

My Story

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

—Carl Jung

I was born in Montgomery, Alabama, to two alcoholic parents. I was the fifth of six children in a very poor family. The story I have been told is that I was conceived by my father abusing my mother. I had a very traumatic breech birth that lasted for hours. It was a shocking birth. It lasted so long that my mother always told me I was born the day after what my birth certificate says.

This becomes part of my story where fact and fiction are always intertwined. I was told all my life that I was of Native American heritage, but when I did a DNA test, it showed I had no Native American in me. In my life, as in the story of my heritage, it is hard to tell fact from fiction.

I have always struggled with the stories in my head and the trauma of being shocked. I learned from my family to create stories, both negative and positive, rather than deal with reality. It began at birth, with these original stories. My family members, including me, have stretched and altered the truth all my life.

My childhood was hard. As in most alcoholic homes, I never knew what was going to happen next, and I could not rely on what I saw or heard. My father was a very angry, abusive man when he was young. He physically, emotionally, and sexually abused me, which created many moments of shock and trauma. One of the ways I coped was by creating stories in my head of being rescued by Jack and Jackie Kennedy clones. In my stories, they would come and rescue me, and she would be wearing a suit with matching hat, shoes, and purse. She would definitely have gloves on, too. I think the outfit mattered so much to me because I thought it represented stability.

My dad was the person I relied on the most and who loved me the most. I knew he loved me and would have gone to the ends of the earth to protect me from other harm. The person who loved me the most was also the person who abused me the most.

My mother was physically and emotionally abusive, but not on the scale of my father. She did not love me like my father did. I always had the impression that my mother just wished I was not there. With my mother, there was no attachment. I have always told myself that being the fifth of six children, the fourth of four girls, meant that she just did not have the energy to care very much about me.

When I was nine years old, my older brother Billie died. This was a shock to me and my family, as it happened very suddenly. This event changed my family forever. The grief and loss was never dealt with. We just stuffed it down, because my mother would become suicidal due to the depression she felt about Billie's death. I was very good at detaching and pretending. I even decided my brother had gone to live with the Jack and Jackie Kennedy clones and was not really dead. I would see him sitting on these big rocks in a river when we went to the cemetery. We would drive over the bridge, and in my mind only the two of us knew he was still living and doing great.

I created stories in my head most of the time. I told my third-grade class my mother was dying, after my brother died. A girl had pushed me down on the bus, and I did not want to be crying for that reason. The lie just came out of my mouth, and then I kept saying it. After a while, I think I started to believe it myself, until the school called my home about doing a fundraiser for my family. My teacher had me stand at the front of the class and explain that my mother was not dying. What I said was that we did not know, and what they did not know was that she and all of us were really dying of broken hearts.

I started using drugs and alcohol at a very young age. I drank for the first time on my twelfth birthday. It was also the day of my first rape. I was shocked and traumatized. I only told my friend, who told me it was all my fault for drinking. During this time, I would sometimes turn up a bottle of vodka just for pain relief. In the sixth grade, the doctor gave me tranquilizers because I was nervous. I quickly learned that two were better than one. I started high school in the eighth grade. My first week of school, I drank on Monday, smoked pot on Tuesday, took speed on Wednesday, dropped acid on Thursday, and rested on Friday.

I drank and drugged my way through high school, barely graduating. By eighteen I had lost my first child, and by twenty-four I had lost my second child. Those were two of the greatest and most painful shocks and traumas of my life. I ended up unsure of what was real and not real about their deaths, because I had created so many stories around what happened (more on these powerful traumas later).

I was arrested and homeless and had numerous shallow relationships with men, which created a succession of shocks and traumas. I could not tell what was real from the stories I created in my head. I went from being an alcoholic in my early twenties to being an intravenous junkie in my late twenties. My life was a mess. Shortly after my thirtieth birthday, I got sober.

I worked very hard on myself, and I have been in sobriety for over half my life. When I say I worked hard, it was very hard. I had a very difficult time not using. I would lock myself in my apartment to keep myself from going out. I knew on some level I could leave, but I would not allow myself to leave, because I knew I would use. I would confine myself to my bedroom, because I knew that if I left the bedroom and went into the living room, the front door was there and I would go out.

Sometimes during my college years, I would have to run home in the middle of class because I would feel overwhelmed with the urge to use. I felt self-hatred that was intense. I felt an incredible amount of grief. It was a very long, hard turnaround. I attended twelve-step meetings, counseling, group therapy, and many other types of treatment for a long time. Sometimes I was called "Negative Pam" in the twelve-step groups, as I openly talked about all my struggles. That was painful to hear, but I knew that staying sober was my priority, so I continued to speak the truth about my struggle.

I got both a bachelor's and master's degree in social work. I am a therapist who works with addicts and people who have been affected by addiction. I loved and still love what I do, and I am good at what I do because of my love and passion for this field.

When I was five years sober, I met my husband, Steve. He is a very good man, and we have been together for over twenty-five years. We structured our lives around helping ourselves and others to grow spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. Our lives were full and complete.

I helped Steve raise his son, my stepson, Alex. I poured all of my love into raising him. At the same time, I still wanted my own child, so when I was sixteen years sober, we adopted our daughter, Shauna. She brought so much joy into our lives. For a long time, I thought our lives could not get any better. I thought I had arrived.

It all changed with the shock of a phone call. Underneath all the harmonious living, there was a troubling undercurrent. Things did not feel right with my stepson and daughter. So my husband asked him. It came out that my stepson had been both physically and emotionally abusive to our daughter for years. We were devastated and did not know what to do. I had trouble making it through the days due to the pain, grief, and guilt of what was really happening in my life. I made the situation worse by imagining different horror stories of what probably happened.

Steve and I both became sleepwalkers. To get away from the pain of our home, Steve began texting and calling with a woman he thought he should and could save. The rescue was a focus and relief when our lives were falling apart around him. He became lost in the drama of the rescue. He saw himself as a white knight.

I was shocked and traumatized when my very honest husband confessed to me the amount of contact he had with this woman. I knew he was helping her, but I did not realize the extent of the time involved. He had never kept anything from me in the twenty-plus years we had been married. It was the first time he had intentionally kept anything from me.

To make matters worse, I began to make up even more stories in my head. I would assume the worse and then create drastic and dramatic stories from there.

Our lives became a hell from which we could not escape. We both told ourselves stories that had some truth in them, but they were not the truth. Even when we received new information that countered the stories in our heads, we both went with the stories instead of the new facts. We were both in a hell, and we had created it together. We were stuck on “repeat.” Traumas from our past and present were preventing us from getting to the other side. We seriously talked about divorce for the first time in our marriage. We had always been so close, but we could not stop attacking each other with our stories.

It became all about the stories in our heads. We could not stop creating stories that we then accused one another with. The problem was that the thoughts had become stories, and then the stories became beliefs.

We worked very hard at coming out of this black hole we were in. We learned that our thoughts and feelings changed very quickly, depending on what story we were listening to inside of ourselves. We confused ourselves and each other. We would be blown around based on what our minds were saying or what either of us was feeling in that moment. The next moment might be completely the opposite. How could we be sure what the truth was at any given moment? We had to put things together in a way that we could both understand.

Steve and I both began to study and be open to new practices. Although we had been meditating on a regular basis, our practice became more profound. Both sincerity and desperation drove us to meditation, reading, writing, and searching for answers. Some days we would read, meditate, go to therapy, and think we had found some answers, and then fall apart, fight, and enter into despair. But we kept at it. We meditated together twice a day. We read everything we thought might possibly help us. We fought some more. We went to individual therapy, workshops, groups, and anything else we could think of to help. We fought some more.

Finally, with all the facades removed, we both saw that others were projections of ourselves and our fears. By removing projections, we got to know ourselves. Our lives have changed in deeper and richer ways, and in ways that we could not have imagined. We both feel more at home in our own skin and with each other than we ever have in our lives. We know that we can walk through anything. It might be heartbreaking and painful, but we can do it. We do not believe that all of our problems in life are over. Now we have a way to walk through and use our problems to meet and know ourselves on a deeper and more real level.

There were parts of ourselves we kept hidden, even from each other and ourselves: our shadow selves. They contained our insecurities, pains, dysfunctions, and hidden assets. We are now able to know each other and ourselves on a deeper, more vulnerable level. We have learned that much of the pain and anger during our crisis were created by our thoughts and feelings. (I have never figured out which comes first, and maybe it doesn't matter.) Our thoughts and feelings are what spin us out of control—and how quickly they change.

Today we see each other, ourselves, and the world through much gentler eyes. We are no longer afraid to feel our feelings. We can dance with happiness and mourn in grief with the same touch of peace. It has been very important to us to realize that it is just as freeing to feel sorrow as it is to feel joy. We used to believe the goal was to try to feel happy all the time. Today it is such a relief to just feel.

To this day, we can get lost in our old traumas and start creating stories in our heads. The difference is that we know it is happening and we have some tools to work through them. We no longer stay stuck on “repeat.” We have learned to appreciate the adage that life is a journey and not a destination. None of us has to worry about “getting there,” because “there” is not a stopping-off place where we are completely done. Knowing this has helped us so much.

This book is meant as a guide. I can teach you some of the insights and ways Steve and I learned to help ourselves. Our experience is that it is our fixed false beliefs that harm us. By learning about how our thoughts turn to stories and stories turn into beliefs, we have more power over what our minds are telling us. Freedom is possible, and even probable. There is a way to regain yourself. Recovery is possible.