much of school in the academic sense, but I do recall the moments that have further shaped me into the person I am today. I've always been different, and eventually I strove to be different. My identity was never as clean-cut as people wanted it to be, and I always walked to the beat of my own path, even if I didn't want to. It didn't help that my parents supported my "differentness" and wanted me not to be ashamed of them. Nonetheless, I still tried to fit into the box society and the community around me wanted me to be. I tried to fit in with the popular kids and stay up with the latest trends, which my mom did with little resistance, even if it meant getting the more expensive Vera Bradley backpack. I tried to connect and be included and to bend and break myself to fit into what was around me. However, and maybe for the better, this was not my pathway. No matter how hard I tried, what I wore, what bag I used, and how much I forced myself to be like others, none of it was enough. I laughed too loudly, I drank the wrong drinks, I ate the wrong food, I used the wrong expressions, and I drank the wrong drinks. The final mark against me was that I was too dark.

So, I decided enough was enough, and I no longer needed to be part of a group or culture that so desperately wanted me to be something I most certainly was not. In middle school, I decided to turn my back on the society that shunned and shamed me and became an entirely independent person. My mother was once again fully supportive of this. I was no longer going to make an effort to be like the others or strive for their approval. They wanted nothing to do with so I said, "fine, fuck all you too!" I traded in my floral and colorful clothing for black skinny jeans, safety pinned ties, and studded belts. My Pandora jewelry was tossed aside and replaced by band bracelets and chains. I darkened my makeup and swept my bangs for the perfect one-eyed look. No one fucked with me afterward, and

it was glorious. No one messed with me, and that meant I was saved from the worries of peer pressure and drug deals that happened around me. I didn't worry about fitting in by the time it was normal to bend oneself to fit into the stream of middle school. My mom always told me that this was the time to do this and pushed me further to be myself. This was also around the time I started therapy. I don't remember the beginning years, but I was told that my first sessions involved talking about what my wedding cake would look like. This therapist would be the one to help me work through everything and has continued to do so.

It was probably a good thing I started going to therapy because not only was I in the process of trying to create any identity for myself, I was struggling with problems at home too, which probably exacerbated what I was dealing with at school. My parents were going through one of the roughest points in their marriage, and I wasn't sure whether they were going to make it, and the abuse I suffered as a child from my dad's son had been revealed. During this time, I couldn't catch a break. However, I developed a great coping mechanism, which I still tend to default to, of dissociation through music or YouTube videos. If I couldn't hear my parents fighting or block out their negative thoughts, then there wasn't anything wrong in the world, and I could move forward in life. My screen usage was so bad that I couldn't have any screen time while doing homework, with only my iPod playing music as the only exception. Even before I had a screen, I always had my iPod, which I think helped me ignore the talk about my dad's son, who everyone was always excited about when he came around. I couldn't stand it or him, so I just tuned it all out. I didn't have to think about the intense anger I felt that stemmed from seemingly nothing at the time, or have to engage with him. This could be the coping mechanism that started off the journey of me creating the perfect armor for myself. To create the perfect mask, I had to ensure I saw nothing, heard nothing, and I definitely didn't say anything to anyone about how I was really feeling. From there, I would create a fortress to protect myself, which also unintentionally became my prison.

I was tired of having no control over anything. I was weak, powerless, and needed something to cling to so my sadness wouldn't completely pull me under. Unknown to me, I had created a perfect armor that would protect me from the powerlessness I felt at home and in school, and the older I got, the harder the

armor got, and the sword got sharper alongside it. Later on in therapy, I was told I was an impenetrable spiked wall dressed in black, well, more specifically, a pineapple. My therapist said to me that I had created a wall so strong that no one could touch me, and my armor may have been working too well. I finally felt strong and thought I had discovered my identity. I took pride in this because the other kids were still playing make-believe, but I knew the “real” world and made sure to boast about my incredible “self-awareness” to my therapist. This armor was a major component of my recovery story, as this armor was an adaptive coping mechanism at the time that eventually became a cage, a prison of my own making that I hadn’t realized I had gotten myself stuck in. My therapist reminded me that all I wanted was to have control over anything I could desperately: how everyone perceived me, how people interacted with me, and how I perceived myself. I could control all of that with this mask as it kept people away, and those who were “worthy” were able to witness the “real” me.

A significant factor that propelled the growth of this mask was leaving the public school system and getting the opportunity to attend Indian Springs, which started in the 8th grade. Here I got to dye my hair bright yellow and red. I got to expand my wardrobe to different variants of the alternative fashion style. I came into my own as an independent person who didn’t need anyone because I was strong and knew I could only rely on myself, or so I thought. The eighth grade was great. I had created an image that kept me safe, but being around other people who were “different” led me to make friends. In 9th grade, things changed, only slightly at first, as my class doubled in size. My mask stayed strong, though it did morph into a more elegant style as I “matured”, but I still hadn’t realized how much the walls of this prison that was my mask had closed in on me. In 10th grade, I was tired. I remember telling my therapist how exhausting my morning routine was and that I had started feeling ugly without makeup. I was tired of being left out again. By the 10th grade, I was growing increasingly weary of being judged by the outside world all the time. Unbeknownst to me, my mask had started slipping, but I couldn’t let it go, as it had kept me safe for so long. So, my brain decided that it was time to change the mask, not get rid of it, even though it was starting to really hurt and get heavy on my face.

Complaining about a problem I had created was something I needed to think

about. So, I changed “aesthetics,” and my brain said this one will keep you safe, but it’s not as heavy, and it’s more acceptable in the outside world. I started branching into more color, but “cool” colors, and donned unique apparel purchased from Fashion Nova, PrettyLittleThing, and Boohoo. I transformed into a new, angsty form of teenager that showed more skin but with the same amount of makeup, just not as black and smoky. This was it! This was the mask I could put on to make myself more approachable, but it was heavy, too —maybe even heavier than before.

I had been worn down, and this new mask, which I thought would be lighter, started feeling even heavier than the one I had worn previously. I don’t remember exactly when, but during my sophomore year, I could no longer do it. I had come to realize all the makeup, the clothes, and spiky accessories were my chains. I was faced with a mirror that showed my thick mask. After this, I eventually traded my outfits and makeup for baggy t-shirts and sweatpants. I was confronted with how tiring it was to maintain this mask, and I slowly started to realize how much I was in a cage with no door or key to escape, instead of a protective bubble. I was so tired of controlling everything, but now what?

I had nothing to protect me, I was too tired to shield myself, but I couldn’t figure out how my armor had turned into something I felt naked without. I wasn’t beautiful without makeup. I wasn’t confident in myself. I was mad at myself. I was mad at my therapist because if it had not been for her, I could have been in denial for a little longer, again, is what I thought. I had lost the one identity I had worked so hard to cultivate and perfect, which had kept me safe and in control. I had nothing to control. I had no control. It didn’t help that this was the year I got my first C...in math, and as an Asian, my ancestry surely looked down on me. I had also started breaking away from the other girls in my class, with the expectation of one person, who had stayed a constant presence in my years at Springs. Now, by the time I had gotten to junior year, I had no idea who I was, who I wanted to be, or how I had even gotten to this point of losing my identity.



Finding Myself...?

Therapy was getting annoying as it felt like I couldn't get my shit together, and I still didn't love that I had created my own demise. Now at 23, I've gotten accustomed to a saying that I hadn't realized until recently how much I used, and it's, "Why can't I catch a fucking break!" Finally, 10th grade was over, and not only was I about to catch that break, but I was about to go through some speed-warp growth and drive forward. The summer after 10th grade, I started working for my therapist parents, and it was small, easy work that I enjoyed, which mainly consisted of filing their notes and organizing the kitchen or bathrooms. However, in addition to being around the office more than I had before, I was further introduced to their work. I got an up-close view of the machine that powered the Moore Institute, and I must admit, it was a little chaotic. Nonetheless, it worked well, and I finally got to see how much effort, love, and care went into this private practice.

I was there when they began laying the groundwork for what would become the Intensive. I overheard conversations that included the fears, logistics, and how they would structure their schedules after setting up the group. I had always been around their work, but I never paid much attention. I had never been this involved, and it sparked something in me that I hadn't known was in me. I had also been acknowledging the fact that I had been in therapy since I was twelve, and I had always really liked that I could go to her for everything. I had an outlet that was all for me, and I utilized it to the fullest. I also had the privilege of seeing old clients come in, thanking them for their support, and witnessing how my parents had helped them so much. This was it! I was going to become a therapist like my parents. They had a drive and goals, and were actively helping people, which was something I had already known I wanted to do, just not how I would go about it.

I had a new drive going into 11th grade. I knew what I was going to do with my life. I finally had a concrete image of what I was striving for. I had also made a change in heart about going to college. While I was still reeling from having lost

my masks, I was still uncertain about the colleges I could get into. I can now give myself grace, but at the time, while I was confident about my goal, I was not confident I could do any better than mildly average. So, the University of Alabama at Birmingham was the college I ultimately chose because I didn't have to submit any additional materials, and I only needed two letters of recommendation.



Creation from Destruction

However, this year was also the one where I got reintroduced to the trauma of my past in a whole new way. Old wounds made their way to the forefront of my life, and I was confronted with some of the biggest triggers that I am still actively working on today. In one year, I had started a new self-discovery journey of growth and healing, and dragged my family and me through hell. The holidays were difficult, and I had made things astronomically difficult because I was once again at the whim of triggers and chains I couldn't see. I had anger and rage that didn't fit the situation, and I couldn't get a grip on myself. I tried, and tried, but all I could do was torch a greater path before me, and I didn't stop until I had burned everyone around me. I was also struggling because I couldn't see my therapist through any of this. After all, everyone was on Christmas break and out of the office. Months after destroying a boy's ego and pride, straining the relationship with my parents, and thoroughly shattering my self-esteem and identity again, I found the writing I had done, and it was truly eye-opening. I had written in red ink on black paper, and it was a message that had likely been swirling in my head for years, that was not meant for the boy who stayed with us. The message came from somewhere deep inside me, or more accurately, from a time years ago when I was a little girl—a wounded girl who wanted control but had none, even over herself, without knowing why.

Finally, through processing what I had written, I realized I was struggling with being in a trauma response. From then on, I was able to start working on the core of the issue that was with the person who hurt me. Looking back on the experience, I was incredibly embarrassed about myself, having acted horribly to everyone, especially my mom. I still feel ashamed about how I acted during this

time, but I gained many valuable insights. In therapy, I was able to talk about my control issues and what different triggers I had discovered, and how I could work through them without them taking control over me. I was able to recognize the feelings and where they would pop up in my body, which pointed towards these activations. I practiced new methods to calm my nerves, including humming and various breathing techniques. I became more attuned to my feelings and worked diligently on noticing what physical sensations arose in my body during activations. I also worked to recognize a baseline for my feelings and emotions and came to terms with the fact that I always have an air of sadness or somberness about me. My mom told me I carried a melancholy within me, and I could finally see and feel that in myself. Once again, I gained more insight into myself and entered my senior year with even more confidence to pursue my goals.

Not only had I gained powerful personal insights, but I also had the opportunity to develop study habits that led to improved grades and a better understanding of how my brain works. I started making lists and began utilizing my reminder app as if my life depended on it. I created a structure that helped me get my homework done efficiently and allowed me enough time to study. My drive toward my goal intensified, and I began preparing for the ACT and SAT. I remember taking both to see which one I had a better chance of getting a higher grade. Ultimately, I chose to study and take the SAT, which resulted in a score high enough to earn almost a full scholarship to UAB. I was once again able to move forward and further strengthen my core, which had been starting to shine brightly.



My Creation

I'm thankful, looking back at high school, for how I didn't have any semblance of direction and lacked confidence for most of it. As I reached my senior year and began to recognize my potential, I allowed myself to soar. I made straight A's, and I finally understood what I was learning. I had nearly perfected my study routine and organization management styles that worked best for me. Senior year was also the first year where I chose all my courses for each semester and

experienced what it would be like in college. My schedule was divided into two different semesters that ended during that term. There weren't any classes that carried over, except for my language course, which I chose to continue. This year also reinforced the notion that I could do things on my own, not out of spite to be different, but instead because I was allowed to do things on my own and enjoy them. I gained more confidence on my own and allowed myself to experience these classes without the comfort of having a friend in any of them, except for my language class. I thrived in my courses and retained the information, as I enjoyed what I was learning. This was the first time at Springs that I had earned all A's, and I couldn't believe how well I was doing in my courses.

My first semester had finished without a hitch, except for a minor issue in one of my classes due to a teacher's unfamiliarity with handling a potential plagiarism case. Ultimately, nothing came from all the talk, and my record was untouched. Unfortunately, I thought this was the last of my snafus, but the world had other plans. The COVID-19 pandemic struck in my second semester. We went on Spring Break early and were told it would be extended, but we never returned. My senior year and all the plans I had all blew up within a couple of weeks. I recognize the severity of this pandemic, as many people lost their lives, but there is a very real loss that my fellow seniors and I experienced that none of us will be able to get back. My graduation was nothing like I had expected, but the silver lining for me was that I had the opportunity to do one of the final graduation speeches. That was a big deal, and if my eighth-grade self had seen what I had done, she would've been so embarrassed. I even noted in my speech that I went to Springs with the firm intention of keeping my head down and cruising through it. By the end of my senior year, I had become a new person. I had become someone who was way more certain of who she wanted to become and what kind of person she was.

In August 2020, I began my studies at the University of Alabama, where, unknown to me, I would thrive and grow exponentially more than I could have ever imagined. I started college in a hybrid system, where only half the class attended in person on some days, while the others participated via Zoom. Where others struggled, I flourished. I had gotten out of dorming, which I am incredibly thankful for, so I got to zoom into class in the comfort of my own home, in my spot. When our new deck was built, I was then able to attend the Zooms with a

fantastic background, but with the comfort of a fan and no bugs. This further set me up for success as I discovered how well I perform when I create my schedule. I could motivate myself to do the work and didn't need my parents to do my work. I had become so comfortable with this system that going back to entirely in-person classes made my second year challenging. Driving took a lot more time out of my day than I had grown accustomed to utilizing for school work, and I hadn't realized just how crowded and chaotic college spaces were. I recall walking into the student hall and nearly having a panic attack, overwhelmed by the sheer number of students in the foyer. It was a zoo.

Although it was tough for me to adjust to being around so many people, I made a promise to myself to stick to my senior commitments of getting involved and doing more, so I joined an organization called the Second Year Experience. I remained with this organization and was actively involved until my last semester, when I no longer had the time to continue participating. This was one of my best decisions, as it connected me with other students, helped me learn how to run organizations, and provided me with opportunities to strengthen my resume. I feel very proud of my work with this organization, as it hadn't been active for several semesters, and we were able to build it into a strong organization that hosted many events and served as a true resource to second-year students.

For the first time in a while, I excelled academically and finally allowed myself to acknowledge my success. I thrived in college. Everything was significantly easier than Springs, and homework wasn't an issue for me. I completed my assignments promptly and never stressed about getting them turned in on time, as I had planned everything out to the hour. I was in the Honors College, and those classes were some of my easiest classes, as I genuinely enjoyed what we learned and the assignments. Most every assignment was a paper or some form of writing assignment, and I consistently outperformed my peers. I finally discovered a strength of mine that ultimately served me well in college. As my peers struggled to write papers longer than a page, I was able to crank out five-page papers easily. Looking back on my time at Springs, I am reminded of just how well it had prepared me for college, and for that, I am eternally grateful to my teachers and the administration of the time. My last history class was the one that really set me up for success in writing papers, as I had to write a 25-page research

paper on a topic of my choice, making any other paper I wrote seem like light work in comparison.

As I continued to blossom and solidify this new identity, I further realized how unimportant and not essential it is to have a good time anywhere, especially at college. I affirmed my likes and what I enjoyed for entertainment. I enjoyed the company of myself. I enjoyed board games or card games over going out to a party. I enjoyed small group gatherings that were quiet and didn't involve drinking. Drinking and any kind of substance use got further and further away from something I wanted to partake in. Unfortunately, this created a new issue with still wanting a social life, as a lot of people around me still drank and smoked. It became increasingly more complicated to be in any environment like this, as I didn't like to be around drunk people, and my tolerance wore thin as I got further into my college years. This limited the spaces I felt comfortable subjecting myself to. However, my decision never wavered, and I never felt the urge to be included in the drinking scene. Eventually, I found a space where I could be a part of college life that was sober. I became involved in the recovery community at UAB. I began attending Collegiate Recovery meetings, which were open to both students in recovery and those interested in a safe and sober space. Here, I was able to participate in different events that were incredibly fun and involved no drinking. Even when presented with opportunities to drink and try the drinks, I either hated the taste or hated how it made me feel. Being a control freak came in handy as I don't like feeling out of control, so that was a big no-no for me.

I had fully flourished into something new. Not only did I succeed by getting good grades and finishing assignments effectively, but I also finished my studies a semester early. By my junior year, which was four semesters in, I was looking at graduate school. Never in my young life had I thought I had what it took to get into college, let alone grad school. However, now in my fourth semester, having earned straight A's, excelled in my honors courses, and stayed involved in campus events, I knew that not only did I have a long list of options, but I also had the grades and the resume to gain admission to an Ivy League institution. For a moment, I was considering Boston College. I had toured the campus, sat in on a class, and met with an admission counselor who said I had a high chance of getting accepted. For the first time in my life, I realized how I had earned this

success and felt proud of the work I had put in to achieve that point.

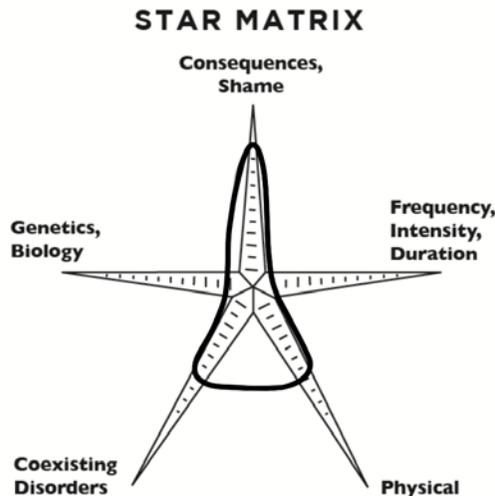
After a lengthy period of deliberation, campus touring, and attending numerous Zoom information sessions, I decided that the University of Kentucky's online Social Work program was the right choice for me. This is where I completed my master's degree in three semesters, earning another round of straight A's. By the time I had graduated with my master's degree, I had bought a house, had a small caseload of clients, and had worked through many of my nesting dolls. I've made significant progress in my personal growth, and I can write about the good outcomes, but I was put through a lot, and I struggled for years. None of this was easy. I have to deal with both the effects of abuse from my father's son and from my parents' dysfunctional coping when it was first discovered. I struggled, feeling like I belonged anywhere.



I wasn't Asian enough to be Asian, but I didn't look American. I was 'other'. I was often the oddball or the last to be considered. I struggled with all of these insecurities continuously, even as I gained confidence in myself. I was confident in my decision not to use or drink, but that made my social life really hard, and I was judged for the activities I preferred. I felt lonely, and there were so many times when I felt disconnected. I don't regret any of my decisions not to drink, but one issue I hadn't thought I would encounter is how hard it would become to be

around others who were drinking. I was sensitive to the smells, and it made being around them nauseating, which made a small part of me feel like a loser. There were times I wondered if I didn't drink just because I was too scared or if I was worried that since I'd be a lightweight, I'd get made fun of. Just another reason to be left out and made fun of. Another space I wouldn't fit in. Nonetheless, I was reminded every day that I could handle anything that life threw at me because I've spent over ten years in therapy and was raised in a family where issues didn't go undiscussed. I was able to create new coping mechanisms and build a different armor that I didn't feel stuck to me. I could take off the masks I created to push me forward.

I experienced significant struggles and had old painful wounds pulled back to the forefront of my life, but never once did I feel those experiences deter my journey. Life has thrown some significant obstacles in my way, but I never let those things define me or restrict me from growing into the person I am today. Nor will I let them in the future because I know that life is a cycle of destruction and creation that is ongoing. Life is complex. It's filled with both lightness and darkness, which is necessary to be a complete human being. While it can be painful, I want to be whole. I will wield the double-edged sword that is life with confidence, knowing that whatever comes my way, I will have the support, love, and knowledge to work through it.



The Dance of Light and Dark

Pam Moore



I am not what happens to me, I am what I choose to become.

Carl Jung



How do you incorporate the idea of being conceived by the rape of your mother by your father? When my parents told me this, as I was suffering the loss of my first child and they were arguing, it felt like more than a gut punch; it felt as if there was no hope for who I was as a human being. Was I even a human, or something darker or more sinister? At the same time, it made sense. My mother seemed like she hated me my whole life, and it seemed like I could not please her enough to be acceptable. I had always wondered why I was the odd man out in my family. My mom thought it would be cute to call her daughters by a “J” name and my brothers by a “B”. So we were in order of birth: June, Judy, Jean, Billy, Pam, and Bert. There was something different about my name that did not fit the others. It didn’t even make sense; my name was Pamella Joyce, so I could have easily been called Joyce or even Joy (the name I wanted to be thought of), but no, I was the odd one out, Pam. (Pamella was a misspelled Pamela that they never bothered to correct - and that I love today- it is an affirmation of who I am - just a little bit different.)

This is my story. It is a story of light and dark. This is my story, as I remember and process it. I am well aware that we all have memories that are different

from one another. My sisters had a better childhood than I did, and therefore remember our lives differently than I do. My husband, my daughter, my stepson, and others remember our past from different viewpoints. As I recall, and I believe we all recall, it is the way we remember that shapes us into who we are.

My counselor, Jim, once asked me to make a genogram of the sexual abuse in my family. I tried and failed because there was so much across so many people, it just became a cross-up mess. There were too many incidents I was aware of. My assumption is that I only know a small fraction, but what I do know spans multiple generations and involves multiple people. An example of what I tried to draw. My mother was raped by her brother at the age of 3. Her sister was sexually abused by their father, and another sister was raped by my father when she was 12. My aunt used to gather us into the room to watch her sexually torture her husband. One male cousin raped another male cousin who then raped other cousins. I have another female cousin I have never met because when I was very young, her father, my uncle, raped her. Sexual abuse is the one constant in my family, and it bleeds into everything else. It was everywhere throughout time. It happened so often that, thinking of writing this, I knew it would take too long and be too much work to list it all. So, instead, I leave you with the above example. What it created, though, was incredible shame. Shame is one toxic potion that I believe created all my family dysfunction. We couldn't escape it. The hard part about shame is that when you have this much shame in a system, it does not make people hang their heads, but it makes them ferocious. There is a cruelty that comes from this much shame, that we don't like to talk about, but there it is. So, just know that as I go through my story, it is filled with the toxicity of shame. Not terrible people, just shameful people.



Internal Shame

I have always felt like I have to apologize for existing. It annoys people that I'm here, so I tried to make myself as small as possible. My mom hated that I existed, I guess, because of the way I was created. My dad was glad I existed, but mainly for his gratification. At the same time, he was always mad about the way I looked, or I

said the wrong thing, or I did not praise him enough. My dad had a very small ego, and he needed constant reinforcement that he was seen as nice-looking, manly, smart, funny, whatever, and so on. When he did not get it, he was angry or sulked. And when those two things happened, all hell was going to break loose. Someone was going to pay. It was exhausting. My feelings were always discounted, as other people's feelings in the family were more important and needed addressing. Even if they were upset about what had happened to me. This became a theme throughout my life. I can say it was the universe, and others that taught me this but also myself. It has been an ongoing struggle throughout my life.



The Beginning

My mother, Eva, was small and beautiful. Even into her 80s, she had a slim, trim figure and was considered very pretty. She was also very intelligent, despite having limited formal education. She was from a very poor, large family from rural Alabama. She married Bill, my dad, when she was 16 and he was 21. He was a bad boy. He ran around and drank, and it must have seemed very exciting to my mother. They met on a double blind date, where they were with other people. They were attracted to each other, and the rest is history. They were not allowed to touch, yet they felt a deep passion for each other. They wanted to be together. My mom told me she married my dad after dating him for a few months because she was attracted to him, and they were always chaperoned. She said she wished she had just had sex with him, and then she might have made another choice. But that was a different time.

She said she also wanted out of her house. Her home life was hard and abusive. There was nothing there for her. So they eloped and married in the courthouse. She conceived my sister almost immediately. The marriage struggled from the beginning, my father was never faithful, and always drinking. He became abusive pretty quickly. As her mother told her, "You made your bed, now you lie in it." I can understand why she would want to get away from my grandmother, who, although a strong (both physically and emotionally) woman, was also a cruel woman. And my mother and all her siblings were alcoholics. Her brothers were

abusive. The story goes that at 6 years old, she ran to her mother after my Uncle Wesley, her brother, raped her with blood running between her legs, and all my grandmother said was “Boys will be boys.”

My mom grew up in a one-room shack with no electricity. When her younger sister reached adulthood, she had a house built for her parents. It had 3 tiny bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and a bathroom. Not a working bathroom as it had no running water in the house, but a bathroom that my grandmother would show to guests so they could see how upscale she was. It also had a screened-in back porch. This is where we would bathe when we visited my grandmother. She had a hand pump in the kitchen. She would pump the water, place it in a pot, boil it, and repeat until the galvanized tub was full. Then, two of us would squeeze in at a time to take our baths. The outhouse was a short walk through the yard from the back of the house. It was a tiny wooden shack with a bench seat and a hole cut in the middle. There was a hole dug into the ground where your bodily fluids would go. As the hole was filled, it would be covered with dirt, and the outhouse would be moved over. There was a Sears catalogue to both read and wipe with after you did your business. There were always big green horseflies circling around. And they would bite and sting you as you used the outhouse. If you had to go in the middle of the night, it was a frightening adventure.

The part I loved, though, at that little farmhouse, was getting up early to watch the morning glories open. We would wake up before the sun came up and sit on the screened-in porch, waiting and watching for the white Morning Glories to open. Then, one by one, they would open, almost as if choreographed to the song of the morning.. It was a beautiful sight. Flowers abounded in the country. Zinnias were growing up the hill on which they lived. They were of every color, and it was as if it was perfectly painted by magical Gods. There were the banana trees and the apple trees. And the fields where crops were growing green of every hue.

There was a “cement pond.” A 2-foot by 3-foot hole that had been covered in cement, which my grandfather kept his goldfish in. Orange and golden some with red fins. They were so big and bright. There were woods between the house and the fields that we could play in, and there were huge pieces of iron ore just lying

about everywhere. Beautiful pieces of quartz were tossed around as if someone had just scattered them into the woods. The quartz seemed like diamonds to me with their shine. They had a funny mynah bird. It looked like a crow, but I would say “Sam is a pretty bird”. It would wolf-whistle and make the same noise people make when spitting chewed tobacco. It was funny. Country food was the best. We could pick bananas and have banana pudding, or apples and have apple pie. There were chickens in the coop that we would name, chase, and feed. We gathered their eggs every morning.

However, at the same time, it was a great deal of work to live day-to-day in this area. My grandmother made her own broom, canned her food, and used her chickens for both eggs and meat. Nothing came easily, living on a subsistence farm. And with poverty came hopelessness, and with hopelessness came cruelty and abuse. My mother’s family was cruel and harmful to one another.

My father’s parents lived a bit better, but not much. My grandfather was an abusive alcoholic who terrorized his family. He only valued them for what they could produce for him. He did not see them as people but more as working machines. My understanding is that when my father was young, he would pull him out of school to work his juke joint he had in the barn. My grandfather was a moonshiner for a considerable amount of time.

Rural life is hard. The thing my parents got right was leaving Troy, Alabama, where they were from, and moving to Montgomery, Alabama. There were jobs and opportunities you would never have at the farm. But that also meant we lived in poverty. Everything we got was a hand-me-down from some other family. Toys, clothes, and household items, except the clothing my mother made. She was a great seamstress. In fact, that was her job for most of my childhood. She worked in a sewing factory, while my father, who mostly knew about growing food, was a produce man in the grocery store. Probably the only person I knew who was poorer than us was the woman who came and cleaned, washed, ironed, cooked, and watched 6 kids while my mother worked. I can not imagine what her life must have been like and the hardships she must have faced.



I Am Here

I was born the fifth child, fourth daughter, to my parents. At best, I would have been a disappointment. They really wanted 2 boys. After the three girls — June, Judy, and Jean — they finally had Billy, the first boy. But here I was, a girl. Breech and a difficult delivery. Born right before midnight. My mother told me (and my father did not disagree) that I was conceived by a rape he perpetrated on her 9 & ½ months before. Of course, I was late. My mother was a tiny woman, and I was over 9 pounds. And did I already say breech? My mother's first words to me, as told to me by my father, were "get that thing away from me!" She and my dad were apparently arguing because, as she put it, he came to the delivery room "smelling like pussy." So I was a very big disappointment. My mother, every year on my birthday (which we celebrated a day late as she insisted her labor lasted much longer than the doctors recorded on my birth certificate), reminded me of the hell she went through to get me here. My mother exaggerated how long her labor was with me as an event every year. I thought my birthday was August 16, when I was actually born on the 15th. I spent years believing something that was not true and never questioning it. That became another theme in my life.

The energy I was born with made me feel like a bother for my entire life. I made a conscious effort to be pleasing to her, trying to make up for all that I had put her through that day, without taking up too much space or energy. I felt like a mistake. I felt too big.

My first memory is of being around 2 years old. I was sitting on my mother's lap in the front seat of the car. She told me I was too fat to sit in her lap anymore. I can remember shame washing over my body. I felt dirty. It was the experience of being too much and too big that started at birth. It is just a fleeting memory, and the part that sticks with me the most is the feeling of shame. I can remember her disgust at how big I was. In my mind, I was gigantic. I felt disgust too, even at such a young age.

I needed to take up as little room and energy as possible. I spent years believing

I was obese. The crazy thing is, I was bigger than almost everyone in my family, taller. I come from a very short family; most females are under 5 feet tall, and I am 5 feet 4 inches tall. My mom would buy clothes for my sisters and would hand them down. When they came to me, they would be too small. I internalized this as just one more thing wrong with me. I was too big. It never occurred to me that the problem was that they were just smaller than I. It was another thing I hated about myself that I never questioned. I just heard the chant I would hear from my siblings, “Fatty, Fatty, 2x4, she can’t get through the kitchen door.” My next memory is of being around 5, and it is the same feeling of shame and being dirty. I was having to take medicine mixed in applesauce because of vaginal irritation. All I knew was my mom said it was all my fault. I am pretty sure that some sexual abuse had already started, but I do not have a clear memory.



Hard Beginnings

This period of my life was filled with violence and shame. My parents were very violent with one another. They drank - a lot. There were times we would huddle in the girls’ bedroom and pray that our daddy would not kill our mommy. We would all 6 gather in the bedroom and hold hands. Then my oldest sister, June, would lead the prayer, “Please don’t let daddy kill our mommy.” We would be terrified, hearing things break. They would be hitting and throwing things, and screaming. It was terrifying. The fighting would be so violent.

Once my dad pulled a rifle on my mom to kill her, and it was only because she knocked the gun away from her head that she lived that night. It broke her arm, but it saved her life. She tried calling the police from the kitchen phone. It had a very long cord. My dad grabbed the cord and wrapped it around her neck and started to strangle her. I do not know how she got away, but I know we kept our circle tight and prayed. We knew not to leave the room, or we would get it too, and then he would be even angrier at her and beat her more.

There would then be moments of intense attraction and passion between them. They loved as hard as they hated.

My dad pushed my mom through the glass of a china cabinet, and the glass flew everywhere. It was their anniversary. They had started out having fun drinking with the neighbors. They were all laughing, and then someone decided they would have a man-less wedding. We were peeking at all the fun from under the china cabinet, which was up on legs. It was smaller than most, and it probably wasn't even a real china cabinet, but rather a cabinet with glass in the front, where they displayed dishes. As we watched, it started looking wrong, as our neighbor was only wearing a towel. But they seemed to think everything was funny until suddenly it wasn't. I don't know what flipped the switch, but things turned ugly, with people arguing, and the neighbors left. My dad was accusing my mom of coming on to men, and my mom was accusing my dad of coming on to the neighbor. Then he started hitting her and throwing her. We ran and hid in our room to pray, and then the next thing I knew was the sound of glass shattering, as I could hear the thud. Was she alive this time? It got quieter. We shook with fear that this was it—the end. Finally, the sound of the mother crying. The sound of the broken glass had ended the fight like it was a wake-up call. Then something unusual happened. My parents called us out of the bedroom and into the dining room. They were exhausted and needed the mess cleaned up. We kids spent the rest of the night cleaning broken glass.

There were black eyes and regular beatings that seemed to happen way too often, especially after drinking episodes. Both my parents loved to drink. My mom discovered pills for her everyday use. You never knew what was going to happen. One minute, they would be in a loving embrace, and the next, there would be things flying.

My dad beat all of us. He was good at using a belt. He would at times draw blood, and other times it would be welts and bruises. Sometimes my dad would come into our room in the middle of the night (we had 2 sets of bunk beds in the girls' room), and he would just start swinging his belt. He would have so much pent-up anger. He would swing wildly and hit and hit and hit - everyone in the room. All 4 of us. I would try to squeeze over next to the wall on my top bunk, but I was never able to get far enough away to miss the sting of the wild belt. He would not say a word, just hit. He could get us all at once. Finally, he would feel spent and go back to his bedroom. It just seemed normal. This is what dads do.



Sex

My dad also loved sex and women. And women loved him. My dad would have sex with my mother's friends, our teachers, or activity leaders, and really anyone he could. He and my mom had loud sex - a lot. I can remember waking up to my parents having very wild sex, or maybe it was my dad having wild sex, because it was him I would hear grunting as the springs would be squeaking. I don't really remember hearing my mother. She once told me that when you get married, you just have to "bear it". She grimaced on her face as she told me this. That was my mother's whole sex talk with me. It was normal to walk into the living room, and my dad's hand would be down my mom's pants. He seemed to need to be touching her vagina (or someone else's) most of the time, or he was angry. He had a desire that could never be filled. So it is no surprise that my dad sometimes didn't understand the distinction between not crossing that boundary with your daughters, or at least this one. My sisters say my dad never touched them. My mom's sister told me he started raping her at age 12. My dad would touch me sexually often. I don't remember penetration, but I do remember being able to calm him down by being sexual with him from a very young age. As I said, he needed to be touching a vagina most of the time to soothe his anger. My father was a very immature man who needed constant reassurance that he was seen as a man. I don't remember it bothering me when I was young. My mother seemed to have a burning anger with me that I never understood until I was older. My mother had to be in constant competition with me. My dad would use me against her, as I was always willing to please him. I had no demands; I would have been afraid to have any demands on him. She was a grown woman and tired. I was going to win that competition most of the time. I understand my mother's anger. When you put on top of my conception and birth, it was too much to bear. I thought I would hate myself too if I had been reminded of a trauma every time I saw my face, and on top of that, her husband using me as a stand-in spouse.

It is interesting to me that people are neither all good nor all bad. My family is neither good nor bad. They are just humans trying their best. We all came from dysfunction, including my parents. My mother's mother was a cruel woman who

was especially cruel to her. Her father, when I knew him, was a sweet grandfather, but when she was growing up, he was a raging alcoholic. Her brothers were town drunks, and Wesley had raped her when she was six years old. They were all very violent. My father's father was also a cruel alcoholic who rejected my father and saw him as less than his brothers. My father grieved this loss into his old age and dementia. He never forgot his own father's cruelty. It is difficult to transition from multi-generational alcoholism and cruelty.



Happy Memories

Every day was not hell; there were happy days too. My family could have fun. We played games together and laughed together often, too. We played board games, Trouble, Monopoly, and Clue. We played Rook and penny poker. I knew how to play poker - 5-card stud - by the time I was 6 years old. I think of the homemade Barbie clothes we made, mostly strapless wrap-around dresses, as they were the easiest to make. We made Barbie furniture out of foam and cardboard. We enjoyed the small pleasures in life.

I remember on Christmas Eve pulling mattresses onto the floor in our room so our brothers could sleep with us as we waited for Santa Claus. We would always get an orange, an apple, and nuts in our stockings, which would be made out of my mom's nylons with our name at the top in nail polish. Since we were poor, we did not have very many "things." I remember that my sister, Jean, would always get the better of Christmas from Santa. She would get the bride and groom, Barbie and Ken, and I would get Midge, her not-so-attractive friend. She would get three or four dresses, and I would get one. My mom dressed the two of us alike, only her in pink and me in blue. The crazy thing was that I was three and a half years younger. We were not close to twins or the same age.

In the summer, we would fill three different-sized trash cans with water, bring a ladder to them, and jump in from the smallest to the largest trash can. It was such an adventure. There would be a small trash can, the kitchen trash can, and an outside trash can. We would fill them full of water. From the 2nd step of the

ladder, we would jump into the smallest trash can, then move to the fourth step for the kitchen trash can, and finally, the top step of the ladder for the outside trash can. We would laugh and have the best time. It never felt like a burden or less than anyone else's pool or water experience. In fact, we saw ourselves as geniuses for having such a grand idea. It was carefree and full of joy. There was also a giant weeping willow tree in our front yard. Its branches reach almost to the ground. It was beautiful. It provided shade and added to the water fun. At times, one of us would climb the weeping willow tree that grew in our front yard and be the "witch". The witch would squirt the others with the hose and freeze you. You have to stand frozen for a few seconds before you can run again and get caught by the squirting of the hose once more. It kept us cool and refreshed. When you got thirsty, your drink was right there. We all got along and laughed during these games. We had fun. We kept our ice cream money in the middle of the tree, and the ice cream guy would come by on his bicycle, and we would get orange push-ups. Sometimes he would give us some dry ice from his cart on his bike, and we would chase each other with it too, as it looked like it was smoking. Sometimes we would pick up these little bugs called Roly-Polys and eat them on a dare. They were crunchy, but mostly I would swallow them whole. You can ask, did it bother me to eat a bug? Not in the least little bit. I saw it as a courageous and brave act. Don't ask me why I saw it that way, but I was very proud of my abilities in this area.

You could hear our house down the block as there were so many of us playing. We would cool off and play all summer under that weeping willow tree. When you have no air conditioning in the midsummer Alabama heat, it was such a treat. It was the only relief from the summer heat. These moments were very idealistic to me. Just sweet, cooling fun. But then something would happen, and the cycle of violence would begin again. One or both of my parents would get angry over very slight incidents. I lived in terror most of my childhood as I never knew when an explosion would happen.



Shame

When I was learning to ride a bike, my dad would yell at me to keep me from falling off. I would get scared and fall again and again. Finally, one day he went inside, and as soon as he went inside, I rode my bike. I went down the street and back. He was furious that I didn't do it when he was there. He thought I was trying to disrespect him and pulled his belt off in the driveway, and just began hitting me. I was shocked and afraid. I can remember the way it burned with each strike of the belt. As he hit my legs on the front and back, I could see the red welts rising up and down my legs. I went from being so proud of myself to feeling devastated. I could not understand what I had done wrong. I thought he would be so proud, but the opposite happened. His eyes would flame with hatred and anger in those moments, and he looked almost demonic. That is the way it was with my family. Very complex. So close and so destructive. It was also the beginning of a belief that I still struggle with today: "Do it self." This belief has helped me recover, but it has always isolated me at times. I have a hard time letting people know I hurt.

I felt so much shame for existing and knowing I would never measure up. I felt dirty inside all of my life. My first memory was how dirty I felt internally, and that did not change until recovery. Sometimes I hear people say there is no such feeling as shame, but I have no other word for it. It is a deep sense of filth from the inside out. It is beyond sadness or fear; it is as if a deep impurity that can never be cleansed. I felt flushed all the time in my face, which would permeate downward into my chest. My face scrunched up like I had just eaten something bitter and spoiled. I would vibrate with self-hatred.

I hardly spoke to anyone. I was extremely shy. It was painful to speak - even saying hello would bring up immense shame in me. I would turn beet red, which would only make it worse. This would make people tease and taunt me about how red I would turn, which would increase the shame. My red face was the outward symbol of what was taking place internally, only internally it was much more toxic and painful. Shame for me has always had profound pain with it. I think that is what so many people, including me, attack when the experience

happens. In my early life, it never left me. Shame was my constant companion. It was attached to me as an oily film that could never be washed off, no matter how hard I tried.

I also felt shame around my vagina, but it went up to my chest and down from my face into my chest. My shame went both ways. Perhaps it was my father and his inappropriate sexualized behavior with me. My father was a sexual abuser of convenience. He did not care where the hole was as long as he had access to it. Mr Carter, our next-door neighbor, was different.

Mr. Carter, in hindsight, was a true pedophile and sociopath. He would show me child pornography magazines and explain he liked little girl vaginas as they were cleaner and hairless. He was a very intimidating person, but I still don't know what happened beyond that. I started using my Ken doll to beat and abuse Barbie. It was a scary time. The Carters seemed to be of a different breed. They stole and were almost joyful in their crimes. Mr Carter did not hide who he was; he was proud. That was different.

Around this same time, my cousin, Rusty, also sexually abused me. He wrote to me from prison that he would molest me at night in my sleep when I spent the night at their house. I have no memory of this. He said he was confident no one would believe me if I said what happened, and he could just say I was dreaming. He, like many of my relatives, was a chronic abuser. Rusty was a cruel person. It is weird not to remember being sexually abused by someone, but to get the abuse details from them is a great detail. He told me that when we were staying with my grandmother one summer, we spent the night over at his mom's house. I slept with him. He said in the middle of the night, he fondled me, and I woke up. He told me to go back to sleep. He ended his letter by saying that if I said anything the next morning, he would say I was dreaming. If I had known I wasn't dreaming, he would have said I was lying, knowing he would be believed, and I wouldn't have. That was because he was male. My family always believed what a male said. Males were given more value and treated with kid gloves. He wrote to me from prison, where he was serving time for rape. His sister, Jeannie, was profoundly Intellectually Disabled, got pregnant while he was serving time. Her mother, my aunt, was happy because she knew it was not Rusty's. Instead, she was

impregnated by one of our uncles, who was sexually abusing her. So many men in my family sexually abused her because she was easy. She had the mind of a 6-year-old. She wanted to please more than anything, and she desperately craved love. So she would just go along. I remember as a kid she would tell us she was in a relationship with Dean Martin, the actor. That is who she pretended all their sexual abusers were. It kept her world safe. I have so much sadness about her and her life. She was not unhappy; in fact, she enjoyed her life. She loved her brother and uncles. She would allow anyone who wanted to abuse her and never say a word, and love them with all her heart. She had a pure soul. A soul so pure, there were teachers and others who sexually abused her, too. She never held a grudge about any of it. She lived so innocently when she died of a heart attack at 42, she was eagerly waiting for Santa Claus. Her last words were "I can't wait for Santa to get here tonight." I love her very much. And I grieve her passing. It is a shame when the world loses purity.

When Jeannie died, Rusty left a note in her casket. I assumed he was sorry for the terrible things he did. And he did terrible things. When he died a few years later, my first thought was "The world is a better place without him in it." I felt disgusted by Rusty. When he wrote to me from prison, where he was in a special unit for sex offenders, he was still using manipulation and control. I did not realize it at first, but he was still getting off sexually and control-wise by telling me. With some of his letters about what he did to me, I would just shake and feel so sick to my stomach. There were many instances that I did not remember, but he wrote to me about them with crystal-clear detail. When I finally realized he was playing a sick game, I cut off communications. I still feel dirty and disgusted by both what he did to me when I was little, but also how he offended me again through his letters. It makes my skin crawl to even think of him as I am writing this. It is not heartbreaking, it is anger-inducing. I shake with rage when I think of him, and I do not forgive him. He was a detriment to society his whole life and brought nothing but misery to everyone who knew him. I hated him and still hate him to this day for myself, for Jeannie, and every woman that ever came in contact with him.



Learning Disabilities

I was not a good student. I was ADD and dyslexic before anyone knew what those things meant. I also had a speech impediment. I don't remember this, but I've heard that I didn't speak until I was 2 years old. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't speak much at all when I was young. And my family being from the Deep South, I had what I call a redneck dialect. I would try so hard, but I always seemed to be on the verge of failure almost all the time. There were questions about whether I was "retarded". My parents wondered aloud about being "retarded". I understand why this word is so offensive today, as it has always made me feel like I was beneath other people. I always felt like everyone else was smarter than me, and that there was something terribly wrong with me. My first-grade teacher was terribly mean and scary, and she did not approve of me. She had red hair and freckles all over her body. I was so afraid of her. My desk was a mess, and I couldn't keep the papers straight. I am fairly certain she disliked kids, not just me, but all of us. She would tape our mouths shut and make kids sit in the trash can. She would lock - usually a boy - in the coat closet. She would force me to use my right hand instead of the left. To this day, my penmanship leaves something to be desired. I was afraid of her. I made my first F. It was in coloring. I did not stay in line. I was a messy colorer. I would color back and forth and in circles. She wanted me to get my F in coloring signed by my mother. I had watched my oldest sister, June, forge my mother's signature on papers. She was 9 years older than I was. I carefully took my big pencil and attempted my own forgery. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Sexton, my teacher, did not buy my attempt. She then wanted me to get my mother to sign both my F and my forgery. I got my oldest sister to sign. One of the reasons this stands out in my mind is that I come from a very dishonest family, and I was an extremely dishonest person myself. I always wondered about that, but lying came very naturally to me. It was years later that I realized it was not just a personal failing but a family failing as well. I hated first grade and averaged Cs there. I struggled with the basics. I wet my pants in class (we were not allowed to go to the bathroom except at assigned times, and I fell out of my desk, squirming around in it. Papers hung from the bottom. I was chaotic, and I knew then I was different and not in a good way. I believed I was not as valuable as the other

children in the class. I was a misfit.

My second-grade year stands out in my mind because of the kindness I experienced. There were angels that touched my life and saved me from the sense of self-hate that I seemed to have always felt, and Miss Bourdo was one. She was my second-grade teacher. She would do small things, like brushing my hair and gently saying, "You deserve better." She performed that one act of kindness repeatedly. And she did more. I had a terrible speech impediment, and she helped me with it. She would take me into the Janitor's closet at lunch. She would pull out her compact and have me hold it so I could watch myself. She would have me repeat "How, now, brown cow." She taught me how to form my lips and helped with my speech. She got no extra reward for it. She did it because it was right and because she cared. I thrived in her class because of her kindness. My home life was the same - violent and chaotic - but life felt easier because of those simple acts she did. To this day, I credit her with giving a gift that saved my life. I try to remember that I cannot change a person's circumstances, but maybe a head rub or a word can give a person enough hope to go on, knowing they matter.

The 3rd grade was back to a mean teacher, not as mean as my first-grade teacher. I think she was more mean in the idea that expectations should be high and that we all could accomplish difficult things. At the same time, she taught us to crochet and to develop our manual dexterity. A memory I have always held onto, despite its seeming inconsequentiality, is of my brother Billy bringing me lunch money. Mrs. Steel was unhappy that we hadn't worked it out beforehand. He was an average 11-year-old boy. Billy was not a great student either. Maybe he also had a learning disability. He did not get very good grades. He could make a bicycle built for 2 out of old parts. He was also good at pranks. He would throw stink bombs into our room or put things out that would scare us. Just things you weren't expecting - a scary painting was his favorite. I also recall getting him back in a childish manner. We had tried to save a baby bird that had fallen out of a nest, but of course, it died hours later. We buried it in the back yard with the many other critters that had found their final resting place at the back edge of our yard. We placed the baby bird on a paper towel, put it in a hair spray cap, and covered the whole thing with aluminum foil. We gave that baby bird, which we now named Twitty bird. Billy and his friend from a few doors down dug up the

bird and chased each other with it. Billy went to Bill's house and spent the night. Bill had a little clubhouse in his backyard, where he and his friends slept. When it got dark, my sisters and I snuck to Bill's house and started saying as spooky as we could, "I am the soul of the tweety bird and I have come to haunt you". Over and over. It scared them both. Billy ran home, and Bill ran into his house. We laughed and laughed at how funny that was.



Billy's Death

It was just a couple of weeks later that life changed and would never be the same again. Life took a dramatic turn for the worse that my family never recovered from. Billy died of leukemia. One day in the first part of June in 1966, he came home and had bruises all over his body and a sore throat. My mom took him to the doctor, and he got the usual pink stuff for strep throat. Days later, he was much worse. My dad, the night before our lives blew up, beat him with a belt for leaving some chores undone. The next day, he went back to the doctor - leukemia was the diagnosis, and my parents left with him the next morning for Hillman Hospital in Birmingham (Now UAB). We never saw him again. I had a friend, Gail, who lived next door, and her mom saw me crying about my brother being sick and promised me he would be OK. My grandmother came and stayed with us while they ran tests on my brother in the hospital. He was going there for a few days. One of my sisters and I spent the night at Gail's house the night before he was to return home. The next morning, her mother ran into the house crying and said, "You have to go home." But why? We had not had breakfast yet. I felt so confused. When we walked into our house, my grandmother said, "Your brother is dead, and your mom and dad are on their way home. I don't want to see any crying as it is going to be hard on your mom already!" I remember feeling so confused. I could not process what happened. Who was dead? My oldest sister came in from work, where someone had been sent for her. My grandmother told her just as bluntly. I just felt confused. I refused to accept what had happened. It was chaos and a blur.

There was a funeral shortly thereafter. Someone made me kiss my brother

goodbye as he lay in the casket. When I did it, it seemed to me that this was a wax dummy, not my brother. He felt like he was made of wax. Right then and there, I decided he was really living with Jack and Jackie Kennedy clones, and he was happy. His new mom wore a matching hat, coat, shoes, purse, and gloves. This seems to be the one thing that would make her a good mother. Beautiful and nicely dressed. I did not have to grieve because it did not happen. It was all a ploy so he could live a better life. What a lucky guy he was, I thought.

My belief kept me safe, but my mother was falling apart. The family doctor felt guilty about missing my brother's diagnosis, so he gave her grocery sacks full of medications to make her feel better. My dad felt guilt and shame for that beating and was unsure if he had hastened my brother's death. (My brother died when a blood clot moved to his brain.) And maybe he did, I guess that is something that will never be known. No one wanted to upset my mom, so she just spiraled out of control. It became unbearable sometimes.

She began a long series of suicide attempts. I can remember her taking pills to kill herself and calling the rest of us into her room as she lay dying to say she loved my brother so much she could not live without him. She had us all line up in the bedroom and told us, "Billy was so special and I loved him so much. I cannot live without him. I am going to kill myself so I can be with him, and your dad will take care of you." I cried and begged her not to kill herself. I promised to be better and make her feel more loved. I felt so panicked and would have killed myself to keep her alive. I felt so responsible to make sure she lived. I would do her nails, brush her hair, and try to pamper her in any way I could. I was desperate for her to live.

I would feel more and more responsible with each suicide attempt that would happen regularly. She was determined. It was like no one else mattered anymore. She took some more pills and said it was over. We wept. We were sent out of the room. I do not know what happened after these attempts, but the next day we would get up and not speak of what had happened the night before. We pretended it didn't happen, but then it happened again, and again and again. I can not count the number of suicide attempts my mother made over my brother's death, but it got worse.

To fix this problem, we moved. We moved to another part of town. In some ways, it did get better. Things seemed to have calmed somehow. Another angel came into my life at this time. Allene, my oldest sister's best friend. She would take me to her house to spend the night, giving me a chance to get away. She would play games with me and tell me I had value. Her boyfriend was in Vietnam, and we would write him letters, and he wrote me so many letters. They were full of Vietnam's beauty and kindness. I felt a part of it. Until one day, my letters to him started coming back. No one would tell me why. Damn landmines! It took years to learn the tragedy of what happened to him. An angel who wrote and took a little girl on adventures in Vietnam. He always wrote about pineapples, animals, and beautiful trees. It seemed so magical. He also wrote to me of all he believed I could be. He and she gave me hope.

At school, my struggles continued. I would think I knew the answer to a math problem, and it would be wrong. I would think that I had spelled a paper correctly, and it would be an F for so many misspelled words. The crazy thing is, I loved math. I played around with math problems in my head as a means of self-soothing. I would look at a car tag or a mailbox and add, subtract, multiply, and divide the different numbers until I could get to zero. It was so confusing for me. My parents told me I was being sent for testing to see if I was retarded. It was a day-long test, and after it was over, I never heard another word about it again. I assumed it must have come out pretty badly to be a taboo topic. I started living my life with this belief.



New Beginnings

Then, before the 6th grade, my dad got a promotion, and we moved from Montgomery to Atlanta. At this point, I should say we were a very racist family. I was taught by the time I was 6 to yell at black people walking down the street. I was taught that all black men were sexual predators (interesting considering what I came from). I was taught to be very afraid. I lived in segregated Montgomery, Alabama. We went to a brick, multi-roomed school, while the kids of color attended a wooden one-room school located at the edge of the playground. We

did not mix with one another. We did not talk to one another. We only judged them. I did not question any of this; it was just the way I perceived it. In Atlanta, the schools were integrated, especially in the lower-middle-class areas. I was terrified as there were black boys in my class, and I was sure I would be assaulted. Only they seemed not to give me two shits. They seemed to care less that I was there. I was at the beginning of puberty and was already insecure. It was very hard on me as I started to believe I was so repulsive that these monsters could easily ignore me. It would take a few more years for me to realize I had been lied to. It took a while to learn that people are just people. But at this point, I just felt more inadequate.

Things started getting worse at home again. My mother was drinking and taking pills. Somehow, during this time, she obtained her GED, attended school, and earned an LPN degree. She went from working in sewing factories to a decent job for the first time in her life. Outside, things looked better, but on the inside, mental illness and substance abuse were tearing us apart. My mom not only kept trying to kill herself, but she also decided my younger brother had to go with her. She decided her love for him was so great that he needed to die, too. My mom 4 times tried to murder my younger brother four times as part of her suicide attempts. The first I remember was her trying to jump out of a window with him. It was a second-story bedroom window, but the window opened onto a concrete stair that led to another floor below. My brother was probably 9 then. She dressed him in Billy's pajamas that had a strong mothball smell. He was just confused. She opened the window and grabbed him. My dad caught her before they made it all the way through the window. She was angry that my father had stopped the attempt, which led to more fighting. She tried to run a car off a bridge with him and her in it. She tried to jump out a window with him again, and she put a hose from the exhaust to the window to gas them to death. The last one got her sent to a locked psych ward for a while. She came home on more pills.

On my 12th birthday, a friend invited me to spend the night at her apartment. They were moving the next day. I had a huge crush on her 20-year-old brother. Her uncle was there also. It was the first time I drank. I remember starting to throw up. The next thing I knew, I came to, and her brother was on top of me. What happened? How? I had no idea. I just lay there until he finished. I felt sick.

The next morning, I asked her why she let this happen. She said, “It looked like you enjoyed it to me.” I didn’t know because I wasn’t aware of what had happened. Or how I felt so much shame. I was sick with shame. I started sneaking alcohol, and in the 7th grade, I got my first prescription for “anxiety medicine”. I felt so anxious after this experience that I would have these terrible stomach aches anytime anything new happened. Librax seemed to really help me, so I quickly figured out that two were better than one. I tried to convince myself that I was sophisticated, and that was why the terrible thing had happened that night. I must have wanted it. Didn’t I?

I had 2 good friends, Scarlett and Gina. We were all very different. Gina was a big tomboy and the toughest person I knew. She was from a very broken home. Scarlett seemed like she was from the best family in the world. I loved her mom so much, and she was one of the angels in my life. She loved me and treated me with such kindness. We were misfits, and as we would discover as we grew up, we were all 3 addicts.

Where I lived in Atlanta, there was no middle school, so you started high school in the 8th grade. Subfreshman, we were called. On my first day of the 8th grade, I drank Boone’s Farm Strawberry Hill wine. On my second day, I smoked weed for the first time. On my third day, I took speed for the first time. On my 4th day of 8th grade, I dropped acid for the first time. By Friday, I was exhausted and rested. Mostly what I remember about high school is lots of drugs, alcohol, and sex. I made terrible grades, and I did not care. I don’t think my parents cared that much either.

I attended three different high schools, trying to find a stable foundation, but I was very lost. I did not belong. I barely graduated from high school. By the time I graduated, it was from what was then called Adult School; today, it would be called an alternative school. In regular school, I made C’s to D’s. In an alternative school, I made straight A’s. In an alternative school, there was no social pressure as everyone was a misfit. I befriended many trans and gay guys. We seemed to understand each other. We would spend the mornings trying out different makeup tips we each had and laughing. It was the first time in my life that I felt like I belonged. No one judged me, and I did not judge them. It was a

very sweet time. We would get high together almost every day, but the true bond was in being around acceptance. I hated regular high school as I was an outcast and different. Here I fit in. I had a community for the first time in my life. It felt so good to finally belong. High school ends, though, and then it is back to being disconnected from the rest of the world.



Pam Spiraling

I attempted suicide twice during this time. The first time I attempted suicide, I took so many of my mom's sleeping pills that to this day, I have no idea how I lived. I know this is going to sound kind of crazy, but I took the pills and sat at the kitchen table to wait for them to kick in. While I was sitting there, the James Taylor song "You've Got A Friend in Me" came on the radio. At that moment, I knew I wanted to live. Then I passed out. From what I figured out, I must have been in a coma for a couple of days. I finally came to, and the first thing that happened was my dad beat me. I didn't really care, as I could barely stand up anyway. I remember looking in the mirror as he beat me, feeling proud that I did not show any emotion. That seemed like a very good thing. I felt invincible. I knew I had taken over 30 sleeping pills, which on the bottle it said to take ½ of 1. I thought there must be an important purpose to my life because I lived. Instead of giving me direction, though, this gave me the green light to use whatever I wanted. And I did.

On my second suicide attempt, I took the pills at school and was going to walk home. I do not remember anything. I heard that a friend took me home to avoid getting in trouble. I heard I was jealous because she was pregnant and I wanted a kid, and that I threw a knife at her that was on the kitchen table, then passed out, and my lips turned blue. Somewhere, they had gotten my mom on the phone as they were afraid. Someone gave me mouth-to-mouth while they drove to the hospital. The next morning, when I came to, I was still hooked up to the heart monitor. The doctor told me they had to start my heart back twice, and the monitor started beeping from the fear I felt. I knew then I did not really want to die. I just did not want to live in the amount of pain I was in. I came up with what

I thought was a perfect plan. Stay wasted, and the pain of life did not seem as bad. I felt overwhelmed just to be alive.

My mom had so many pills that it was easy to steal them from her. I took lots of them, mostly with no idea what effect they would have on me. The thing I was sure of was that my mom knew how to get the best pills, so up or down did not matter. I smoke pot sometimes, but I hate the way it makes me so paranoid. Pot would lead me into panic attacks and have me hiding from some mysterious person I thought was following me.

During this time, I also drank a great deal, consumed lots of psychedelics, barbiturates, quaaludes, speed, and just about anything else I could find. I never considered whether what I was taking caused an overdose because it did not matter to me. I was no longer suicidal, but I did not care if I lived or died. And in the back of my mind, I knew I would not die because of the suicide attempt, where I found out I was not likely to die.

I partied almost every day. At that time in Atlanta, there were some great music bars, including Richard's and Alex Cooley's Electric Ballroom, which was my favorite. Some of that experience was great fun and awesome. Some of my favorite memories were of the Ballroom. Alex Cooley was a concert promoter, so people going up or down the ladder of success would play there. I saw Billy Joel, Arrowsmith, Badfinger, Kansas, Rush, Bruce Springsteen, Kiss, and the Ramones, among others. It was an exciting time. My sweetest memory from that time is when the Ramones were playing there, and one of my sisters and I had dropped some acid. We were very disoriented and had no idea what was happening. Joey Ramone took us to his room at the Georgian Terrace, which was next door. He babysat us all night. His only interest was in keeping us safe. I love that he was supposed to be wild and crazy, but in reality, he was one of those rare good souls you meet in life. There were many other times I touched people of fame, but never in such an innocent way. The kindness of his act made it special. Mostly it was as the old adage goes: drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Mostly, this time is a blur as I was wasted most of the time in one way or another. From the tenth grade when I started going to bars till my first marriage, I barely remember. There were no days, months, or even years, as in most addicts' lives. It was just the same thing

every day, “How am I going to ingest a mood-altering chemical today? Don’t care what it is as long as it alters me.”

I was a waitress for a while. I moved to Maryland to help my sister with a friend. I lived with him and his girlfriend as a guard for her. She and I both loved to drink, so we got along famously. I took advantage of his kindness and stole from him. I think both of us did. After a while, he grew tired of how we treated him and asked us to leave.



Love and Heartbreak

When I returned to Atlanta, I was unskilled, addicted, and out of work. The easiest job to get was to work in a bar, and that is what I did. A club was the perfect employer for me. No one cared if you were wasted; you could drink on the job, and it did not take much thought. While working at a club, I met a guy, David. I thought he was my savior. He owned his own company, a locksmith shop, and he treated me better than I had ever been treated before. I left dancing, moved in with him, and quickly began working for him. I was good at it. It was a numbers job. It turns out that a lock is essentially a series of numbers (cut depths) that you add together. The same thing I did as a child to soothe. The order of numbers did not matter on most locks. I also started managing his accounts. He was in trouble with the IRS for not filing taxes. When the woman auditor arrived, I didn’t know I was supposed to be afraid of her. She was amazing. She helped me a lot with how to fix all the problems and left me with this. “Appreciate yourself for being smart, but be smart enough to lose the guy.” I did not listen to her.

David started becoming more and more violent with me, but I believed my love was going to make it all go away. He slept around on me with my friends, and I’m pretty sure one of my sisters. I still thought I could love him and make it better. We used lots of drugs together until I became pregnant with our son. I quit using it as I did not want to do anything to harm my son. David was unhappy about my pregnancy. My parents separated when I first became pregnant, and my father moved another woman in with him. We just called her the German. Life

became more conflictual with David. He started to tell me he was going to kill our baby. I was afraid, but still hoping things would work out. I went to an attorney who was a friend of my dad and asked him what I should do. He told me not to worry about it, as people just say things. Sadly, it was not just talk.

One night, when I was 6 ½ months pregnant, David beat me. He punched my stomach over and over, saying he was not going to be a father again. He told me how much he hated me and my pregnancy. I was hysterical. One of my sisters came over with a Valium and said it would be OK the next day. That morning he got up and left to meet and have sex another woman, a friend of mine. I stayed home and started cramping. By noon, there was blood. I called my mother, who was at my father's house, where they were arguing. They both got on the phone. I told them how afraid I was and thought I might be in labor. My mother told me I had nothing to complain about as her birth with me was much worse and that she was in labor for over 24 hours, while my dad was out "eating someone's pussy." She told me he smelled of "pussy" when he got to the labor. My dad then told me that my mom had said "Get that fucking thing away from me" when she was first shown to me after I was born. My mom then told me that it was because my dad had raped her the night I was conceived. This was one of the worst moments of my life. I knew in that moment what I had always suspected. I was not wanted. No one was happy I was there. And above all, I was alone. (Back to my fixed false belief that I must take care of everything on my own.) I hung up, unsure of what to do, and the pain grew more frequent and worse. David came home shortly thereafter. He raced me to the hospital, where my son drowned in my blood while in the birth canal. I had to be given blood, I had lost so much.

My baby boy did not make it. I was told in the hospital to pretend I had not been pregnant and just to try to forget the whole thing. Only I couldn't forget. I called Bobby, the attorney, and told him he was wrong, that I should have left. I blamed him for my inaction. The next day, the police showed up at the lock shop. They took me to the station and interviewed me about what happened. I was very conscious of telling them exactly what happened. One of the few times I did not exaggerate or lie.

They arrested David the next day for Feticide. Believe it or not, I thought we

might still be able to work things out. The next day, he tried to strangle me to death. That was when I learned he had tried to kill his last girlfriend. I left, but I continued to see David. My family told me not to testify against David because my brother-in-law worked for him, and it could hurt my sister's family. I was visiting my father (he and my mother reconciled over their distress over how hard it was for them with the baby dying). The policeman who had arrested David called. He told my father he was a pathetic human being for not supporting me. I do not know what else he said to my father that day, but I do know whatever it was made my father literally shit his pants; it scared him so much. But it did not scare him enough to offer me any support. I started going to therapy, but the therapist hated me and only had judgment for me. She saw me as a less-than drug addict who was getting what she deserved. It did not help at all.

When it came time for court, David had convinced me that if I refused to testify against him, we could be together and get married. I refused to testify against him and insisted that I had fallen down some stairs. I said I had lied to the police about what happened. When we walked out of court and were standing on the courthouse stairs, he told me to "fuck off." At that moment, I had to face myself. I had let this person get away with murdering my son because it was easier for me and my family. I was a coward, and now I knew it. I had betrayed my son, whom I loved, and I was never going to be able to change that fact. I hated myself with a burning passion.



Self-Hatred

With self-hatred came a need for constant drugs to be able to live in a body I hated. That also means it was a body I had no respect for. I went back to working in a bar and abusing my body. It didn't matter because I didn't matter. It was a blur.

I ended up moving in with a guy. The relationship meant little to me beyond providing a sense of safety. After moving to a safer environment and regaining some self-esteem, I landed a job as a waitress at a local bar. I started dating (and in my case, at that time in my life, meant moving in with someone), Melvin, the

manager of the bar. We lived together for a few years. He was much older (25 years older) than I was, and we both knew this relationship was just temporary. He was kind, and that was something I was not used to. Towards the end of this relationship, I started going out drinking more. I drank every day at work and would do cocaine on occasion, but I stuck around this one place for a while. This was as stable as I knew life to be.



First Marriage

Around this time, I met my first husband, Don. I was driving Melvin's car when a sudden snowstorm struck. I, like many others, had to pull off the road. It was very scary. As I walked along the roadway, unsure of what to do, a handsome man in a Porsche pulled up and asked if I needed a ride, then offered me a bottle of vodka. I jumped at the chance. We spent days drinking together while snowed in, and it became clear that this was a relationship we needed to pursue.

I took a day break from seeing Don and went out to a bar. While there, a friend offered me some cocaine. I jumped at it but had to go to the bathroom first. As I was walking out of the bar to meet him in his car, the cop at the front door said, "A smart girl would not go out there right now." I informed him he was not going to tell me what to do and marched on out. Just as I got the straw up my nose, the doors were jerked open by a bunch of cops. The cop from the door just looked at me and shrugged. I call this my felony "stupid." I was placed in the city of Atlanta jail. It was a terrible place where I watched people get beaten in the booking area, and maggots were in the food.

The jail, like the clubs and bars, had negative energy to it that you could almost call evil. It is like some harmful power. It affects every person who enters, regardless of their reason for entering. I wish I could explain it, but I know I felt it. I called Don every day from jail and pretended my grandmother had died and was out of town attending to family matters. Finally, my friend who got arrested with me turned someone else in, and we were released pending trial. I went back to Don, pretending nothing had happened. When I entered my relationship with

Don, I created a story for myself that was entirely fictional. He did not even know my real age. Probably the only thing he knew about me that was true was my name. I had to watch and make sure he didn't talk to anyone I knew very well, lest he find out the truth about me. I lied so much that I had trouble keeping up with the lies. Luckily, he was a liar, too. We got married, but without a solid foundation for a relationship. We were both pretending to be functional people.

Don was a very successful banker, so financially we were in great shape. We were great party buddies, as we both loved to get wasted. Getting wasted was the foundation of the relationship. We were having a house built, and I found out I was pregnant. My fear was that God would punish me for not standing up for my son and, therefore, lose this child too. I was more than afraid, I was terrified. I quit drinking, using drugs, and smoking cigarettes when I found out I was pregnant. I started eating broccoli even though I hated it. I was trying to be good enough not to lose another child. I knew I couldn't tell anyone, so I had to handle it all on my own.

Things were difficult for Don and me, as our bond was strained by our partying. He continued, and I quit. I started seeing a therapist to deal with my anger about his using (jealousy?) and because I was terrified of being a parent like mine were. I was so afraid I would hurt my child, too.

Around 6 ½ to 7 months pregnant, Don was out partying, and I felt the beginnings of labor pains. I called the doctor, and he said it was probably in my head. I really wanted to believe him, so I did nothing. By that evening, the pains were regular and excruciating. I called one of my sisters first to ask her to take me to the hospital. She said no, she was partying. I called around and finally got in touch with an old customer from the bar where I used to work, who gave me a lift to the hospital. They gave me morphine, trying to slow the labor as I was too far along at that time to stop the baby from coming. Don got to the hospital sometime in the middle of the night. He insisted I have my tubes tied, as we would not go through this again. The doctor tried to talk us out of it, but I wanted to please him, and he wanted to never go through something like this again. They had to give me a C-section the next day. He was in the delivery room with me as our daughter was born June 18, 1983, at 3:21 pm. She was alive. I was thrilled and

afraid as she was so tiny. She weighed around 2 pounds. They took me away and let him spend time with her. We were both exhausted, and he went home to sleep.

I lay in my bed, fearful that God was going to punish me by taking her life because I let David get away with killing our son. I believed God hated me. So I begged the devil to let my daughter live, and I would hand him my soul. Unfortunately, this only increased my fear and guilt, and so I decided God was going to punish me for trying to make this pact and kill her, and it would be all my fault. Then the nurse came into the room and said the doctor wanted to talk to me. I said no as I knew what he wanted. She wheeled me, in my bed, into the neonatal unit. They were trying to save my daughter's life. She turned her head and looked at me, and drew her last breath. I thought I might also die. The nurse kept apologizing to me and telling me it was her fault as she turned the ventilator up too high. She was crying too. Don arrived shortly after they took me back to the room. She handed him our daughter, but he was in shock and could not process that she was gone, so he kept asking if she was okay. The nurse ran out of the room, and finally, the doctor came in and informed him of her death. We were both heartbroken. We shared true intimacy in our grief that night, and both slept in my hospital bed together. We moved simultaneously and were one in grief. We ultimately decided to donate our daughter's body to science. It was a whirl. And it was the closest I had ever felt with anyone in my life.

My mom came the next day. She started telling me it was important that I stay calm, as my sister, Judy, was pregnant and we did not want her to get upset and go into labor, either. She told me to consider how my feelings might affect others. She said it was much worse for her when my brother died, as she "really knew him. I was lucky I did not know my daughter." It was excruciating, but I was compliant; I had to hold it in so no one else would be affected. I was going to have to deal with the pain on my own. (Back to my big fixed false belief.) I did just that, but at quite a high cost. The hospital did not want to have to deal with my grief, so they kept me on mega doses of pain medication. When I was leaving the hospital, my doctor offered to write me a script for more pain meds, but I refused. I was afraid of becoming addicted.

My mother-in-law stayed with me when I first returned home, as my mother

said she was too busy to do so. As soon as I got home, the pain medication was wearing off, and I became violently ill. I thought it was grief. My mother-in-law knew better. My MIL had come to help me when I got out of the hospital, as my mother "was too busy". My MIL was a good and caring woman. Our daughter, who had just died, was named after her. I know this caused her great pain. I was in opioid withdrawal. It shocked me how quickly this happened. That night, my husband was late coming home, and when he did, there was lipstick all over his shirt. We were back where we had been. Only worse. We had shared this intimacy through grief. We were both too shallow for such deep sharing. I don't think we ever looked each other in the eye. When my MIL left, we began moving into our new home, which we had been building while I was pregnant.

The first night in our new house, Don brought champagne and cocaine home. He said he thought it would make me feel better. And boy did it! It made me feel so much better. It became a daily ritual for me to go get a ½ of an ounce (8 ball) of cocaine a day, drink champagne for breakfast, and then start on vodka for lunch. Everything became a blur. I could not make it up the stairs at night because I was too wasted. I would wake up with the shakes in the morning and end the day hugging the toilet as I vomited. I did this for over a year. There was a day I had my 3-year-old nephew in the car with me (The Porsche I first saw Don in). Our driveway was steep, and I was intoxicated. I put him in the driver's seat while I was doing something, and he knocked the car out of gear. It started rolling down the driveway, and I tried to stop it. I was knocked down, and the car ran over my leg. I went to a doc in the box, and they tried to get me to go to the hospital, but I was too focused on getting back to getting high. I went back to drinking after dropping my nephew off, and my entire leg was black. My ankle hurts to this day, and I never did get it looked at appropriately. Don didn't really care either, as he was as focused on continuing to party as much as I was.



Unraveling

Don started noticing money was missing. A bank teller had to inform the Vice President of the bank that he had overdrawn from our bank account. I had

somehow withdrawn over \$100,000 during the year. My fix had consequences I had not considered. I didn't even notice how much money I had taken while every day buying champagne and cocaine. So I lied. I told him I had been diagnosed with cancer and had been receiving treatment. I told him I did not want to worry anyone, as his grandmother died right after our daughter did. My MIL was beside herself with worry about me. She cared deeply. It took months, but eventually he wanted to come to my treatment with me. I panicked and drank bug poison on the day he was to go with me. I figured with a medical emergency, I could keep the scam going. It didn't work. We arrived at the hospital, but I didn't get sick in time for my scheme to work. When I did start throwing up, everyone thought it was from nerves for getting caught lying, such a terrible lie.

Really, I didn't even realize how awful my lie was because I was too zoned out. I was just focused on how to keep it going. Don called an attorney friend that day and came home with divorce papers. I signed them. But the next week, we went to the courthouse to fill them out, and I had my arm in a sling. Not for any reason other than that I was working on another scam. The judge's clerk was afraid I was being abused and stopped the divorce for a while. In the end, with all of my lies, I ended up with a small settlement and a clunker of a car he had bought. I was too wasted to care.

While we were waiting for the divorce to happen, I went out with some "friends". They invited me to a party at Tony's. He was a Cuban cocaine dealer. Only when I got to his room was I the only person at the party. Tony grabbed my arm and pushed me around a bit. He had a cruelty that was palpable to him. Tony pushed me on the bed and said we would do it the easy way or the hard way; he didn't care, but we were going to "fuck" either way. I chose the easier way. I did not want to be hurt. So he raped me and then passed out. It did not last very long, but I felt sick and confused. How could my friends have done that? Was this rape? Was it still rape if a woman doesn't fight back enough?

I did not want to get hurt, and there was no doubt that Tony would hurt me. I felt like a discarded piece of trash and a coward. Then I saw his stash of cocaine on the table. I stole some cocaine from the table and then snuck out the door as he snored away. I was terrified and upset by what had happened, so I, in my wasted

state, went to the police to report my rape. I am not sure why, but maybe because of being high or just because they saw me as a trashy woman, they decided they did not believe me. They started threatening to throw me in a psych ward and that they would make sure I never got out if I did not say I had made the whole story up. They played good cop, bad cop with me. The next cop would say, "Pretty girls like you could do better in life, so just sign this confession and we can let you go with the rest of your life." This back-and-forth continued for hours. I was exhausted and felt even more abused by this situation than I had by the rape. I just wanted to go home. I regretted trying to report in the first place. I was also not sure I had the right to report. After all, I had taken the easier way, so I was not beaten. And then I would remember my fear. The three of us went on like this repeatedly. They asked me to create a composite drawing of him, but since there were no Hispanic features available, I did the best I could. They called Don and had him come to the station, and the 3 of them decided I was trying to get Don arrested. They decided my composite drawing looked too close to how he looked. This was confusing for me. At the time, they only had black and white features to choose from, and my rape was a Hispanic man.

The cops kept insisting I was trying to get Don in trouble. It was confusing, as I was not trying to accuse him of touching me or even being with me, I kept telling them it was a cocaine dealer named Tony. They said if I did not sign a confession saying I made it all up, they were going to take me to the psych ward, and that I would not be able to get out, so I signed the confession. They threw me in jail. Interestingly, they did not search my person, and I still had the cocaine I had stolen. I sat in the holding cell and snorted my cocaine. It made this terrible night, now morning, bearable. No one else was in the cell with me, so I was free to get as high as I wanted. Later that morning, they released me to Don. The police treatment was far worse than rape.

The DA pretty quickly refused to prosecute, but it still haunts me to this day, as this is why women do not want to report rape. They are never believed. As an added insult, this arrest remains on my record to this day. Today, in 2025, it is 40 years later, with no outcome from the standing charge. It has caused me multiple problems over the years. It was a misdemeanor charge, but it has a way of interfering with my life at the most inopportune times. I remember the shame

of not being believed every time I have to explain what happened. Mostly, women understand, as they know from their life experiences, and men give me a 'not sure you're telling the truth' look, mostly.



Huge Spiral Out of Control

I seemed to spiral out of control even more after this. I was introduced to a guy named Richard. His father was a race car driver, so he was living off his father's name. A drug dealer named Charlie, whom I had known for years, introduced us. Charlie dared us to get married, so we did shortly after we met.

On our wedding night, the police were called to the hotel room as he was beating me so severely. The police suggested I leave him, but that seemed wrong to me as we had just married. I should have listened. His beatings were very severe. We started smoking cocaine together, and between his paranoia from smoking cocaine and his Mental illness of paranoia, he was terrifying. By the end, I was unsure if I would get out alive. It was a very short-lived union. Maybe 2-3 months. As I was leaving him, I met a friend who was trying to get away from her very abusive, cocaine-dealing husband. I tried to help her and her daughter escape. Richard took me to him in exchange for some cocaine, and he beat me so severely that an entire side of my face turned black. I thought he might kill me.

Charlie helped me go to a guy's place, where I was at least safe. As I said, no one is entirely good or entirely bad. Even a cocaine dealer can have a heart sometimes. I stayed with his friends for a short time. Of course, there was a trade-off of sex for a place to stay. This guy I was staying with took me to a homeless camp where I shot up meth for the first time. The encampment was a condemned, abandoned house on the outskirts of Atlanta. It was the most incredible experience I had ever had. It was true euphoria. I had to have more. I went back on my own and traded sex for shooting meth, and was soon living in this homeless encampment, and as long as I had something in my arm, it felt like I had finally gone home to myself. I became Tommy's girlfriend; he was in charge. I was willing to tolerate beatings and rough sex for more of the drug. I soon became malnourished and ended up

begging for both food and drugs. It was an insane experience where I once fought wild dogs for a small piece of baloney. I was starving, but mostly I did not care as long as I could get more meth.

There was only condemned well water, which we used to mix the drugs with. We would get trash fever as a result, over and over again. (Trash fever is a sickness from injecting contaminated water into your veins.) There would be people shooting guns at one another to try to be the king of the homeless. Tommy's beatings were extreme, and he would often put a gun to my head if I ever said anything about leaving. He threatened to kill me and everyone in my family. For some reason, I believed he would do it. I would tell people I was living a free life. And sometimes when I was high, I believed in myself. But it was a prison, a brutal prison. When I was high, I did not mind the madness, but when I sobered up, it was hell being there. I tried just to stay wasted as much as I could.

I once tried to be king of the homeless myself, so I decided to kill Tommy. I filled a syringe with enough meth to kill 10 people and gave it to him. It barely phased him. He appreciated the good hit.

About 8 months into living like this, I was arrested again. Richard had put a bounty out for anyone who got me arrested. He would give them an eight-ball of cocaine. So a guy came to the encampment and traded \$10 worth of meth for a stolen car. He said he could get some meth later. Tommy and I went to make the deal. He wanted to meet us across the street from a small family grocery store. We, of course, had a weapon with us in the stolen car- a sawed-off shotgun. We waited a very long time, but we didn't want to miss out on getting some good stuff. All at once, the police surrounded the car and jumped out of their cars with their guns aimed at us. They beat Tommy and put the gun to my head. The cop said, "Move an inch, bitch, or I will blow your brains out." I was shaking so bad I knew I was moving more than an inch. It was terrifying. The police had gotten an anonymous report that a person had overheard me saying I was robbing the grocery store that night. It was a setup. We ended up being arrested for receiving stolen motor vehicles and possession of an illegal weapon. This jail was significantly cleaner and better-run than the one in downtown Atlanta. After a few days, I began to get into the rhythm of being there. To be honest, it was not

that bad. There were some women with Mental Health issues, but I was the safest I had been in a while. Tommy informed others and got us out of jail. So it was back to the outside prison of using, being abused, and trying as hard as I could to stay as wasted as I could.

There was a woman who would come to our encampment daily to check on us, even though she did not use it. She decided she wanted to save me, so she would call the police after she saw I had been beaten. The police would show up, and I would refuse help. Then they would show up again. After a terrible beating, she called the police and said I had been kidnapped and held against my will. The whole SWAT team showed up with helicopters and snipers throughout the yard. The helicopter circled overhead, and Tommy came out with his hands up and crying. The police taunted him. They rescued me from there for me to return hours later.



Changes

I wore everyone out, yet I was changing. I would look in the mirror and see death. Where I had once been proud of my ability to help others, I now found myself begging them not to become me. I had a prayer that first was a long prayer about my wants, then about my conditions, and finally, the prayer was just "Help!" I would look in the mirror in the bathroom and try to find any signs of life in my eyes, but there was no life left. It was like I had no soul left. I was not sure I was even human anymore. I was a drug-using machine. That was all that mattered, and I hated that about myself. I wanted a miracle to save me, and the miracle was not coming. On my last day of using, Tommy shot up the last of the meth. I was enraged.

I wanted him to pay. I was so lost in delusion and insanity that I attempted to murder Tommy again. I took one of the guns someone had, aimed it at him, and shot. Only the gun did not fire. He was furious and beat me terribly. Again, the police were called, but this time, one lone fat policeman showed up and picked me up. As we were driving away, he said, "Pam, we are not coming back - either

get help for your drug problem or die. But we aren't coming back." I said, "Do you really think I have a drug problem?" It had really not occurred to me. He just looked at me like I was the dumbest person on the face of the earth. To this day, I appreciate how brutally blunt he was with me. No one had put it that way before. He dropped me at the bus station with a ticket to Birmingham, Alabama, where my parents lived.



New Life

When I got to Birmingham, I was not sure I wanted to stay absolutely sober, but I did not want to be the way I was. I was 5 feet 4 inches and weighed about 90 pounds. You could have mistaken me for a person with cancer. I was attractive and young, but too skinny. I always walked with slumped shoulders that matched my slumped sense of self. You could see it on me.

I thought I would probably go back to using it after I had chilled out a bit. Maybe smoke pot, and maybe just use a little bit. My parents and sister, Jean, helped me get into UAB Drug Free, an indigent outpatient program. There, I met Tony Morris, my new counselor. He was a genuinely good person. The thing about Tony was that he cared. He was not in recovery, so he did not care how I got sober. But he cared that I did get sober. He was the first good man I had ever met in my life. I saw an announcement on the bulletin board for Cocaine Anonymous meetings, so I lied and told my parents that they said I had to go. I remember believing I fit in. I was accepted. At first, I thought you were supposed to romanticize using and get high through euphoric recall. I started to share in detail about the sensation of getting high. A guy told me to shut up and take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth. I found this behavior rude and couldn't understand why he acted that way. At the same time, I felt loved. At the end of the meeting, we stepped outside into the moonlight and held hands, reciting the Lord's Prayer. I had never been a religious person, but I felt an incredible connection to these people. Afterwards, Stevo, the guy in the meeting, tried to explain to me why what I was doing was such a bad idea. I met people who cared.

One of them was Mike McCurdy. Mike talked to me often after the meetings and suggested I go to treatment. He said some are sicker than others. I didn't know he meant that, but I appreciate the attention. Mike helped me get into Alpha House - a 45-day program for indigent clients. My dad took me. As soon as he saw there were people of color there, he offered for me to leave. I thought about taking this easy out, but decided to stay. I was the only female client out of about 25. I got a room for myself. My counselor was Ima Neuhauser. She was a tiny but powerful woman. All the clients were terrified of her. She could see right through you. She never cussed but was proven to call Moose Poop on you. And you knew she cared. When a client had a family member visit, she would use healthy shame to try to motivate them to change. "Your family loves you, and you are tearing them apart." When my parents came, she stated, "Sometimes you know you are not loved and get sober for yourself." I really wanted her to say the other thing, but I knew what she was saying was true. She urged me to go to St Anne's, a halfway house for women. I agreed to it only because they didn't have any openings, and I knew it would appear as though I was trying to do more when, in reality, I wasn't. I would make a big deal out of wishing I could go, but since there were no beds, it was just a pity.



Treatment Worked

Then, the day before I got out of Alpha House, there was a drunk fest at St Anne's and they had plenty of beds. Holy Crap! I manipulated myself into going into a halfway house. When I arrived at St Anne's, a historic part of Birmingham, I was impressed by the beauty of the house. It was a large house from the 1920s that a doctor had left for St. Anne's, providing the women with a decent place to live while they recovered from their addiction. St Anne's was a safe place, but not a truly healing one, due to the overwhelming chaos that made it impossible to consider a healing environment.

While at St. Anne's, my court date came up for my last arrest. My dad drove me to Atlanta for my court appearance. I received 5 years' probation. I was so relieved. As we drove back to Birmingham, my dad started rubbing my neck.

And to this day, I can not explain how this happened, but suddenly, from the deepest depths of who I was, deeper than I knew I could be, I knew my dad had sexually abused me. Worse, I knew that at that moment I was not strong enough to tell him no. He looked at me and said, "Do you want to go to the house for a little while before you go back?" I said, "Sure." When we arrived at his house, the most I could muster was to go into a different room when he walked in. It was shameful to know I was too weak to say no. This was the best I had. I finally lied and said I would get in trouble if I did not get back right then. I walked in the doors of St Anne's and did not just cry but wailed for the next 2 weeks straight. I could not contain the pain inside me. This was the beginning of a journey that would take decades.

During the middle of my grief, I was sent to Vocational Rehab to be evaluated for education services. I talked to the counselor, who agreed with me that I was a mess. She suggested that I might be able to acquire typing skills or something similar to help with job placement. She had me tested to see what they could offer. After the testing, she came back and said they would give me a full-ride scholarship to college. That really confused me as I barely made it out of high school. At the same time, I was thrilled. I started college in March 1988. A little over 5 months sober. It was a thrilling time, and I excelled. It was hard for me to believe, but I was making straight A's, except in science. What had happened since I graduated from high school and college? Spell checker! I was not intelligently disabled; I was dyslexic.



College Bound

I went to my parents' house one day, angry that I had lived my life until that time believing I was barely functional. I asked my dad what the testing said when I was in the 6th grade. He said I was intellectually gifted but had a low sense of self. I could not believe they had let me believe that there was something terribly wrong with my brain. My parents never stopped treating me like I was disabled; it was the only way they could see me. But I thrived in college anyway. I loved to learn and was willing to put in the hours. My first job sober was at Shoney's as a

waitress. And I went to Cocaine Anonymous meetings almost every night, and I bonded with people. And I stayed in therapy with Tony.

I moved in with Jerri and her husband. It was a big mistake. I admired Jerri so much. I wanted what she had in recovery, or so I thought. Jerri taught me more than one important lesson. The first was about acceptance and Kindness. We met a beggar on the street, and I was judgmental, but Jerri was kind. She gave him money and a card on how to find help. I could not understand. She told me, "We don't know if a drink might save his life tonight, so he can find help tomorrow." I have always tried to remember those important words. And it is a lesson that has come to me many times. Sometimes what looks wrong is right, and what looks right is wrong. We won't know till later. The other sadder lesson was that with alcoholism, you never know who or when it will strike again. Jerri and her husband drank and fought every night. It was hard to stay sober around her. I ended up having to move back in with my parents, as it became dangerous to stay, and she stole my money, so I had no alternatives.

It was difficult staying with my parents because I now had this knowledge about my dad. I sought help from a CA fellowship. My friend gave me a job lead for an assistant manager position at a lower-end apartment complex. My car broke down on the way to the interview, but I managed to get it running and arrived late anyway. That was why she gave me the job. I persevered despite the obstacles. The best part was that the job came with an apartment that was paid for. I got first place on my own. I soon met a fella that I fell in love with, Gary. He was kind, and I was not used to that in a man. He also had a difficult time staying sober. I had to break it off with him, and he left for treatment.



It Worked

I still continued with my going to Cocaine Anonymous meetings, seeing Tony, and I added going to Al-Anon and group therapy. I attended group therapy in Montgomery, where Barbara, a counselor, led an experiential group therapy. It involved paying attention to your feelings and staying present with yourself. I had

never taken the time to sit with myself and stay present. It was healing.

One of the difficulties I faced and many young women face in recovery is men. I got hit on often in the 12-step meetings. Both overtly and covertly. Men would proposition me, and they would do more minor things like go to hug me, but end up with their hands lower towards my rear end. For a while, it didn't bother me, as it seemed normal to me; however, as I began to develop more self-respect, it did. It all ended one night, I'm not sure even why I slapped a guy when he did it. His response was, "You should have done that a long time ago." It was true I should have, I just didn't know it. That is why, if a woman is going to go to 12-step meetings, I have strongly encouraged that they go to women's meetings and build a strong network of women in recovery to bond with. Women need women to recover.



Confusion

My niece came to stay during this time. I had a great deal of studying to do, so I took her to my parents' place to study. As I was leaving, I turned and saw my dad rubbing her feet. In the pit of my stomach, I knew what was coming. I left anyway. A choice I will always regret. She called the next day in a panic and said my dad had been touching her breast. She said she got afraid and moved to the floor, where she fell asleep instantly. I now know this is a trauma response, but I had no idea why that had happened at the time. She said she came to, and my dad was on top of her, and she was not sure what had happened. I called Tony, my counselor. He spoke to her and me, trying to center us both. I told her what I knew about what happened to me with my dad. It was similar. He did not call DHR. She was 16 at the time and left to go back to her parents the next day. It was very emotional. My parents left with her the next day to meet them at the beach and exchange custody. When I came for my next appointment, my dad was there. Tony told me he didn't know what to do, and I didn't either, so we let him join the session. He said that when they were at the beach, my niece confronted him and told him I had told her it happened to me, too. At first, my dad denied it, but after a while, he ended up saying, "I didn't mean to hurt you, and if I did, it was not on

purpose." Tony became very anxious and said we would never know, rambling about how it might have felt like he did, but maybe he didn't. It was quite crazy, and I felt a bit disoriented.

The next week, I was doubting myself and wondering if I was making a mistake. Am I making the whole thing up? When I walked into Tony's office, the first thing he said was that he thought he had been a terrible counselor the week before and that he saw that he threw me under the bus because of his own anxiety. He told me he had walked for a long time afterwards and felt terrible about himself. It made me trust him more. No one had ever made a big mistake, hurt me, and then taken responsibility for it before. To this day, I think it was why I trusted him so much. He taught me it was okay to be human and that I didn't have to be superhuman to be effective and a good therapist. I just needed to care. My work with Tony after that became more honest and fruitful. He was a good therapist.



Desperation for Stability

I went to many self-help meetings. Probably once a day for a few years. It was where all my friends were, and it served as an anchor. It was an anchor. At the same time, it didn't quite fit right, although I loved attending meetings and seeing people I cared about. I had nine sponsors in two years. All nine of them relapsed. Because the last person relapsed, a new sponsor would want me to start over on the twelve steps. However, that did not seem right, as it was not I who was using it, but rather the previous sponsor. Then the next one would relapse, and it would start over.

I had worked all 12 steps while I was in St Anne's. I had worked the 4th and 5th steps multiple times. I had completed the AA version, the Al-Anon version, the ACOA version, and the NA version. I ended up doing my 5th step with my counselor, Tony. He was not in recovery, but I trusted him. I did not trust many people. I am so glad I trusted myself and trusted him. After my ninth sponsor, I gave up on the sponsorship program. I thought it was great for some people, but

it didn't work well for me. I'm glad I worked through the steps, but I'm also glad I did so in a way that suited me. I participated in more individual therapy and group therapy sessions.

Church was not a place of comfort for me. I think because I had always found church to be a place of judgment growing up. Over time, self-help programs became less effective for me. Probably because of the trauma in my life, I needed more therapy, and the self-help program was only going to work for a while. I stayed in them for seven years. I have not attended a meeting, except to honor another person I love for over thirty years. I can clearly see how the 12-step programs help many people, but I do believe that some people are so traumatized that therapy is the way out. I know I am one of those people who developed a substance use disorder not just from the genetics (which I have on both sides of my family in multiples) but also from the trauma. I did not use it just for the high, which I did, but also to get away from the level of pain I felt.



Chuck

When I was 2 years sober, I met the best friend I would ever have. His name was Chuck, and we were instant friends. I met him at a CA meeting right after he got sober. He said something to me about how hard it was to stay sober, and just started talking. I told him I was not interested in him, and he laughed, saying he was not interested in me in that way either. We ended up with a profound and rare relationship. Chuck had AIDs, as many gay men did in my social group. (We were not the most careful people.) He had an honesty and genuine love that few people did. I loved him so much because he was one of the few people I ever met whom I could call and whine about something, then he would usually laugh and tell me my part in the situation. He would end it with "don't be such a bitch." Sounds cruel, but it wasn't. There was never one drop of judgmentalness in his words. I always knew he spoke out of love for me. He was one of those people I loved so deeply, and I knew he loved me.



New Beginning and End

When I was 3 years sober, my job at the apartments was being downsized, and that was very scary. Luckily, I got a job with a treatment center that only treated addicts who were postal workers. I also moved into a new apartment. The day I moved into my new place, Gary was moving in across the street in the first sober living house in Birmingham. It seemed divine providence that we were meant to be together. And together we became. We got married within the year. Shortly before we married, I journaled that I thought Gary was gay, but that was crazy. All he did was cut the grass in some very short shorts. But there was something about that day that I did not want to know. So, I bought a new journal and put the old one away where I wouldn't see it. Gary still was not able to stay sober. He struggled with sobriety and would "relapse" often.

During this time, I had many thoughts and emotional turmoil from the abuse I had lived through growing up. Working on a program did not seem to have a significant impact on this. I would feel so conflicted that sometimes the only way I could find relief was by hitting myself in the head, not to the point of a bruise or injury, but to the point where it hurt, like I had been hurt. I know this sounds insane, and it was. It is not a method I would recommend to anyone. But I cannot tell my story without adding that truth. I was so wounded from my past that relief came through pain. Pain that I controlled. It is one of the most dysfunctional ways I can think of healing from pain, and yet it was part of my healing process. I had to control the pain to help myself with the pain.

While pursuing my undergraduate degree in social work in college, the big demon scare began. There were many stories of devil worshipers killing babies and drinking their blood. I was so afraid this had happened to my daughter. I had donated her body, and I would read that they would take babies from morgues and hospitals and drink their blood. The fear stuck with me. Also, during this time, therapists thought there were multiple-personality women all over the place. Luckily, Tony was not one of those therapists, but the dean of the social work department and his wife, who worked there, did believe it, and they spent a

great deal of time trying to convince me that I had a multiple personality disorder. Sometimes I wanted it to be true, then I would have permission to give up and not have to try so hard. Tony would not go for it. He helped me realize that this was just a phase and not based on truth.

I had two dear friends from St Anne's, Kathy and Jeannette, and we were all being told we were multiple personality disordered. We talked about it on my porch, as we were all three tired, and it seemed so hard to get better. I had an epiphany as we sat there talking about it, and it was this. I saw that I could accept the label and splinter into many personalities (not fake it, I would truly splinter), but there was no hope down that path, only more bleakness. Coming front would be easier on the front end, but only a hardship on the back end. I saw that the road ahead was rocky and hard, which meant taking responsibility for myself and being willing to walk through some pain. But on that path, there was hope and light down the road. I told my friends about what I had just experienced, and that day, we all made our choices. I chose the hard road, and my two friends, whom I loved, were tired and said they were going with the multiple personality diagnosis. I believe it changed all 3 of our lives forever that day. I did ever so slowly start to get better, and both of my friends died tragically. Jennette committed suicide - she tied trash bags over her head and suffocated herself. I think the cruel way she took her life was from the hardships that came from that choice, and Kathy died of liver disease and in extreme poverty, both within 5 years of our decisions. I am not sure why it was clear to me at that moment, but it was. My friends were both good people who were tired and wanted life to give them a break. They deserved better.

My nephew came to live with us, and I learned some powerful lessons again. My nephew came to live with me while my sister worked out some personal issues. Our family had issues that affected us all, and we have worked them out to varying degrees. Jason was 7 and as sweet a boy as you could imagine, but he was also a handful. He was hyperactive. He struggled in school, not because he was not bright, he was very bright, but he had trouble staying focused on the matter at hand. Again, the biggest thing I learned while he was there was that I had no idea how to parent other than in a brutally harsh manner. I knew how to hit or rage, but that was it. I knew I did not want to be that to my nephew, so he and I went

to parenting classes. It opened my eyes to the fact that there really was a different way to raise children. I learned from him how to teach a child without using fear. I changed my life. I was happy. Yet there were currents I did not want to admit were there in my marriage. Jason stayed for the school year before returning home.

I graduated with my BSSW and was thrilled, and even more so, that I was accepted into an Advanced Standing MSW pilot program at the University of Alabama. Since it was a pilot program, only 25 people were accepted out of 1000 applications. I was beyond proud. My dad wondered if somehow they found out about my "issues" and felt sorry for me. It hurt, but I remained proud of my accomplishment. I wasn't strong enough to leave my family yet, but I knew I needed to. It was too difficult for me at the time.

Meanwhile, in my therapy, I was forced to leave my work with Tony and start work with a woman named Dale. Tony was told, he and I were too codependent and that I needed to work with a woman therapist. It was hard on me, but I started working with Dale. She was very religious and soon left to go into private practice with her husband. I went with her, and I am not even sure why. What I appreciated about Tony is that he never let other people's shaming of our professional relationship shame him or me. We stayed in touch over the years and even had lunch planned for a few days after he passed away. We were having lunch on a Thursday, but he died of a heart attack the Saturday before. He kept a picture of us on his desk until the day he died. It was from my wedding to Gary. He said it reminded him of hope and kept him going when it was hard to be a therapist to addicts.



The End

Dale started seeing Gary and me together. The idea that Gary might be gay and unfaithful bubbled up for me more and more. Something about when a handsome man walked by out of the corner of my eye. Something that I could not quite put my finger on. Then I would shake the thought away.

I can not say what happened, but one day I was standing by the dining room table. I suddenly accepted he was gay and he was having an affair with his friend, Tom. My knees buckled out from under me. I wept like I wept at St Anne's. It was deep, but it also meant I could not stay. I wanted it with all my heart not to be true, but it was. He could never love me because I was a woman. He did finally admit - he was not gay - he was bisexual with a strong preference for men. He could not stay sober because he could not accept who he was.

In the middle of this, Dale, my counselor, convinced me to have an exorcism. She told me the reason I was struggling was because there were demons in me and that we needed to let them out. She took me to an exorcist, and they both prayed over me and anointed me with oil, but nothing happened. I really wanted something profound to happen, and then I would no longer hurt, but after hours, nothing happened. They decided that the demons were too entrenched in me, and Dale dropped me as a therapist. Probably one of the best things that could have happened to me. In hindsight, she was a very toxic person. I still have trouble wrapping my head around a therapist taking their client to an exorcism. That is crazy. This was terrible therapy. After this episode, I quit seeing Dale and started seeing Carol. She was an excellent therapist and helped me regain a sense of myself.

I learned during my marriage to Gary how to stay when life gets hard. I learned I was stronger than I thought. I had a good support group that loved me. I continued to work hard on myself in 12-step meetings, individual therapy, and group therapy. I continued to write and worked hard on accepting myself and learning a tiny bit of self-love. I also found that I didn't have to use it even when things got hard. I was built to handle life.

My split with Gray was very painful. I loved him, and he had been good to me. It was so painful that I could not be what he wanted. After we split, my gay friends started telling me about not knowing what to do as they would see him at gay clubs with men. Worse was when I found out he frequented XXX movie houses for anonymous sex with other men without protection in the middle of the AIDS epidemic. I was terrified of having contracted AIDS. I had already lost friends,

and my best friend Chuck was getting sicker. I got tested so many times that the doctor finally had to tell me to stop. He had given me other STDs but not AIDS. It was such a conflict of feelings. He had been so good to me, but he was willing to pass a deadly STD to me without my consent. Who could do such a thing?



New Love and Life

During this time of turmoil, I met Bonnie. She was funny and a little crazy, living on the edge. About 4-5 months after my divorce from Gary, Bonnie wanted to set me up with a friend who was going through a divorce too and was in the "program". (I think she was tired of hearing us both whine and cry about being left.). His name was Steve. He was more conservative than I was. I have always said he looked like a perfect ad for a republican politician. Nicely trimmed black hair, not too short, not too long. Always in a Ralph Lauren Shirt and khaki pants during the week, blue jeans on the weekend. White shirts during the week, pin-striped on the weekend. I had never met anyone who could laugh like him. And he laughed often. He was also very open to debate and to adjusting his belief system when it made sense to him. We were opposites in many ways. A liberal (me) and a conservative Republican (him). He had been raised in a very religious home, and I had been raised in a religious home (only when it was an advantage, but not a value).

Steve was in the midst of a divorce after his wife had left him for another man, and, really, my husband had left me for a man, too, so we had that in common. Bonnie told Steve I loved to have sex to make sure he would call and call. I felt so embarrassed, so the first thing I said was, "I do not like to have sex!" and he said, "Me either." That made us both burst into laughter. We talked for over an hour. I have no idea what we talked about other than that thing about sex, but I laughed and laughed. We arranged to meet at a CA meeting as a pre-date. We did. He did not speak, so I finally walked up and spoke to him. He says it was because I was late to the meeting, and he was unsure if he would speak to me. He is a very timely fellow. I was not. We went across the street and grabbed a bite to eat. We enjoyed ourselves so much. He was such a gentleman. We went out the

next day and pretty much every day after that. We like each other a lot!! He had a 3-year-old son. Steve and I were both broken-hearted, and that was part of our connection, but it was more than that. We enjoyed each other's company more than anyone we had ever met. We said we'd take it slow, but we didn't. What we did do is help heal one another. We both worked hard at being honest and there for one another. We studied how to be in an open and honest relationship, as we did not want to hurt each other or get hurt ourselves. We talked about everything about ourselves. We tried so hard to hold nothing back about past mistakes, crazy beliefs, deep fears, and insecurities. It was challenging but rewarding work. I had never had anyone in my life who was as willing as Steve was to be together.

My relationship with Steve has always been one of those that you would never think would work. I had been divorced for only five months, while he was still married, having been left by his wife two weeks before our meeting. It was one of those times when something looked very wrong but ultimately turned out to be right. It has been both a good and a problematic relationship, partly due to the way it began and partly because of who we are. I have always believed Steve was the kindest and most critical person I have ever met. He can build me up and rip me apart in the same sentence. Both have helped me to grow as a person. I think we need someone in our lives who can be both. I know it's not the politically correct way of viewing a relationship, but in reality, we are a mixture of both. Shortly after we met, we came upon a book that would change and deepen our relationship. It was called "Centering and the Art of Intimacy." This book advocates for honesty in all aspects of a relationship, which can sometimes lead to cruelty. We both committed to this approach and moved forward. We kept nothing from one another, even the difficult things. To be honest, Steve has always been better at that than I. I have been afraid for as long as I can remember. This fear has made me keep secrets - emotional secrets. I would not want him to know that I felt angry, afraid, or sad.

The only times I remember not seeing Steve are when Chuck would be sick. By this point, Chuck had Kaposi's Sarcoma and other AIDS related issues. Steve had grown up very conservative and had not been around gay men, and was afraid of Chuck's AIDS. We laughed as I took Steve to a tea Chuck had where we were the token straight people. All the men flirted with him in a fun kind of way.

I was unsure how he would take it, but when we left, he laughed and said, "If I had known what great taste they had in men, I would never have been afraid." It was never an issue after that. Chuck was a great ally and cheerleader for my relationship with Steve.

My life was changing, and it seemed almost magical. I really loved him, and we were changing each other for the better. I felt more stable with him, and he became more open to being a freer person. By May of 1993, I had graduated with an MSW, moved in with Steve, and begun a new job working for the Post Office as a counselor. In my 6 years of sobriety, I had faced my felony charges and served 5 years' probation. I married once and was looking to marry again, went to both undergraduate and graduate school, all while trying to deal with issues of abuse from my childhood. I had been in therapy for my whole sobriety. I attended a self-help meeting almost every day. It was where all my friends were.



Facing Hardship Sober

As my life straightened out more and more, the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from my childhood became so painful that I could no longer ignore it. It peaked for me when, on a visit to see my parents, I could not stop gagging. I was gagging because of the betrayal of myself that I dumped on myself every time I went to my parents and pretended, mostly so no one else would feel uncomfortable. I knew this gagging was because my body was not going to allow me to keep up the betrayal of myself. I wrote my dad a letter and told him I could no longer pretend. It was too difficult for me. I needed to step away and take care of myself. It was both one of the hardest and most necessary things I have ever done for myself. The rest of my family quit speaking to me in retaliation. This forced me to work hard on myself, but it also gave me the space I needed to both work on myself and grow. Sometimes it was incredibly lonely, and I grieved hard, but it also gave me the energy to look after myself. My relationship with Steve also provided an opportunity for growth. I appreciate the time I had away. I started seeing a new therapist who helped me work on being more true to myself.

During this time, Chuck died. He had been so sick for a while - there were no Protease Inhibitors at that time. He had been getting weaker and weaker. I visited him shortly before he died. He slept most of the time there at the end. He had a little blood trickle from his right ear. I read him a poem I wrote about him and how much he meant to me in my life. He chuckled and said, "That is a nice eulogy, Pam, but I am not dead yet." We laughed, but I could see in his eyes how much he loved me, too. I climbed into bed with him and just spooned with him. I knew I would never have a relationship like this again. My soul friend - we had such a special closeness. I had met his sister Judy during his illness. She spent most of her time caring for him and his mother, who had dementia. It was more than a person should bear. During his last 24 hours of life, he went to the doctor as usual, and the doctor asked him to go to the hospice. He told them he was not yet ready to give up. But he was so close to death that he would be gone the next morning. That night, I called him, and he was lying on the floor by his bed. He told me he was terrified. I was afraid that since he was gay, he would go to hell. I resented that he would die in fear when he was such a good man. His last words to me were "I love you". My reply was, "I love you, too." I had a terrible feeling. The next morning, his nephew called me shortly after I got to work to tell me Chuck had died that morning. I can remember screaming "NOOOOOOOOO" as if it were going into a void. Time slowed down. It was like there was no time for a short period. My anchor was gone. It was devastating for me. His friendship and our relationship meant more to me than I can speak into words, even to this day. In a way, we recognized each other's souls. He saw me and accepted me. I saw him and accepted him. I miss him to this day. The afternoon of the day he died, I breathed in his fear about what happens after death. I couldn't explain it, but it was as if I had to work it out for him. It was a very spiritually dry time in my life, and it took me years to conclude that if there is a God, probably a person's sexuality is the least of concerns. However, the most important lesson I learned is that I would never do what is right out of fear, but rather because it is the right thing to do. I do not need the fear of heaven and hell to do the next right thing. I should treat people with respect and love them as I love myself, just because it is right. If there is a heaven afterwards, great, but that should not be the goal for trying to live a value-filled life. It was freeing for me, and it made more sense to me then because of my fear. It was the last gift Chuck gave me, the ability to

clarify my own value system.

Around the time Chuck died, I stopped going to self-help meetings. There was no big explosion or anything. It just felt like I had finished that phase of my life and moved onto another. I continued with therapy and would go to retreats, but I stopped going to meetings as it felt like a terrible fit. I definitely have and have had a substance use disorder. It was that meetings just did not fit who I was anymore. I had a mentor back then, Trevor. Trevor was a delightful, sunny-side-up, very religious Jamaican older man. He had stopped going to meetings many years before and had successfully maintained his sobriety. He met with me every few weeks for lunch, for me to talk through my fears of relapse. He held me emotionally and spiritually while I changed the path I was taking. His support for me was immeasurable. He showed me that I owned my recovery and that I was capable of figuring out the path that worked best for me.



Normalcy

I worked to help Steve raise his son A. I put everything into raising him. I loved him, cherished him, and invested tremendous energy in his formative years. At the same time, Steve's family, which is very religious, treated me as less than. They saw me as an impediment to Steve's salvation and treated me accordingly. I felt like an orphan in the world. At the same time, Steve's acceptance of me took away much of the sting.

After we got married, Steve went to college and earned both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. He grew his hair out to match the change he had made in his belief system. We were both developing more confidence in ourselves. It felt good. I ended up getting some excellent corporate jobs. I felt proud, but my job seemed hollow and devoid of meaning. The money helped while Steve was in graduate school, but I really wanted to work directly with people. The other thing I learned is that I don't enjoy managing people. I prefer listening and helping, not checking time cards and making sure they "do right."

Life went on, and Steve graduated with an MSW. We started a private practice, and for years, life seemed almost perfect. We were raising A, working jobs, and also practicing together. We bought our first car and then our first house. We started growing up. We began growing together and doing training together. We enjoyed becoming adults together. At a workshop we attended in California, we met another couple who would later become part of our family: Jackie and Carol. Even though we lived at opposite ends of the country, we stayed in touch and grew a tight bond. They have touched us in so many ways, including when, as in the stoneworks, we have a son that we helped bring into the world. We met other friends who have become lifelong friends. Sam and Rene are closest to us. We met at a supper club with Peter and Paula. My friends have been there through good times and bad. We don't talk every day, but I know we will always be there for one another. When we met, we were all newlyweds with similar beliefs, and we shared a love for laughter and games.

About 7 years after Steve and I married, I came back to my dad and told him I was ready to resume our relationship, but that I never wanted to pretend again. My dad once told one of my nieces that I was the person he trusted the most because I saw him for who he was and accepted him as he was. By this time, I had been sober for close to 12 years. 5 years after my dad and I resumed our relationship, he did make amends to me. It was interesting, as I thought it would bring me peace, but instead, I felt kind of ripped off. It was at that moment that I realized the ego was controlling my forgiveness of my dad. I felt better than. It was a painful realization to have. At the same time, seeing that shadow side of who I was helped me to grow, too. I began to realize that there were many sides to who I was. Some are very light, while others are dark. Both sides make me who I am: yin and yang.

Life was good. A was growing into a fine young man. I believed we had done a good job raising him. Steve and I had our bumps, but mostly we got along and worked together well, both at our private practice and at home. It seemed life had come together beautifully. I saw myself as the luckiest woman in the world. I had a stepson I was close to, a husband I loved deeply, and great friends. Around the year 2000, I realized two things. I was ready to leave the security of a job and focus on private practice, and I also wanted a child of my own. I knew I

was not A's mother, and that he loved his biological mother, and that I would be loved, but with a distance that a stepparent is accustomed to. Steve was afraid but supportive of my desire. We found a place - we are still there today - in a small community called Cahaba Heights, and we moved in. It was full of excitement. We had a solid marriage with few hiccups. We would have disagreements, but never anything significant. For the first time in my life, I felt confident in someone's love and loyalty. That meant a great deal to me, as I had never experienced it from anyone else. Friends would come and go, and my family was so chaotic it was undependable. But Steve was there - a good and dependable man. My life for so many years just seemed normal.



Boundaries

I did not have close relationships with my immediate family members, as they could turn on you in a moment. They were violent and could emotionally tear me to shreds in a minute. My family had no trouble instantly going for my jugular vein, any weakness, any softness, and they would use it to tear me apart. With Steve, I could tell him anything, and he did the same with me. One of our most important rules in our family was no secrets, so every day we made sure we cleared up anything that would block intimacy between us. I felt like the luckiest woman in the world. I knew other women felt envious of the closeness we shared, and it was something I took pride in. I never had to worry about catching Steve in a lie because he didn't. We both saw our marriage as a model marriage for many years.



Shauna Comes

The only thing missing in my life was not having my own child. That piece missing from me had created a hole in my heart that even my husband's love could not fix. I knew my stepson loved me dearly, but he had his own mother. I had the most intense longing to be a mother. I had everything anyone could want, yet I ached for my own child. So I went to Steve and told him that I thought

I would be okay without a child of my own, but I was wrong. He was kind and open, saying, "Let's do it," "Let's try." I was overjoyed that he was open to another child. He was not enthusiastic, but he struggled with it; however, he was always willing and open to moving forward. We began filling out the paperwork to adopt in 2001. As we filled out paperwork, I began to paint angels-I painted and painted and painted. Steve had a dream during this time, and in part of the dream, an angel came to him and said, "My name is Shauna - spell it S_H_A_U_N_A." We decided that would be our daughter's name. We agreed on Cambodia, and it felt like the right choice.

But gradually, problems arose. My past became an issue, and then the day after we were finally approved to go over there, all of the adoptions from Cambodia were discontinued. There were problems with adoption facilitators buying babies from mothers. This initiated a lengthy two-year saga over what to do. When we had decided to adopt from Cambodia, I felt a lightning bolt of awareness that my daughter was there and it was meant to be. It was very powerful, but now it seemed that it was wrong. It was tough and painful. I tried to let go of the belief that my daughter was in Cambodia, as I was being told it was wrong.

A year went by with the struggle. Carol came to me and said she wanted to have a baby for us. I did not want to miss what was supposed to be because I was stuck in Cambodia, so she began coming here during ovulation, and we would try to impregnate her. Steve would produce the sperm I would take to her and insert it with a pipette. Finally, Jackie came, and she was the one who impregnated her. They were all snuggled up, and with the deepest fiber of my being, I knew this was their baby. Sure enough, six weeks later, Carol called, pregnant and having second thoughts. Around this time, and before she called, we discovered that they were going to allow our adoption to proceed through a pipeline case. I couldn't explain it, but it felt right, even though it looked very wrong. I knew they would be great parents, and I knew my daughter was in Cambodia. Sometimes I would feel angry, mainly because it seemed like I was supposed to be angry, but it just felt right for them to be parents. It took a very long time for the wheels to move with the adoption. In August 2022, we received information about our daughter. Her Cambodian name was Diamond Angle or Pich Davy. Her name became Shauna Davy. The angel had told us her name, and it seemed her name,

Davy, was perfect. She was beautiful. It stated that she arrived at the orphanage two days after they announced the pipeline cases could progress. Her history seemed inaccurate, but I was told not to worry about it. She had been at the orphanage for just over a year when we were finally able to bring her home. It was a joyous time for us when we finally brought her home. She was easy, but it was hard too. She seemed to adjust and fit into the family. Carol and Jackie had a little boy, Avery, and we have raised our families in unison. Sometimes what does not seem right is right.



Dad's Decline

My dad, around 2005-2007, started becoming more paranoid. He had always been extremely jealous of my mother, but it seemed to be escalating out of control. We had been at peace with one another for a long time. I no longer had to pretend with him that my childhood was happy. We were just okay with who we were. I think what my dad taught me that has helped me through the years is that there is bad in the best of us and good in the worst of us. The dividing line is not as rigid and black and white as we want it to be. We are technicolor. All of us. But this jealousy did not make sense. And then he started pulling weapons, thinking men were sneaking in at night.

We had to have him involuntarily placed in the locked unit of the hospital. He was a danger. He had always been a danger when drinking, but he had quit many years before, spontaneously- no explanation. While at the unit, he was diagnosed with Delusional Disorder. Finally, my childhood made more sense. It was not just alcoholism but mental illness running through my family. It turned out that Delusional Disorder ran through his family. Cousins could relate, as their fathers struggled with the same issues my father and grandfather did. That was how abuse was passed from generation to generation - mental illness and substance abuse.

During this time, my mother's substance abuse spiraled out of control. She was drinking, taking her meds, and his. She became a danger to him and herself. Steve got her into treatment, and I would say it was successful, but not in any

traditional way. They asked her to write an apology letter, and she asked me to write it for her. Embarrassingly, I did. I said all the things I wished she would have said to me, but never did. She asked me to cut and paste and send it to my siblings, but I didn't do it. She was discharged and did not drink or use as much as she had in the past. She would have slips here and there, but nothing like it was. She hated the anonymous programs, so her recovery program revolved around reading meditation books in the mornings. I must say her usage was dramatically better. I would call it recovery.

I became my father's fiduciary and medical power of attorney. I helped him obtain VA benefits, as he had served in World War II. My father also had dementia, which made the delusions worse. His decline into dementia was very slow and painful to watch. But we had come so far and had so much healing that he told my niece that the reason he wanted me to do these things for him was that I saw who he really was and accepted him anyway, and that was love. I know this is what recovery is all about. The ability to see my flaws and yours, and accept them in both of us. In 2013, I ended up being the one who held the responsibility of placing my father in a VA nursing home. He was unable to care for himself, and my mother was unable to care for him.



Things Take A Terrible Turn

I noticed A seemed jealous, but he was 15 years old and was starting to focus more on his peer group. I tried to make sure I did special things just for him and figured it would all work out. Shauna grew to hate A and would often speak of anger at him that seemed irrational. She also would cry herself to sleep most nights. She would lie on my chest and just wail and cry. I hoped that she was releasing all the pain from her adoption and leaving everything she knew. Slowly, we adjusted, and life became normal. I had my beautiful family, and we were happy.

Steve and I aged and progressed in our business and private lives. I felt so proud of who we were and what we stood for. Mostly, other women were jealous

of my relationship with Steve. It was not perfect, and we had conflicts, but we were committed to each other and each other's growth. We had a rock-solid marriage. The joy of having Shauna in our lives drew us even closer. We arranged our lives so that I could leave early four days a week to pick Shauna up from school, and Steve would leave one day a week. She seemed to be mostly happy. We kept bumping up against issues of racism in our very white area of town, but I thought we handled the bumps that came our way.

Something seemed wrong underneath. I just could not put my finger on it. Or maybe the truth is, it felt too hard to put my finger on it. I was afraid that A was hurting Shauna, but I would then shame myself for being so negative. I would go back and forth, but never trusted myself. Or did I want someone else to be responsible?

A graduated from high school and left home very quickly. College did not go well; he was first kicked out of his dorm for smoking pot (maybe selling it) and moved back home for a short time. Steve told him he had to go to school to live with us. In May, we discovered that he was pretending to attend classes but was not, so we packed his bags and left them on the front porch. He quickly moved in with a friend and went on. He moved to DC after some legal issues with selling pot. Life settled down again after he left. Yet still, I would wake in the middle of the night with this clutching and fear that he had hurt Shauna. Shauna did not fit in at school. Maybe it was because she was adopted, perhaps because she was brown in a white world, but she never really bonded with her peers deeply, except one, Jada. Shauna loved Jada, and Jada loved Shauna. They were the best of friends. Jada spent the night often and went on vacations with us. It was an easy and relaxed time throughout these years.



Life Unraveled Again

A married a young woman from Central America, and things got hard again. They moved into our basement when they first moved back to the States. Things did not feel right. Everything seemed hard.

In 2014, we celebrated our 20th anniversary. Steve had secretly arranged for us to renew our vows at the exact location where we had gotten initially married. I was afraid that something bad would happen. I had a belief that if you thought you needed to renew your vows, it meant something was not right in the relationship. However, it was such a romantic gesture that I did not want to say anything to ruin it. It was very romantic. Shauna went with us to Gatlinburg to renew our vows, and it was a wonderful trip. We came home, and things seemed more chaotic with A and his wife. He had cheated on her, and they were struggling, but it seemed like more.

So Steve asked him, "Did you ever hurt Shauna?" and his answer was yes. Steve decided to wait until we were not at work and away from Shauna to tell me. We were going to a picnic with the church choir; Steve was singing with them that evening, and Shauna was going to be in the youth group. It was a beautiful spring day in April. The day was so lovely. It filled one with hope. We drove to church, talking and laughing, but Steve seemed distant. I thought it was probably just something at work. I was looking forward to food, friends, and listening to them sing. Tonight was going to be a night of fun and food. I needed it. It had felt like a hard few months with A. I had a foreboding that something was amiss, but at the same time, I could just shake it out of my mind.

We dropped Shauna off, and instead of heading to the picnic, Steve almost yelled at me, "He did it. He really hurt her badly. It is so bad, Pam. Oh God, I cannot believe this." I felt my head swimming. What was he saying? For years now, I had been afraid, but people around me had kept telling me I was crazy. I had talked to the doctor and wanted him to check. I noticed blue marks on her, which is common in Asian children, as they sometimes have Mongolian spots. Her pediatrician told me I was a helicopter mom who needed to chill. I talked to Steve, and he asked how I could think such a thing about our son. I wonder how I could think such a thing. Yet for years, I would wake with a start, and there it would be again.

I had stopped letting him watch her many years ago, but when she was 2 or 3, he still did. How could I have let him near her? I felt both sadness and fear, but what I felt more was rage. Rage at the boy I had raised. I had loved him and

nurtured him and saw him as my son ...until this moment, Steve was struggling to support both of them, and I just wanted him to rot in hell. I thought I would never forgive him. I hated him. Life was suddenly in slow motion. We were driving down the street, but we were barely moving. We both said we did not know what to do. I could not feel anything but rage, and even that seemed to be going in slow motion. I always had a strange awareness that this was a dividing line in my life before and after. I realized that thinking and believing were very different from confirmation. I knew my life would never be the same. I lost my center. I lost who I thought I was. I prided myself on my family. We were close and loyal and there for one another. A long way from my childhood and all the abuse that had taken place. This was my healthy family. We had done the work, damn it! This could not be happening. I swirled and swirled and swirled. I wanted my other life back. I wanted my world, but that world was gone, never to return.

What happened and what he did is Shauna's story to tell, so I will talk about the aftermath. Steve and I did not see eye to eye on what to do. Steve felt torn between his two children, and I was angry and wanted A away. I wanted to only protect my daughter from ever being hurt again. I thought Steve and I were discussing things and working it out, but we weren't. Life was hard at home. I was so full of pain and rage. I had raised A, and what I was hearing was that the pain he had inflicted on Shauna was because of his anger at me. He was angry because he thought I loved her too much. My family would tell me the same thing - I had loved her too much, so he had to hurt her. All the blame seemed to lie on me. I struggled and worked hard to just get through the days. Nights were worse. I felt so responsible for everything that happened. I should have been a better mother. I should have been more aware. I should have given more. My life felt like it was falling apart, and I was fighting to keep us together. I started to believe that if I were a better person, none of this would have happened. I worried that what I was being told was true; if I had been better, he would have been better.



Getting Help

I started therapy again and writing. Writing was the only thing keeping me

together. Steve seemed distracted and distant. I felt very alone walking through the pain. I knew we were on very different pages. He started taking a nap every day when he got home from work. I felt like I was going through the motions.

Jim, a very caring and excellent therapist, and I ended up doing some of the hardest work I have ever done in therapy. Therapy is not just about trauma, but therapy of looking into the mirror at myself and my part in my life's ups and downs. And to acknowledge that there are times when we are responsible, and there are times when people and events happen to us. We don't cause them, but we have to work with the aftermath nonetheless.



More Unraveling

During this time, I noticed Steve had begun helping a young woman with a keen interest. He would text with her and help her get through hard days. Her hard days were every day. He hated it when I felt needy, but he seemed to be more and more attracted to her neediness. I should have seen that he was infatuated with her. I was self-absorbed in my own gut-wrenching pain. I told Steve a few times it seemed like too much, and he should probably back off. He didn't seem to think so.

I was driving Shauna to school, and she suddenly started hyperventilating and said, "I can hear him.... He is saying if I tell anyone, he will kill me.... I am so afraid of A, something terrible will happen if I tell." I tried to stay on track. I did not know what to do. I wish I could say I handled the situation with care and ease. But that is not what I did. I mentioned that it was safe for her to talk, and then I stared ahead. She had calmed down some by the time we had reached her middle school. And I just dropped her off like it was any other day. I was too afraid to acknowledge what was happening. I talked to Steve about it, but he seemed not to care. He seemed to be in another world. I felt even more alone.

I felt very alone walking through the pain. I felt like I was going through the motions. I did not know my world was fixing to fall into a hellish place, and I was not sure I would find my way back out of it.

A few mornings later, I checked the cell phone bill, which I never did. But this day and this day only, I checked. The number of text messages appeared on the screen when I opened the bill. Steve had over 1000 text messages. Something else that had never happened before or since. I said, "I know it was from texting her," the young woman he was "helping". He agreed and then said, "We agreed I would text her more to help her." I said, "No, that was your decision." Later that day, I saw him staring at his cell phone. He was just scrolling and staring. I thought that was weird. He seemed to be in a trance as he stared at the phone. However, I was busy and didn't have time to think about what he was doing. He canceled an appointment, saying he needed to talk to me, and then drove me to pick up our daughter from school. I felt terrified.

As we were getting in the car, he blurted out, "I have been in an inappropriate relationship with her." I felt my head spinning. I asked, "Did y'all have sex?" and he said, "No." He said, "I knew she had a crush on me and I encouraged it because I liked the way she looked at me." I kept spinning. My head felt fuzzy. I thought I could trust him, but apparently I couldn't. I went through the motions of the rest of my day, we picked up Shauna, and I took her to her piano lesson like it was any other day. But I was reeling. He told her I knew. He said he told her he could no longer text her every day. When I got home, I checked the cell phone records, and for the last two months, there had been text messages and long phone calls every morning and afternoon. I could not believe this was happening. I was enraged. I yelled and screamed and cried. Not only had my stepson not been who I thought he was, but neither had my husband. I could see how inflated his ego had become with the attention he received from her. It took him weeks to overcome the infatuation.

My friend, Renee, was with me when Steve did his main "confession" a few days later. I planned to be strong and mature, but instead, I tried to run away. My friend tackled me, laid on top of me and begged me to hit her so I could stay. I know that sounds like the most insane thing in the world but when I look back on that day I think how lucky I am to have a friend who loves me that much. She was willing to try to absorb what I could not in that moment. That is what I appreciate about recovery: the amazing people who love you even when life is exploding.

Meanwhile, I was acting like a crazy woman. I screamed and screamed and screamed. My world was completely gone. There was nothing left of the life I had known. I did not take to change well. I had loved my life and how I saw my family. Now, everything looked like a lie to me. This was scorched earth. I knew I should not yell in front of Shauna, but could not seem to stop. I wanted my old life back. I didn't want this one. This one sucked.

I alternated between rage and devastation. Everything I had believed about my life and my family was an illusion. Nothing was what I believed it to be. Steve would alternate between rage and shame. He seemed to blame me. Part of the pain stems from the trust I had in him, and part of it is that it was such a betrayal. He said he had been confused and was infatuated with her idealization of him. He said it felt unfixable at home, and she seemed fixable to him. What I know is that from this, we went into a very dark place for a very long time. This was not the beginning of healing but the beginning of a long descent. It was a descent I was not sure I would survive. It was hell. I could barely function. We worked together, and to be honest, I would barely be able to work. In the first few weeks, there were days when I would cancel all my appointments because I knew I couldn't do them. My husband was angry, and so was I.

I had another friend who supported me so much during this time, Beppy. When I would go off in my head with wild stories, she would bring me back to earth and reality check me. I am not sure I would have gotten through my insanity without her and Renee.

Steve went to a retreat, and I stayed home to manage the business and our daily life here. The pain of the explosion of my family felt almost unbearable.

Steve would tell me to come to him day or night if I needed him, and a few times, I did, I would wake him with my insistent questions. I think in hindsight, I wanted him to reassure me it was always only me. That is not what would happen. He would be angry that I woke him and would angrily tell me to go away. Who was this guy? I did not know or like this person my husband had become. Things seemed to go from bad to worse to hell.

Steve and I were both angry, and sometimes it felt as though we were on the verge of rage. I thought I might use. One night, I went to him wanting comfort, and he told me to leave. He was trying to sleep. I ran out the door, determined to use it again after all these years. I jumped in the car and drove off. When I was driving, I realized two things: when you have not used in years, you don't know where to get drugs, and I did not really want to use. I wanted to not be in the amount of pain I was in. I was tired of hurting all the time. I turned around and came home. I realized I had to start taking better care of myself. So I started working on boundaries. We started marriage therapy, but our counselor seemed both intimidated and in awe of Steve. Steve has a big personality and is well-known as an excellent therapist around town. I slowly lost respect for our counselor and ended up never feeling heard or seen. The focus for most everyone around us was how much Steve was struggling. I mainly felt pushed aside in favor of his pain. Our daughter started therapy also.

After some time, I felt like I was not getting as caught up in the cycle as I had before, and I started thinking about divorce. It took me a long time to work on myself to decide to commit again. And I did commit again. I learned that sticking through the hard times, as well as the easy times, develops a stronger bond than when things are always easy. One of the most critical lessons for recovery I ended up learning is that I have to be willing to walk through pain. The avoidance is what has caused the most damage in my life. The willingness to face it has created the most healing in my life.



Walking Through Extreme Pain Sober

This time in my life brought more pain than I knew I could live through. I felt blindsided. I thought I had passed through the trials and that it would be smooth sailing from then on. Instead, there was tremendous work to be done. Steve and I both worked very hard on ourselves and on stopping the damage we caused our daughter. While he chose a more traditional path of going back to meetings and therapy, I stuck with therapy, writing, and learning. I began studying the dark and light sides of humanity. Initially, it was to understand why Steve would have

carried on with a secret life, even briefly, and then it evolved into understanding myself better. I've realized I am very secretive and have always done things on my own. I taught myself to ride a bike, drive a car, and even recover. And this healing again was more personal and internal. I worked on healing, but mainly in a very internal way. Steve and I had to learn to be together in a completely different way than we had before. Also, we were dealing with the pain of the betrayal that had happened with A. It was a long and heavy road. Coping with Steve's mistakes seemed more straightforward than dealing with the pain of one child hurting another. This recovery was a very methodical and slow process. At times, it would seem there was the healing of our broken hearts from A's betrayal, our recovery from our relationship being torn apart. We worked at being there for Shauna as she was hurt, afraid, and confused, not just from A's actions, but also from our own. We would experience periods of great healing, followed by retreat, and then more periods of great healing. It was arduous work and required a willingness to endure incredible pain. But year over year, life not only got better, but we developed a relationship where much of our unhealthy need for closeness was healed. We both learned to stand on our own feet instead of leaning on each other as much. We had to walk two different paths, and we did. I did not like to face pain or discomfort, but I can.



Parents' Deaths

By the time COVID hit in 2020, my father had been in a nursing home for seven years. My mother was living with my sister, who never spoke to me again as a result. My mother was callous to my daughter, just as she had been to me. My sister wanted us to split time with her, but I knew I needed to protect my daughter from what I had grown up with. My mother supported this decision because she didn't want to live with me either. My sister could not forgive this. My father died, I am pretty sure of COVID at the beginning, before there was testing. I did not go, as I did not want it to end in anger. I knew my sisters were going, and I knew how we were together.

I also owe my recovery to this decision. My recovery has taught me to take

better care of myself and to know that my love for my father or his for me was not dependent on my physical presence, especially knowing it would have been harmful to myself and those around me. My family can be very emotionally ugly. It was my gift to him, my mother, and my sisters to stay away. Even though my father had long lost any sense of thought, I wailed when he died. He was still the only person in my family, growing up, that I knew loved me. The person who hurt me the most, but loved me the most, was gone. My mother died at my sister's a couple of years later. My sister didn't bother to tell me, but when I heard, I didn't feel that strongly, as my mother and I didn't have a close relationship. I have come to understand that because of her own childhood abuse and the fact that I was conceived through my father raping her, it was just too painful to love me. I don't hold it against her or me that we lived our lives without much connection. She did her best, but it didn't involve accepting me, which meant we didn't form a strong bond.



Gifts of Turmoil

The struggles Steve and I went through brought many positive changes in our lives together and to my recovery. I thought I had done the work, but then I suddenly realized there was much more to recover within myself. I find being able to own both my light and my dark has brought me immense healing. When I own all of who I am, I am stronger and wiser. Holding all of me helps me to be less judgmental of others' struggles. Holding it all has helped me develop more empathy for other people's struggles. Holding both sides of me has increased my ability to do the right thing, as I can see my alternative motivations. I don't have to pretend I don't make mistakes. It helps me hold myself and others more lightly. Both sides can be healing or cruel, depending on my willingness to be aware of them. A gift all this turmoil brought was a new intensity to our work with other addicts. A gift I have is that I am pretty non-judgmental about Substance Use Disorder and the pain it brings, as I know we are all doing the best we can in any given moment. However, I also know that for me, I must continue to grow and acknowledge the dark places within me so that they don't control me. What I do not see is what has the greatest control over me at the moment.



Forgiveness

I am grateful that I have forgiven A, Steve, my father, and many others who have betrayed me in my life. Forgiveness is not an easy task. To forgive is to acknowledge the hurt. If you “forget,” there is nothing to forgive; it is only through owning the hurt, which means I always own it, that I can forgive. Some people, such as AI, had to forgive and release. This means he is not in my life. I knew it would be a betrayal of Shauna to have him in my life. I love the person I helped raise, I forgive him, but not as a part of my life. Steve, I forgave and renewed my relationship with him, just like I did with my father. I have learned that for me, this has been an incredible gift of my sobriety. At the same time, I do not believe I have to forgive or that, without forgiveness, a person can not heal. I know healing happens either way. This is just the way it worked for me.



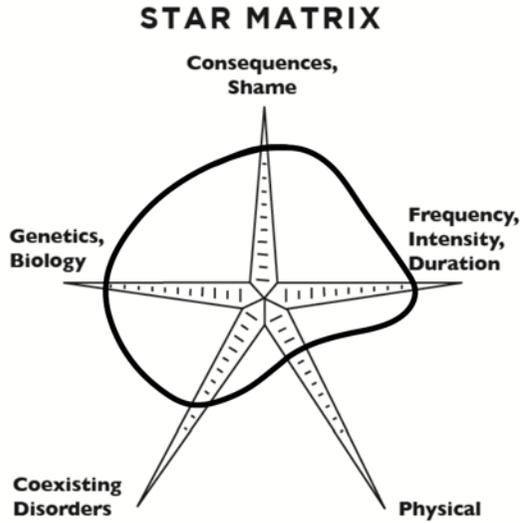
New, New Beginning

It is through this pain that C3, the Addiction Research Foundation, and The Intensive were born. Without the pain, there is no creation of the new. As we navigated the challenges, our landlord offered us the space behind our offices, where we had been for a very long time. It was an old warehouse space that had not been cleaned or updated in over 20 years. It was a mess. It had not been cleaned in over 20 years. We scrubbed it over and over. We cleaned and painted and designed. We spent months working on this. I think as we scrubbed, we were also cleaning our souls. It gave us a common purpose as we were floundering. We poured our pain into the creation of the space. We scrubbed the place clean. We decorated and then opened it to the public, providing alternatives to the anonymous programs. Not to replace them but to complement and acknowledge that there is more than one way to recover. There have been meetings for over a decade. Our pain created a space that now 1000s of people have found healing in. Out of our pain, great joy for so many was created.

At the Addiction Research Foundation, we are exploring and researching alternative approaches to recovery. Looking at alternative ways to recover motivated us to open The Intensive, where we focus on the internal person rather than helping people get into meetings. What we realized is that recovery communities help with the draw to meetings, and our job is to address the parts of life that are not discussed in the "rooms." Out of our pain, much recovery has been born. Both internally and externally. I know that due to the pain, not just of our addiction but of our recovery, we have been able to help many more people than we would have. For that, I am eternally grateful.

I have worked very, very hard on myself in therapy for the last 11 years. There was no place within myself that I was not willing to go. I learned how complacent I had been in my inner work. I realized that, like others, I need to continue the act of self-discovery. Self-discovery and growth are my keys to recovery. I have learned that no matter how long a person remains sober, life still throws curveballs at them. The gift I am sure I have been given is resilience. I know a word that is often misused, but it plays a vital part in my path. I am unsure what will happen next in life. It may be happy or sad, powerful or not, but I do not doubt that through my personal recovery, I will be able to handle it all, joyful, sad, or mundane. I am still a "do it yourself girl". And I have accepted that I might always be, but it works for me. I know recovery is not a life of eternal happiness, but like the rest of life, it has its peaks and valleys. The important part is to stay present with yourself. The human spirit is more resilient than we know. That life is going to be sunshine sometimes and throwing thunderbolts sometimes, but either way, it is important to stay present with who I am.

It is through destruction that we are open to creation. When I look over my life, starting with the destructive way I was conceived, there was always creation behind it. Through the rape of my mother, I was created. I have wondered if being created through violence made me more of a seeker in life. Maybe we have looked at it wrong; that is what we consider a victim of some act, and instead, we are the strongest of all. We have had to create meaning and a new self with each tragedy. It becomes a very triumphant life. I would not trade any event in life as they all created me. I know I am strong and powerful. I know I can handle whatever happens next, and that is my journey of recovery. I know life still



happens after recovery. Sometimes it is triumph, and sometimes it is tragedy, but either way, we are all built to handle it.

I have learned that when working on your recovery and life, it works like nesting dolls. You do the work, and it is good work. Then there is a space, and then you work through your core issues again. The next time, there is not as much to work through, but it goes deeper. I find hope in this as it affirms the journey and process. There is grace and acceptance in these spaces and places.

Final Thoughts



A single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.

Henry David Thoreau

What we hope this book shows is that there is a unique path for each unique individual. That people are resilient and find the way that works for them. Even people who appear to be doing the same thing, like attending 90 meetings in 90 days, calling a sponsor, or reading the big book, do so in their own individual way. And when a person gets into recovery, life does not stop. There are still peaks and valleys that have to be handled to maneuver without returning to destructive coping mechanisms. And that is what people do. We do not always walk in a straight line upward and onward. We are all human and some days we are better at handling life than others. Sometimes we are at our best and sometimes at our worst. The whole point of recovery is when we are at our worst, we pick ourselves back up and move forward. We find a great deal of relief in knowing that most of our work is about self acceptance. Self acceptance gives us the chance to accept others also. What a relief to know we don't have to work a perfect recovery and that all the ups and downs or the handling of life well and not so well is recovery. Recovery happens, just not in the way we think it is going to happen.

We have included a summary of some of our research for The Addiction Research Foundation that parallels the diversity of the stories in this book. We hope you find it useful and enlightening.

*Like a giant oak tree covered with apple blossoms is the vast man in you.
His mind binds you to the earth, his fragrance lifts you into space,
and in his durability you are deathless. You have been told that,
even like a chain, you are as weak as your weakest link.
This is but half the truth. You are also as strong as your strongest link.
To measure you by your smallest deed is to reckon the power of ocean
by the frailty of its foam. To judge you by your failures is
to cast blame upon the seasons for their inconsistency.
Ay, you are like an ocean, And though heavy-grounded ships await
the tide upon your shores, yet, even like an ocean,
you cannot hasten your tides. And like the seasons you are also,
and though in your winter you deny your spring,
Yet spring, reposing within you, smiles in her drowsiness and is not offended.*

Kihlal Gibra, The Prophet - Farewell



Many Paths to Recovery: A Synthesis of Four Addiction-Recovery Surveys

Abstract

This paper synthesizes data from four surveys conducted by the Addiction Research Foundation: *Tell Us About, My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help*, *STAR Matrix Assessment*[®], and *What Is Working for You in Recovery?*.

Collectively, the surveys captured responses from nearly 700 individuals on topics ranging from substance use and recovery status to mental-health diagnoses, self-care practices and service work. By aggregating results from multiple instruments, we aim to provide a holistic view of the diverse pathways people take toward recovery and to identify common themes that could inform future research and program design. Key findings include the prevalence of co-occurring mental-health conditions, wide variation in sobriety length, the importance of social support and self-care, and the limited use of traditional 12-Step programs. Data are presented in both narrative form and with visualizations to aid interpretation.

Introduction

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a complex condition that intersects with mental health, socio-economic factors, trauma and social support. There is growing recognition that recovery is not a linear process and that individuals may follow multiple paths toward wellness. The **Addiction Research Foundation (ARF)** conducted four surveys between 2023 and 2025 to gather insights from people at various stages of recovery:

- ***Tell Us About*** (n = 424) asked participants about current use of mood-altering substances, history of addiction and attendance at 12-Step meetings.
- ***My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help*** (n = 100) surveyed demographics, treatment attendance, self-help meeting participation, substance use behaviors, therapy engagement, meditation and prayer practices, exercise, life satisfaction and beliefs about controlled use.
- ***STAR Matrix Assessment***[®] (n = 91) assessed physical and mental health history, substance use patterns and the impact of past events on satisfaction with life.
- ***What Is Working for You in Recovery?*** (n = 34) focused on participants' current recovery practices, including mental-health diagnoses, sobriety length, sleep patterns, spiritual practices, family activities and service work.

By combining these datasets, this paper explores how demographic factors, mental-health conditions, substance use history, personal practices and community involvement shape the recovery experience. The analysis uses descriptive statistics because only aggregate data were available. The discussion emphasizes patterns rather than inferential relationships.

Methods

Data collection:

The surveys were hosted on SurveyMonkey and distributed through ARF's networks.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous; respondents could skip any question.

Each survey contained a mix of closed-ended (multiple choice or rating scales) and open-ended questions. For this paper, only de-identified, aggregated results were analyzed. Raw individual data were unavailable, so no statistical tests beyond simple counts and percentages were performed.

Measures and coding:

Tell Us About captured basic substance use and recovery status. Questions included current use of mood-altering substances (yes/no), alcohol consumption frequency, use of prescribed and non-prescribed substances, self-identification as addict/alcoholic, recovery status (in recovery, recovered, in relapse), 12-Step attendance and values important to recovery (e.g., family, spirituality, exercise, counseling).

My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help collected demographic information (age, gender, race/ethnicity), treatment and self-help meeting attendance, substance use behaviors, therapy engagement, meditation and prayer practices, exercise, life satisfaction and beliefs about controlled use.

STAR Matrix Assessment[®] included a broad set of questions on physical and mental health history, family history of substance abuse, age of first consistent substance use, types of substances used for more than six months, experiences of craving and tolerance, negative consequences of use, impact of major life events and instability, self-image changes and current efforts to change substance use behaviors. Respondents also selected from a list of self-care and recovery tools they used.

What Is Working for You in Recovery? explored mental-health diagnoses and whether participants still received treatment, length of sobriety, sleep difficulties, spiritual/meditative practices, types of music that aid recovery, family activities that support recovery, involvement in service work and types of service activities.

Data synthesis and visualization:

Counts and percentages from each survey were entered into data frames using Python, and simple charts were generated using Matplotlib to illustrate key distributions. Four charts highlight (1)self-reported mental-health diagnoses still receiving help, (2)length of sobriety, (3)self-care and recovery tools, and (4)types of service work. These figures support the narrative analysis. Due to rounding and small differences in the number of respondents per question, totals may not always equal 100%.

Results

Demographics and substance use histories:

Respondents across the surveys spanned a wide age range, with *My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help* showing roughly equal representation across 25–64 years. Women made up about 55% of that survey's sample. The sample was predominantly White/Caucasian (85%) with smaller proportions of other racial/ethnic groups.

In *Tell Us About*, just over half of respondents (52.6%) reported currently ingesting mood-altering substances, while 47.4% said they did not. Drinking alcohol was less prevalent: of the 219 who answered the question, 53% currently drank and 47% did not. When asked about other substances, 52% reported taking mood-altering medications prescribed to them and 57% admitted to using non-prescription or illegal substances (including marijuana). Frequency of use varied widely: 43% used substances daily, 15% a few times per week and 23% reported no use. Two-thirds identified themselves as addicts or alcoholics.

The *STAR Matrix Assessment*[®] revealed that 92% of participants had a family history of substance abuse. The average reported age for beginning consistent substance use was 18 years, with a range spanning adolescence and young adulthood. Among respondents who listed substances used for more than six months, alcohol (89%), marijuana (55%), cocaine/crack (44%) and opioids or benzodiazepines (30%) were the most common. Nearly 97% said they were currently trying to change their substance use behaviors.

Mental-health diagnoses and comorbidities:

In the *What Is Working for You in Recovery?* survey, 52% of participants reported having a mental-health diagnosis, compared with 48 % without such a diagnosis. Of those with a diagnosis, the most frequent conditions were depression (78%), generalized anxiety disorder (62%), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (31%), post-traumatic stress disorder (16%) and other conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and bipolar disorder. Half of respondents noted they

still received help for their diagnosis. Number of respondents still receiving help for each mental-health diagnosis.

In the *STAR Matrix Assessment*[®], 78% of participants reported a history of mental-health difficulties and 74% had used medications or substances to address those difficulties.

Additionally, more than 93% acknowledged that substance use had negative effects on their physical health and 88% reported negative mental-health consequences.

These findings underscore the high comorbidity between SUD and mental-health disorders.

Recovery status and sobriety length:

The *Tell Us About* survey asked respondents if they considered themselves in recovery, recovered, or in relapse. Among 369 participants, 39% said they were in recovery, 13% considered themselves recovered, 22% reported being in relapse and 26% chose “other.” Only 25% attended 12-Step meetings, while 46% did not and 21% used to use but stopped, suggesting that many people pursue alternative support systems.

In *What Is Working for You in Recovery?*, almost half of respondents had been sober for 10 years or more, while smaller groups reported shorter periods: 0–6 months (16%), 6 months– 2 years (10%), 2–5 years (13%), 5–7 years (10%) and 7–10 years (3%).

Wellbeing, coping and self-care practices:

Across the surveys, respondents reported diverse strategies to support their recovery and wellbeing. In *Tell Us About*, the top values considered important were family (69%), spirituality (57%), friends (56%), counseling (34%) and exercise (42%). Only 16% cited religion specifically, highlighting a broader emphasis on spiritual connection rather than formal religious practice.

The *My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help* survey revealed that about a quarter of

respondents were in therapy at the time, 42% had been in therapy previously and 32% never had.

Meditation practices varied: about 19% meditated regularly, 21% occasionally, 26% had done so in the past and 35% never meditated. Prayer was used by half of the sample, and roughly half reported exercising regularly. When asked about their level of contentment with life, 48% were somewhat or very content, while 40% were somewhat or very discontent.

The *STAR Matrix Assessment*[®] survey asked respondents to select self-care and recovery tools from a long list. Popular activities included listening to music (79%), attending self-help or support groups (69%), making plans with loved ones (68%), exercise (66%), meditation (63%) and individual therapy (59%). Less common yet notable practices were hiking (30%), yoga (27%), group therapy (25%) and playing an instrument (13%). The chart below illustrates the most frequently selected tools.

Family activities and community involvement:

Participants in *What Is Working for You in Recovery?* identified family activities that helped them stay grounded. Cooking meals together (80%), taking vacations (71%), watching TV shows or movies (63%) and doing crafts or housework (44%) were the most common. A majority of respondents (53%) reported involvement in some form of service work. When specifying types of service work, volunteering individually (74%), mentoring or coaching others (59%), donating supplies or money (67%) and participating in situational events (59%) were prominent.

Discussion

Diversity of recovery pathways:

The aggregated data affirm ARF's premise that there are many paths to recovery.

Respondents varied widely in their substance use history, mental-health status, length of sobriety and engagement with formal treatment or 12-Step programs. While nearly all participants in *STAR Matrix Assessment*[®] were actively trying to

change their substance use behaviors, only one quarter of **Tell Us About** respondents attended 12-Step meetings. Similarly, half of the **My Life Since Treatment/Self-Help** survey respondents were not in therapy, and a substantial portion did not meditate or exercise. These patterns suggest that recovery is deeply personal and may involve a combination of professional treatment, peer support, self-care practices and informal networks.

Co-occurring mental-health conditions:

High rates of depression, anxiety and other mental-health diagnoses highlight the importance of integrated care. The fact that more than three-quarters of **STAR Matrix Assessment**[®] participants reported mental-health difficulties and medication use underscores the need for accessible psychiatric services. In *What Is Working*, half of those diagnosed with a mental-health condition were still receiving help, indicating ongoing challenges. Programs that address both substance use and mental health could improve outcomes for individuals with dual diagnoses.

Importance of social support and self-care:

Family, friends and community emerged as critical anchors. Across surveys, respondents consistently identified family and social connections as central to their recovery. Activities like cooking together, traveling and spending time with loved ones were more common than solitary practices. Listening to music, exercise, meditation and therapy were also prominent self-care tools. Because participants reported varied combinations of these activities, recovery services should offer flexible programming that allows individuals to choose what resonates with them.

Service and purpose:

Involvement in service work was a hallmark of participants in *What Is Working for You in Recovery?*: more than half engaged in volunteering or mentoring. Service activities can provide meaning, accountability and opportunities to build supportive relationships. The prevalence of service suggests that programs encouraging peer support and community engagement may be particularly effective.

Limitations:

This analysis has several limitations. First, it relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Second, because only aggregated results were available, we could not perform inferential analyses or examine associations between variables (for example, whether specific self-care practices correlate with longer sobriety). Third, sample sizes differed across surveys and were modest for *What Is Working for You in Recovery?*, reducing generalization. Finally, participants were drawn from ARF's network and may not represent the broader population of people experiencing substance use disorder.

Conclusion

By synthesizing data from four distinct surveys, this paper provides a multi-faceted view of addiction recovery. The findings support the idea that recovery is not a one-size-fits-all journey but rather a tapestry of experiences shaped by individual histories, mental-health conditions, coping strategies and community involvement.

Ongoing mental-health support, flexible programming, emphasis on family and community and opportunities for service work appear to be vital components of successful recovery pathways. Future research should link individual responses to explore how specific practices influence outcomes over time and should prioritize inclusive sampling to capture the diversity of recovery experiences.

About The Authors

Pam, Steve, and Shauna each hold master's degrees in social work. Pam and Steve have over 30 years of experience working with substance use disorders, while Shauna specializes in trauma work. Pam and Steve co-founded The Addiction Research Foundation and The Moore Institute. They started the Intensive at The Moore Institute as an alternative to traditional treatment. Shauna grew up around The Moore Institute and The Addiction Research Foundation, which sparked her interest in working with substance use. She is interested in specializing in trauma and substance use in families. They work together as a team, utilizing each other's skills. Pam has authored four books, including "The Natural Pathways of Recovery" with Steve. Steve has been a nationally known speaker on recovery for the last 30 years.



