

Coming Home

How to Leave Trauma Behind
and Find Your True Self

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Chapter 2: Unhealed Wounds From My Parents

MY FATHER DRANK TO SOFTEN THE BLOWS OF A DISAPPOINTING LIFE.

My mother, on the other hand, coped with her sadness by shopping and needing to have the best home and well-dressed kids. Most of my early memories of time with Mom live in the colorful, pastel-soaked world of JC Penney as we browsed endless racks of dresses, skirts, waistcoats, shoes, and hats.

I remember following her, often at the end of her thin, boney arm as it towed me about the place. My head was a lifeless bust to place bonnets and hats and shawls and scarves upon; my shoulders, the peaks of plastic mannequin for my mother's dotting. This was my mother at her most passionate, effusive. She lived for nice things. Love

to her, it seemed, was to drape me in expensive garments as if this was the same as showering me with verbal and physical affection.

But it wasn't honest love.

The moment an item was bought, it was forgotten and her mind leapt straight to the next thing that had to be hunted and purchased. If it wasn't purchased, she found a way to acquire it anyway. For every item she carried to the counter for payment, two made their way into our bags, surreptitiously grabbed and stashed like paraphernalia as we made our way toward the exit. I remember my entire body quivering with terror each time she handed me a rumpled article of clothing and muttered, "Put it in the bag," though it was something that was not paid for. I obeyed, a robotic compliance with tingling cold hands that moved without feeling as my entire sense of self was pulsing in my head, my heart throbbing out my ears as I stared across the store in terror, waiting for men in uniforms to arrest us.

I told myself that my mom must have some kind of mental illness. Why does she need to steal things when my dad makes good money?

What would happen if we got caught? What would happen to *me*?

To avoid these awful encounters, I would make up excuses to not go shopping with her. My dad, sister, and I would be mocked all around town if she was ever caught. I don't even want to think what my dad would do to her. Something had to be really wrong with my mom to steal like this. My choice to grow up and try not to be like her was hardened all the more.

My mother was exactly what her generation considered beautiful. Thin, and proudly so. Curves that were considerable but modestly hidden under the fashion of the day. Long brown hair that was always well-kept.

People told me that I looked like her, but I didn't believe it. Worse, my mother sneered at such an idea. Sure, I may look *like* her, but only

because she found ways to obtain nice clothes to disguise my ugly tomboyish appearance. If it wasn't for her and all her work, I would look no different than a mud-stained orphan digging through a trash pile.

Yet I was deeply aware of something awful about my mother all along. I knew she stole things, driven by some terrible idol in her heart. This truth poisoned everything else about her. I remember searching my house when Mom and Dad weren't home and finding the gifts that were hidden away for Christmas. Once I discovered a pleated skirt and a matching soft blue sweater. Just based on the silky-smooth texture, I knew they were expensive. Had my mother actually worked at her job for these items? Or had she merely snatched them off the rack and stuffed them into the bottom of her bag?

Perhaps it seems cruel of me to judge her so harshly, but I have so few memories of my mother that suggest I should do otherwise. Vanity propelled everything she did. Her entire persona was designed to look like a queen in front of complete strangers. Our house, Dad's car, her outfits: It all had to tell the most glamorous story imaginable.

There was one problem: Me.

I never came close to what she envisioned. To keep up appearances, my mother needed an adorable little girl in beautiful dresses, skipping alongside her wherever she went. I had to become a literal doll.

Instead, I was a dirt-smearred tomboy, rushing outside to play in the shade of a tree with my imaginary friends. This simply wouldn't do, and from the jump my mother let me know what a disappointment I was.

It only got worse with time. When I tumbled into the developmental pit of my teenage years, Mom was there to pick and criticize and scold and shame. My cheeks broke into a hive of acne; my spine grew twice as fast as the rest of my body resulting in several years of lanky,

graceless adolescence. I remained an outdoorsy, sports-loving girl all the while. Not once did she assure me that it would be alright or that I would come into my own.

By the end of high school my body figured itself out, but my mind failed to see the shift. Instead, when I looked in the mirror I saw an irrevocably ugly and unlovable excuse for a girl because that's exactly what my mother told me I was. I hated my body and I hated myself. The only way to fix it, I reasoned, was to starve myself.

Thus began a decades-long affair with an eating disorder. Weighing myself three times a day, obsessing over what few low-fat foods I could dare to eat, I became obsessed with my image, all in the hope that it would win my mother's love.

It never worked.

~

TO FEEL LIKE WE BELONG, like our lives are lush with purpose and peace, we must come to terms with the people who birthed us and raised us. For me, that meant unpacking decades of psychological and physical abuse from two people who knew little about raising an introverted girl like me.

Now it's entirely possible that I'm being unfair to my mother and father. Perhaps I'm cherry-picking the bad times in order to blame my problems on them, rather than to take ownership of them.

I've laid awake many nights pondering this possibility. I spent most of my life fearing my parents' disapproval and working to gain their love. Perhaps I truly was the problem and blaming them was a cheap escape from taking responsibility for my failures and inadequacies.

However, I don't believe this is the case, and I don't believe it is necessarily the case for you, either.

As children, we possess little wisdom or knowledge with which we can make proper, tactful decisions. Our sense of scope is so narrow,

so confined to the four walls of our home and the characters who inhabit it, that we rarely have the wherewithal to know whether our own actions, or the actions of our loved ones, are right and acceptable. We must learn about right and wrong, morality, spirituality, good and evil, from somewhere, and most of us learn our parents' version of these things before we learn anyone else's incarnation of them.

This is why it is so important for parents to seek a blend of humility and confidence as they raise their children. Parents are the authority and the final word; they must also be the first to admit wrongdoing and seek forgiveness. There is nothing quite like being genuinely apologized to. It is empowering. It gives a voice to the silenced.

When parents can confidently and honestly admit their mistakes to their children *without* sacrificing a healthy standard of right and wrong, they teach their children that mistakes are a part of life. This sends a message to the child that they themselves are not a mistake, but that mistakes help a child learn from new experiences. Instead of crushing their kids with shame, parents can use mistakes to teach their kids about peace, communication, and love.

My parents never did this.

Never.

To admit wrongdoing was akin to death.

~

I DO HAVE ONE FOND MEMORY OF MY MOTHER.

It's very short and there isn't much detail to support it.

When I was four years old, my mom dropped me off at kindergarten. It would be my first time on my own. The little fish was about to swim outside of the bowl into the big, unknown world.

I didn't want her to go. I was terrified that she would leave me.

Worse, my mind had already started its work.

They won't like you, it told me.

You're too ugly to make friends.

I remember my body throbbing with pain that day. My neck and cheeks were incredibly sore. For the longest time, I couldn't remember why.

At that moment, my mother felt like the only refuge in the world, and I clung to her. But she pulled me away and shooed me out of the car.

"Go on, Kathy," she told me.

So I did, swimming away from her.

I never felt safe with her again. I didn't belong with her, and I didn't belong anywhere else.

It would be decades before I felt like I belonged anywhere at all.

Trauma Check

Does this sound familiar to you?

Did one or both of your parents avoid apologizing and admitting any wrongdoing at all costs? If so, you and I have a lot in common regarding the founding of our sense of self. When we live under the authority of such parents, our core identities are framed around service and pleasing. The apologies flow in one direction because only one party is ever truly "wrong."

In my case, and perhaps yours, the only one who was ever wrong was me. That meant my parents were always right, and always to be served and pleased.

Was your youth centered around keeping others happy at any and all cost? Were the adults in your life unapologetic for terrifying you with their tempers and addictions? Was your entire existence framed as a performance to please grown-ups with their lofty expectations?

How did you respond to these pressures? Were you a people-pleaser, caretaker, being a good child, staying out of sight and out of mind? I did all I could to grow up as the nice girl who never caused her parents any problems. I stayed out of their way as much as I could. People would have heard my parents saying that Kathy kept to herself for the most part.

While you may not have stashed your heart and soul away like I did, you undoubtedly reacted by hiding part of yourself. We all edit and modify our personalities to avoid offending those from whom we seek approval and validation. So often it is our parents. It took me doing my own healing work before I could come to terms with the fact that my parents did the best they knew how at the time. It does not let them off the hook for their behavior, but it helped me be able to forgive them over time.

With all respect given to the mothers and fathers out there who do a wonderful job, many parents unintentionally or recklessly teach their children to live in fear, to never show emotion. Parents who do not love themselves cannot possibly love their children. When children do not have their emotional needs met, they start playing roles so people will like them and accept them. That's precisely what I did, even into my adult years.

While therapy and spiritual healing and medicine can help us process this, the journey of healing can take decades if you do not have the right tools to aid in the healing process. Plus one must be able to trust someone not to judge them and give them a safe space to share. There may be a lot to unpack in your childhood, just as there was in mine. When you do, and when you identify how the seeds of anxiety and shame were planted in your life, you can start to dig out these terrible weeds so the flowers of your life can bloom full and bright.

I can now appreciate just how much my father's drinking was a massive attack against me; I can also see how my mother's scorn was wrong and unearned. I know this now.

But it took a lifetime of pain and hard work to untangle. I hope it doesn't take you nearly as long.

For when you do, I promise: You'll know exactly why you belong right where you are, as you are.