



**Memoirs of a
Healer/
Clinical Social
Worker**

**Autobiography
of
Bruce
Wheaton**

**Memoirs of a Healer/Clinical Social
Worker – Autobiography of Bruce
Whealton**

Bruce Whealton

Memoirs of a Healer/Clinical Social Worker – Autobiography of Bruce Whealton
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A certain number of copies of this book are available for free and you may share the book with others to bring attention to the stories contained within the book.

Suggested donation: \$10. Please visit <https://www.gofundme.com/f/justice-and-publication-for-bruce-whealton> to make a donation on GoFundMe.

If you have any comments or questions, feel free to email me at brucewhealton@outlook.com I love to hear from readers and get an idea as to how you were touched or moved by the story. I always love to hear about what you like most about what was presented in the book.

The content of this book will illustrate the many and various needs that I have for funds. Some of those needs for funding are related to marketing and promoting the book. Additionally, I want to get print copies of the book in the hands of others. When I discuss the injustice that occurred and the impact it had on my psychological well-being you will get a feel for why I am trying to get copies of the book in the hands of those who can address certain problems that have existed for some time.

Injustice has utterly destroyed my life over the past two decades. I have lost the income I might have had during this period of time.

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Acknowledgments and Recommendations

Book recommendations:

This is what Amritari wrote about my book:

I really feel like I get to know you through most of the book and then when everything falls apart it is really shocking and disturbing. As a reader one really cares about you as a character. As a reader, I really want to know what happens to you.

You are such a beautiful writer. I just love how you write. It is so easy to read and get engrossed in all the details. I just enjoyed your book so much and was up into the early morning hours reading it. I couldn't put it down.

- Amritari Martinez adding:

I stayed up till 2 am to finish your book. Oh my god. You have suffered so much. The turn of events was shocking. You are such a good writer. It all sounds like such a nightmare. I really hope the next chapters can be about how you returned to your life and healed from all of this misfortune. Your love story was also beautiful. You are such a romantic. It's so sad that all of these things happened to you.

- And later Amritari added:

This is really Fantastic and engaging. I was totally captivated by your story and drawn into it with your prose and the character of yourself that you created. I want to know more of you. I feel connected to you. I care about you.

Followed by the following:

You did a terrific job bringing more details into your book. I think it is a lot clearer, I really thought you did a good job writing about your romantic encounter with Lynn. That was really beautiful.

It is all so shocking. You have suffered so much. I really think you can turn this around. You are such a nice person and a great writer.

Acknowledgments

I wanted to thank all those who made this book possible.

I wanted to begin by thanking my good friend and colleague Amritari Martinez. We both have experience working in the mental health or allied fields. Without her feedback, support, questions, and guidance, this book would not be possible. She asked questions that helped me clarify areas where the details of events had not been explained well in earlier drafts. That sense of someone wanting to know what happened next or what happened with the love of my life, Lynn and me... those questions were so helpful and demonstrated that someone is reading and paying attention and that someone cares!

So, Amritari was like a colleague in the field and an editor all in one. As a writer, publishing my first novel-length book, we need editors. Because of everything I have experienced, I am not in a position to pay top dollar to expensive editors. Mainly I wanted to get the story out there. I wanted to connect with others. That is what I found ever since I first shared this book with Amritari!

Cari M. and others from the Orange County Rape Crisis Center were very supportive in recognizing my own victimization. We discussed the gender bias that exists when one considers who can be seen as a victim. It might be rare but sometimes, as in my own experiences, a male can be the victim of a violent female. It's sad that this is so hard for many people to imagine this can be true.

I wanted to thank Kirra, the girl I met in the hospital in 2019. Without her friendship, compassion, and kindness, empathy and so much more, I literally wouldn't be here to write this book. I can't give her last name because we met in a psychiatric hospital. This is described in the Introduction that follows.

I want to thank Amy H. also who I met in the same hospital during the same period. We are still friends. She was a good listener and similarly compassionate, caring, and empathetic, not to mention a good friend.

During a writing group, I received some great feedback and suggestions from David Scott Binanay which came as an epiphany to me. David suggested that I start the

book with a pleasant account of how I met my first wife and that I should help the reader to get to know me as a person. This flipped a switch in my mind.

My autobiography had seemed like it was full of so many ideas that I couldn't articulate a theme or a sense of what the book was about. It had seemed to be about so many different things and the ideas had not come together as part of one coherent narrative. I was able to revise the content of my book and to know where it was going with each chapter of the book. With that advice, I knew why and how each chapter would fit into the overall narrative after this. I could see each chapter flowing from the previous chapter after that feedback from David. I had an overall theme for the entire book now and I could see how the different pieces of my story fit together.

As an addendum to this comment above, it was with the feedback of Suzanne, mentioned below, and after consulting with an editor that I realized that I still needed to keep revising and improving the book. The intersection of injustice with mental illness – my own recent suicide attempt – that put things into a broader focus.

I decided to open the book with an account of someone literally saving my life in 2019. It was with the support and kindness of Amy, Kirra and other fellow patients with me on a psychiatric unit in December of 2019 that I am able to bring this book to you in this current form. You will see how what seemed to be part of the past is not actually an event that happened in the past and then ended with justice and healing.

I am still going to fight for justice!

The UNC Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health was very helpful and supportive over the past year or more in helping me to find the strength to write this book.

My friend Suzanne Hoy demonstrated compassion, empathy, and curiosity about what has happened to me beginning when I first met her. We talked that first day for over twelve hours when she showed a fascination with my story and wanted to understand all the details. Her many questions and willingness to listen were very

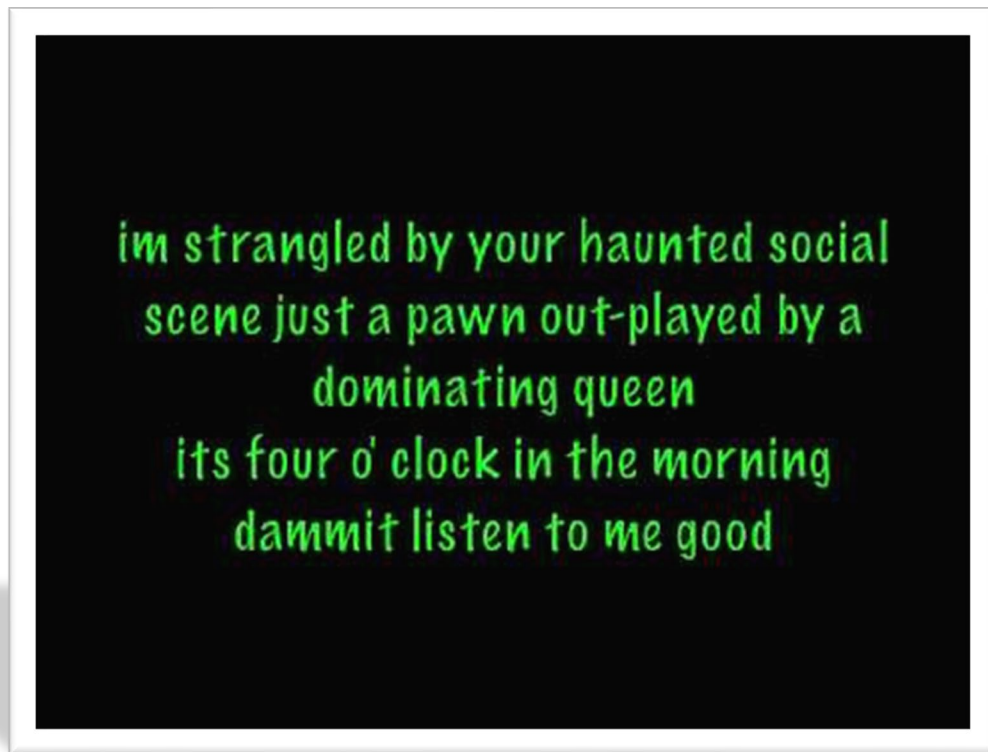
powerful in helping me to tell my story. I was so lucky and encouraged by her interest.

The advocates at Community Empowerment Fund were so helpful with their support over the past year. I was seeking a platform where I could tell my story and they suggested Wattpad. This publication is part of my effort to get my life back after an extremely tragic miscarriage of justice. Initially, it was hard to talk about what had happened to me.

A Memoir of a Healer/Clinical Social Worker: Introduction

Someone Saved My Life

Dear reader: This book is a true story of the life I have known. I am writing to you to share this story in the hopes that we can make sense of things. I will share with you this story on the web, and you will have a way to respond to the questions that will arise.



I do have a favor to ask you though as we discuss these events. Please, be very specific. I will do the same for you. What I mean is that I won't use platitudes about how "there is hope" or "things will work out." I am going to tell you about some very specific experiences that I have had, and I am going to speak with brutal honesty. I am going to be detailed and explicit - meaning, I must apologize if you are someone who thinks in terms of certain abstract ideas.

Something amazing happened to make it possible for me to bring this story to you. It was Monday, December 16, 2019, and someone saved my life tonight. So, if I sounded bitter in the previous paragraph, I apologize. Let me tell you how someone saved my life. Then we will see how that relates to love, kindness, nurturance, compassion, and empathy.

I was in the hospital at the University of North Carolina Medical Center in the psychiatric unit. I had meant to end my life a few days ago. My ex-wife found out because I told her thinking that it would be too late when she got the message.

On this Monday morning just after midnight, I was absolutely convinced that nothing can be done to change my circumstances and that there is no hope. I knew that I would be released soon and then I won't fail in my next suicide attempt. Visions of a slip noose swings in my mind along with other ideas – pills.

I can't sleep. I'm restless... sitting in a large, darkened room just past midnight – a common room. The hospital is quiet.

My ex-wife had been angry that I considered suicide but she understood why I had been that desperately depressed. Yes, I have been through hell but that was in the past. This is not about past pain. That doesn't matter. No one can help remedy the situation because no one understands.

This is what was going through my mind when this girl comes out.

“You can't sleep either?” she asks and takes a seat next to me to talk. **A simple question that started a process that made this book possible!**

This is interesting... because for some reason, I am thinking that I should tell her my story. I have no idea where that idea arose. I am listening to her. I remember her name is Kirra. No, I'm not going to tell you her last name or why she was there. Confidentiality is important.

She seemed at the time to be drawing a story out of me. I felt compassion and empathy for her situation as well. There is something about the problems she has been facing that reminds me of someone who was very special in my life in the past. I can't say what that is because it would reveal something about her that should not be made public with this book.

I felt an overwhelming need to tell her how I had been harmed in the past. I told her how I had been victimized by a woman who brutally attacked me and then lied and said that I attacked her! And if that lie was not bad enough, she said I tried to undress her which meant that I was charged with a sexual offense!

I explained how I would NEVER do anything to hurt someone. I was a therapist who understood how traumatic events affect people. And in fact, dear reader, you will see this when I show it to you throughout this book.

She said, “I believe you, one hundred percent.” She had demonstrated understanding of what I had been feeling – **empathy**.

My first reaction was a thought that floated through my mind, “of course you do... what person who has spent any time at all with me would think I would harm a person.” That is what I was thinking.

I had held the weight of this pain for more than a decade and a half. I held it almost all alone. I asked questions about how it is that we come to know these things about a person. Indeed, there are subtle cues or clues that we pick up that tell us about danger. She used the word “vibes.”

She seemed like she wanted to help me and to be my friend. She was much younger than me, so I wasn't thinking in romantic terms about this friendship. She just said she wanted me to join her and sit with her at breakfast in the morning and at other meals. **Love takes many forms.**

She also understood why the events from the past did have a tremendous impact on my life in the present. I had described my passion for helping others and working as a therapist... and working in the mental health/psychiatric field.

I wondered why this wasn't so clear to everyone.

My plans to end my life suddenly evaporated. **I had hungered for this as truly as we can be starving for food or air!**

I came alive. So much more was offered to the patients on the unit during the week. I had arrived on Friday night and there were not many therapy groups over the weekend. I started connecting with others during therapy groups, at meals, and as we, the patients, socialized.

It was a transformative experience. The world had seemed like a very dark and cold place devoid of human compassion, but I was observing how caring people here were. I'm talking about the other patients that I was meeting.

A couple of days later, we were asked to pick a feeling word to describe how we feel or what we were experiencing. For some reason, I chose to use words like "outsider," "alone," "unnoticed," and "invisible."

The response from the group caused my jaw to drop. I was told that I was actually like a "social butterfly." That I had been at the center of all the action. Another person said I persuaded and encouraged him to come to the group.

Indeed, this was a transformative experience. I had been noticing others and listening to them. I had encouraged someone to come to the "group" because I was concerned and also, I felt that it works better if we can be there together for each other.

There was one other important and memorable event. Some of us were watching Law & Order: SVU. There was an episode that portrayed a teacher who loved teaching children who were falsely accused of sexually molesting one or more children. The visceral pain of this was exquisite. As someone who worked as a clinical social worker, I could recognize that pain from the way it was portrayed to the way we think about having that happen to us or another person.

I wanted to tell some others the experience I had and how I had been harmed by a lie of this nature. I approached two people who stepped out during a commercial break and I said I wanted to share something with them.

I explained how I had been falsely accused and falsely convicted. By that time, they knew that I had worked as a therapist. They knew how much I loved that kind of work or those kinds of activities and experiences.

Beginning with Kirra and then with others I was telling my story and finding the support that I had needed for so long. I had tried to carry this burden all alone and now I was finding opportunities to unburden myself of this exquisite pain. They and others in the hospital, patients, and staff showed love, compassion, and empathy which is precisely what motivated me to go into psychiatric social work.

So, many people would tell me that the terrible events were in the past and that I shouldn't let it bother me now. I shouldn't dwell on the past.

Excuse my language dear reader, but that is such bullshit! The lies of that woman who attacked me in 2004 – the false accusations, the false conviction – affect every aspect of my life in the here and now. Those lies are etched into stone metaphorically speaking. Before we talk more about **love** and **empathy** let me add a few points. Bear with me just a moment.

The pernicious lie suggests that people should worry about did or might do in the future. It's on a North Carolina Public Safety website. This is the modern equivalent of something being etched in stone.

The criminal record presents me as the perpetrator of the crime, but it has no basis in reality. I had been the victim! It's still out there and I had been told by a law firm that there was no hope for me that I would ever get justice... When I heard that cold statement from a lawyer that no one could do anything, I didn't hear the full story. I just heard no one can do anything – there was no hope!

You may disagree strongly with my choice to try to end my life in 2019 but ironically that was the only way that I was able to have this transformative experience. The world had seemed to be dark, cold, and devoid of caring people... devoid of compassion and empathy. The empathy, love, compassion, I developed over a lifetime would not be available to anyone were it not for what started with “a story.”

So, that's what I am giving to you as a gift – a **story**.

Over the next year I continued to write “my story” and this is what you are reading now. I hope you understand, dear reader, why abstract ideas and platitudes are not every helpful to me. When I hear “things are going to be okay” said to me without first acknowledging the pain and without pragmatic statements about how things are going to be okay, I just think you are not offering empathy and compassion.

In my life experience, I have learned how to specifically figure out what a person needs or desires. I have learned to understand how that changes from moment to moment. I have learned how to recognize needs, things that we hunger for and desires almost instantly.

This is how I act from a place of love!

As a psychotherapist, I have developed certain instincts that are almost like common sense for me now. I would NEVER imagine telling a client or a patient what I think is good or a good life. I learned about active listening.

I know for a while there it seemed like I was angry but that's not the full story! We haven't gotten to love if we stop at anger and that's all you see or hear.

Human beings are imperfect and the systems we create are imperfect. So, it's not good enough to just go home and say we didn't break any rules. The bigger issues begin with a question like did we act with love? Did you consider that you could be wrong? Did you consider how that might affect another person?

I would argue that love can be a quality that is the foundation of all societies and all people everywhere in one form or another. A psychotherapist or psychologist might use the word unconditional positive regard.

Certain social workers will speak of social justice because we recognize what happens to people and how they feel, how they experience life when it is lacking. That's empathy.

True empathy, true love, and true compassion reject ideas like "nothing can be done" or "that's just the way it is." That's injustice.

Love comes in many forms though. A mother and father's love are demonstrated in the way they nurture a child. I know I didn't have that growing up. So, I hungered for it. You will hear about some special people in my life. A special friend, a girlfriend, a fiancée, a wife. Sadly, there was some tragedy in my life so you will hear about a second wife.

When I was immature, I thought I wanted a strong protector. The seed of change in that regard was planted in my mind first by a grandmother that was very weak and an elderly grandfather. Their strong love and concern for me showed me there was more than strength that matters – at least more than physical strength.

You'll hear about my first special love with a young woman named Celta who cuddled with me, nurtured me, comforted me – loved me. We were drawn together by the love language of physical contact and spending time together. By physical contact, I am not necessarily speaking of sensual contact.

In my twenties and thirties, the love of my life, Lynn Denise Krupey, like me, recognized that we felt love through physical contact and spending time together.

There are many ways forms of love but those needs, desires or what I hunger for, may have influenced my choices when it came to romantic or certain forms of emotional love that we feel with someone of the opposite sex.

Obviously, I played other roles in life. I was a Clinical Social Worker, a psychotherapist. I didn't cuddle with my clients. However, I did recognize the strivings and desires of people – the motivating forces. I recognized desires and needs that change from moment to moment. As a social worker, if someone is hungry for food, you try to get them food. You get the idea.

You will notice a theme in this book related to my exquisite awareness of the needs, desires, feelings, and emotions of others. These are things that can change very rapidly. Believe me, I have seen people's emotions change in fractions of a second. I had those capacities firmly in place when the bad things to which I alluded to above occurred. Someone like me would not be the cause of harm to another because I would know what another person is experiencing.

I will show you how I instinctually react to the needs and desires of others instantly.

As a way to help you get a sense of the many experiences of love, we can start with an example. There are many forms of love. However, if I tell you I'm going to tell you a love story, you get an idea as to what I mean. Maybe you are already feeling a sense of anticipation. Yes, love stories feel good. So, let's start there.

A Love Story

I was once so paralyzed by shyness that I honestly never believed I would EVER find anyone to love. Luckily, I was wrong - I fell madly and passionately in love.

July 4, 1992. Nearly three months since I moved to Wilmington, North Carolina.

I was with Lynn.

There is a jetty that runs out to a tiny island south of Carolina Beach where the Cape Fear River meets the ocean. It is the farthest point south if you drive down Highway 421/Carolina Beach Road from Wilmington, North Carolina.

It was our first date. Sort of. If you can call it that way. I never had any dating experience, mind you. And I reckon Lynn never had a great deal of experience either. Since I was driving, I asked if she wanted to go to this scenic spot. She agreed.

So, I parked the car near the beach there near that jetty.

We were talking about how during low tide the jetty acts as a bridge over to a tiny island that is like a mini-animal conservation area. The water gently washes against and over the rocks but if the tide is low, like today, we could walk out to the island.

The jetty is not on the open ocean, so the waves only gently lap against the beach and the rocks that form the jetty. It is just a bunch of rocks that have been stacked against one another to make a bridge of sorts. The pavement that layered the stack of rocks made the bridge more accessible.

A photo of one such jetty/bridge is shown below.



I had just moved to Wilmington in April and I wanted to get to know the people there. So, I started attending poetry reading sessions. They were held at the lounge on the fourth floor of the convention center which overlooks Cape Fear River.

There was something serene about the setting that made it comfortable for me to get up in front of a group of people and read my poetry. The sun would reflect across the Cape Fear River casting the soft rays into the room. Dusty, the emcee for the poetry reading sessions who works at the center, made it easier too. She has that magical quality of attending to the guests of the Convention Center whether they were there for the poetry or not. Her caring ways equivalent to that of a loving mother always make us feel welcomed and comfortable.

Sharing my poetry in front of a group was an impossible accomplishment. As a psychotherapist, I would have to lead therapy groups so being able to read my poetry to a group was perfect evidence of my ability to accomplish something that had seemed impossible. My ability to get up in front of a room of people every week was an amazing feat. This was something I never had the guts to do when I was younger. I never wanted to place myself at the center of attention.

I would see Lynn every Sunday at the poetry readings at the Coastline Convention Center. For me, she stood out among all the attendees that were present there. She was thin but shapely.

Cystic Fibrosis – a genetic disease. I overheard her talking about that. That was why she was coughing all the time.

I had come sharing poems about Celta, someone I had loved, and lost. I wasn't expecting to make a romantic connection. Something about Lynn caught my attention.

What was it about her? Did I already think that she was the most beautiful girl imaginable? Do I dare admit to myself that I am entertaining such irrational thoughts? I never thought of it as some kind of love-at-first-sight but there was something about her that intrigued me. Of all the people I held in high regard, Lynn was that one person that seemed to challenge that perspective.

Her voice was hypnotic and alluring. She had all the things that one considers in feminine beauty and shape or so it seemed to me early on. She seemed perfect. I loved her voice - both when she was at the microphone and when I was close to her. And her face, her skin, her legs seemed like gentle features I might have created in my own mind if I had the imagination to do such a thing.

Yet, I noticed she was alone. I guess that was one of the reasons why I was so lucky.

It took me some three months to find the courage and the right words to ask her out. I waited to see if she already had someone else. I wanted to avoid being rejected. I can still feel the fear now as I write this some twenty-eight years later. I guess that was a sign of how much I wanted this to work out. It was scary.

Asking Lynn if she would spend time with me was an accomplishment.

So, here we are, at this gentle beach on July 4th.

I did not expect the pavement to be this slippery. It was a cause of concern for me but not because I was afraid of falling. It was imperative that I must not let her slip

and risk bruising or scratching her perfect skin. Putting my nervousness aside, I offered my hand.

She took my hand.

She took my hand!

Wow!

You must be thinking that I am exaggerating but this was amazing! Her gentle hand around mine!

“Do you want to keep going?” I asked.

"Sure," she said, pausing to take in the scene with me. Her straight blonde hair swayed in the gentle wind.

We walked a little further but then decided that this was getting too slippery. And dangerous.

What's next, I thought. Jean works at Fort Fischer, a Civil War museum site, and they have a tour around the historic site. We could go there.

It was an amazing day. The first of an amazing weekend that we would spend together.

We saw the fireworks in downtown Wilmington that night, over the Cape Fear River and near the Battleship. My friends regarded me as a pacifist. I suppose Lynn was too.

After the fireworks, we were walking back to the car, passing by the place where she worked along the way. Some co-worker asked her if I was her boyfriend. “No, we are just friends,” she said.

Darn. I thought this was a date. Nevertheless, we were still just friends.

I can wait.

It was the 4th of July 1992, and everything would change from this day forward.

Time has a way of changing fates. We became more than just friends. Over time, we fell madly and passionately in love. Two years after this day in July of 1992, we were picking out an engagement ring for her.

Oh, and I was in graduate school in Social Work. Everything was falling into place. It was perfect.

More than that, I felt things I never knew I would or could feel. It is impossible to comprehend what I felt that day when she first held my hand.

The world was full of hope for me. Anything seemed possible. I had clear ideas about what I wanted and where I was going. So, while it might seem that this was just about my social life and making friends, it was also a vision of life for me in some sense of the bigger picture of what really matters to me.

We would get a home together north of Wilmington on Brucemont Drive. Her mother bought the home and we rented it from her.

I became successful in social work. I became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker - a psychotherapist. I opened my own private practice. I gained respect from my colleagues who told me that Wilmington was a saturated market, meaning there was no need for an additional therapist in the area. The person who warned me that Wilmington was a saturated market and that an additional therapist is not needed had the best of intentions, but it was so great to know that despite all the challenges I found success.

I saw a life with Lynn Denise Krupey. I proved to myself that I could accomplish my dreams. It was all built around me and my family. I dedicated my life to helping others to get back on their feet. I had everything I wanted. I certainly had no intention of changing anything at all. I could not imagine anything different or anything better than this other than more of the same.

Halfway through 2000, a meteor would come crashing down on this life I had tirelessly built upon. The shocking events that began to transpire that year would incinerate everything in my world leaving ashes to blot out the sky. I saw only

darkness, the fog of ashes blowing fragments of the familiar home, the furnishings, the words, and dreams.

I was in desperate need of compassion, empathy, kindness, and love but I wasn't thinking too clearly about where to look for these things and where to find them.

I still believed my so-called family had a capacity for providing what I was needing. I wasn't thinking clearly. To understand why I should NOT have turned to my parents or siblings, we need to consider what life was like growing up.

Forward

The early years of my life will be introduced briefly to outline the hunger, needs, and desires that I had as an adult and why I chose to work as a healer, a clinical social worker, a psychiatric social worker.

For the longest time, I thought that the only (or the main) challenge that I had to overcome was shyness. Indeed, overcoming my shyness was an amazing and unbelievable accomplishment. But once I developed a sense of what might be a rewarding career for me, I still had to overcome more challenges. I still hungered for things that had been missing previously.

When I went to live on my own away at college, I found friends. People who listened to me and validated my feelings were meeting a hunger that I had for decades. A need and a desire.

Then I met this tiny woman named Celta. One might wonder what a tiny woman who is no more than four foot eleven, underweight, and with her own problems can offer to anyone. Our love for one another enabled unbelievable things to happen. Celta was nurturing, comforting. She loved me and I loved her. I would repeat that over and over, every day. We would hold one another, cuddle together. Caress one another, listen to each other, validate each other's feelings.

This would end suddenly and tragically. But it would be followed within a relatively short period of time by another connection that I made with someone named Lynn Denise Krupey. We would become girlfriend and boyfriend, get engaged and then live together for years. We would nourish one another with our love, filling our hunger for closeness, physical contact, time spent together. Devotion to one another.

You will hear about friends who made me feel like I was special, important, valuable, and lovable. Some of them were more than just friends. Lynn and I were definitely more than just friends. We lived as husband and wife. I don't want to give away too much nor do I want to ignore my second wife. Tragedy had intervened.

Before we get to the climax of the story, you will hear about all the accomplishments I have had in life, all the success. I do consider the fact that I found someone to love

me several times to be a form of success and it is certainly an accomplishment. Earning the enduring ongoing, devoted love of another is an amazing accomplishment. Continuing to earn that love and devotion involves many accomplishments over time.

In building a successful career, I will describe many, many accomplishments. Success required planning, judgment, effort, and hard work. Even the love stories that you will read in this book would not have been possible if I had not overcome the paralyzing shyness that I had into my early adulthood.

Many survivors, like myself, choose a career where we can help others. Obviously, when you consider the fact that I was paralyzed by shyness this was a challenge. It turns out that shyness can be conquered.

I learned that I am an incredibly special person. I'm not saying that to brag. I am merely stating that I loved and was loved by some very special people.

I built a career around helping others. I am very good at that. You'll see.

I haven't always known these things. When your own family betrays you and abandons you, how can you feel good about yourself?

There are ways to heal and find support out there. Over time I learned how worthy and deserving I am of goodness, joy, happiness, and success.

Writing is therapeutic and that is a message that I want to share with others. If writing is potentially interesting to you it can help you whenever you are struggling with pain, negative emotions, mental illness, tragedy, and trauma. It is a form of narrative therapy. You can write your own story.

This is what I am doing. I am writing my own story.

Section One: The Early Years, Immaturity & Shyness

I will start with the earliest years of my life because I mentioned that I was shy. The efforts I made to overcome shyness later in life would be very valuable in my choice to become a clinical social worker. I learned that psychology, as well as empathy, and social skills can be very powerful tools in helping others to heal.

I will mention some information about child abuse and the many forms of child abuse. This is also important in considering why I went into social work and why I wanted to be a psychotherapist. Social workers can intervene to help victims of child abuse. I learned that even if no agency investigates abuse/neglect that doesn't mean that a person's home life was healthy or good enough.

Those who grow up with abuse will be sensitive to the appearance of emotional neglect and abuse. If motivated by love and compassion, we want to help people to heal. We can relate.

Obviously, a wide range of factors go into choosing and discovering a career that is a good match, but I thought it would be helpful to start at the beginning of my life to show you what might have inspired me to make certain choices later in life.

I would later learn about the value of relationships, social support, compassion, empathy, and the needs that everyone has for validation.

Of course, abuse isn't just recognized when we are physically assaulted. As an adult, after I received an undergraduate degree and had a plan for my future, I first moved in with my parents and spent two years and about three months with them. In the following chapters of this section, I will describe the emotional and psychological abuse that I experienced at this time and how I coped – who was there to help me.

You will see that during this time when I was a young adult, I literally was made psychologically sick while living with my parents – this will be described in the chapters that follow. I had someone special during that time, someone named Celta, who comforted, consoled and nurtured me. Despite all the improvements I had

made previously through my counseling, I had not realized what was missing until I found what I needed with Celta.

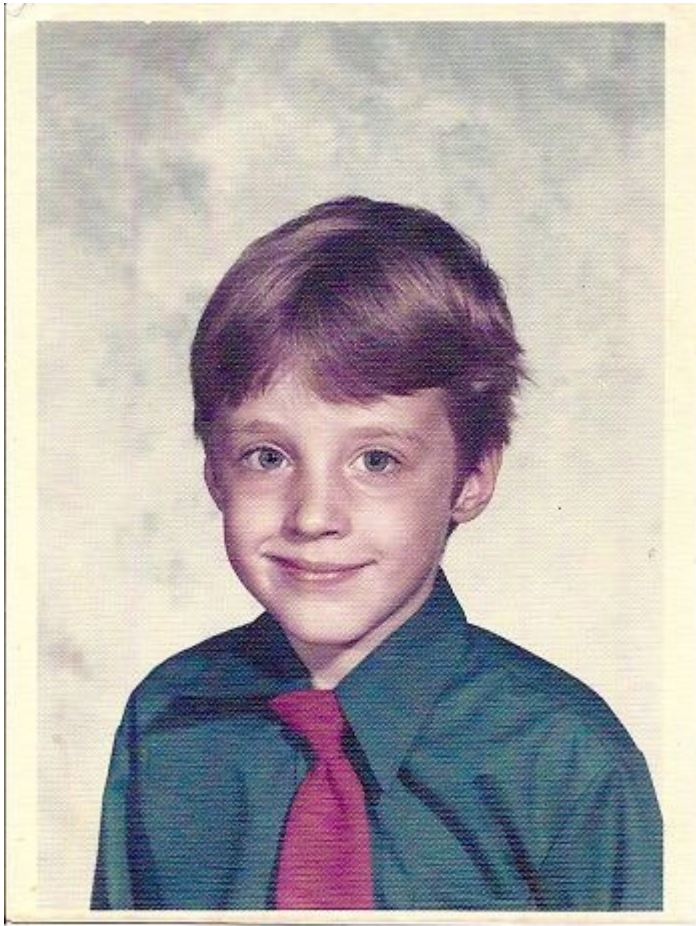
It's ironic that in a conversation with my sister in 2020, she said in an email that our parents were so worried about me and how they might find me when they got home... how they took me to the emergency room. She heard this from our parents because she had not been present at the time. So, she left out the fact that the reason I wasn't well was because of the toxic environment created by our parents.

Despite all the improvements that I made in college I had also needed to have someone see me as "special." I needed to believe that I could be the most important person in another person's life. I didn't know that was missing until Celta showed it to me. For all her "problems" she did this amazing and unbelievable important thing. She was a very small, girl, or woman. She had anorexia and was very much underweight.

Previously, I had friends who respected me. I had friends who listened to me. I had friends who validated my feelings. Actually, they validated some of my feelings. My desire for physical closeness was a desire that Celta fulfilled for me! Do you know that there is a syndrome called "failure to thrive" which demonstrates the human need for physical closeness? We don't just need a home, food, and clothing. We need closeness and nurturing. In extreme cases of "failure to thrive" certain creatures, including people, can die.

I will bring my insights as an adult, as a mental health professional to bear in understanding what was happening to me and those around me when I was so young. Then I will move on to my early adult years and how I was influenced by others, early life events, and how I influenced others or had an impact on the lives of others.

Chapter 1: The Shy Boy



That's me in the photograph above. What do I feel when I see that photograph now? I feel a sense of what was missing, and I feel a sense that he was hurt at one point and he was scared. Self-compassion allows me to recognize these things in myself.

Many of the details of the abuse have been processed by me in therapy over the years. Other aspects of child abuse were healed through the relationships I had with friends and those I loved, including those who I loved emotionally.

We were physically assaulted/abused by both of our parents when we were growing up. The details of this have been processed by me through counseling, in conversations with and I have moved on with the support of people I have loved. So, I'm not going to describe actual incidents. I don't think it is necessary to go into detail about this.

Growing up, we used to discuss this, my sister, Carrie, and me. I don't know what happened to that relationship with my sister. We used to be close.

Not too long ago, I realized that I had some residual problems related to this abuse. Just last year I tried to talk to her about this. Her response was shocking! She acted like she didn't remember the last emotional thing she had shared with me decades earlier. She acted like I was doing something wrong by even talking about these things.

I can't say what she felt about me talking to my therapist about these issues. I just know that she had not demonstrated any empathy, compassion, kindness, or understanding. She was angry at me!

Based on my years of experience and education, I might have some theories that might explain her reactions but that's material that is not important in this particular book. Those theories are not relevant. She isn't my client or patient seeking my assistance. In fact, tragically, we aren't in touch with each other now.

One of the first memories that left an impact on me and which is relevant to this book is a memory I had when my mother's mother heard me in distress and heard what she recognized as abuse. My grandma yelled at her own daughter and her son-in-law to leave Bruce alone.

You see she was weak at this point in her life. She got around with a walker. She and Grandpa moved in with us when we were very young children because their health had deteriorated relatively early in their lives. They first moved into our home when Grandma was about 70 and Grandpa was about 78.

Sometime later, when I was about 8, that's when something was happening as I was on the stairs leading to the second floor of our home. I don't even remember all the details. I only remember Grandma yelling "leave Bruce alone." And I remember thinking "but Grandma, I'm bad."

That was NOT true. I most certainly was not a bad boy. I had tried so hard to do everything right. I was just that small, skinny, fearful, little boy like the one you see in the photograph above. The southerners would say that Grandma cussed out her daughter and son-in-law. I don't believe it was a physical assault, but it had

bothered Grandma enough to shout those words as a command – a command that she could not enforce other than with shame, which she hoped would work. Maybe Grandma still believed she commanded authority over her daughter.

Grandpa used to be so protective of me too. We would take out the garbage and do other chores together. He would call me “Brucie” until I was almost 13 until he died. He was nearly blind it had seemed to me. Grandpa died at age 86. One of the ways he was protective or how he demonstrated concern was the way he cautioned against me lifting too much weight when we were doing chores. He said I might get a hernia.

As an immature boy, I was still trying to live up to the standards of how boys are not supposed to be wimps or sissies. We are socialized to be strong as boys and tough. Grandpa’s wisdom was good though. I had a hernia operation when I was very young – in the part between the legs. It makes me uncomfortable to just think about getting any more specific.

The earliest years of my life are somewhat relevant to this book. I have no fond memories from growing up. I don’t remember having had such memories. Maybe I once did.

A story about something very early in my life will illustrate some important issues that I want to describe. It's a story that I heard from my mother when I was growing up. Unless this story was not related to us later, I would not have known about this because I was so young. So, in the story, I was about two and my parents bought a fire engine. It made a loud noise and I got terrified. I can imagine myself reaching for comfort and consolation and I will tell you how I can imagine that in a moment.

The response of my parents was one of frustration. They had bought a gift and it was about them and how my fear affected them. It was like I wasn’t showing any appreciation. Now, I think of my cat getting startled by a loud noise and what do I do even though my cat cannot understand my words. I say in a soothing tone, “it’s okay, you’re okay.” I just noticed this recently. My interpretation and the examples I might use might be different if I was writing this at a different period in my life.

So, I was a “sensitive baby” and that was what was conveyed to me. Here’s the thing that we know from psychological research. Babies and children need to bond with

their parents so they can feel safe to explore the world. It's like we are on a ship and when the waves come and rock the boat, we need guardrails to feel safe. If we don't have that we are fearful.

This would explain why I was shy growing up. I didn't feel like I had a safe harbor.

I do know from my memories of Elementary School that I didn't feel like I could turn to grown-ups for safety or protection. The only memory of being picked on is a memory I have from when I was in Kindergarten or 1st grade. We were outside for recess and I was last to come back into the building. There were three or four other boys who taunted me and kept me from coming back and returning to class on time.

These four boys seemed to enjoy the bit of fear that I demonstrated. It's okay, kids can be mean and I'm not holding it against them. But I felt so embarrassed for even wanting help and for being picked on. I didn't tell the teacher.

In third grade, a new guy moved into my neighborhood named Paul Plourde. He was a big guy in my eyes. We became friends that year and I felt like I had a protector, so I really came out of my shell. It was amazing. In the mindset of me as a pre-teen kid, strength was what I thought I needed most.

Only later would I discover that I didn't really need a physically strong protector to overcome my shyness. I didn't need a protector as much as I needed nurturing and comfort.

What do most parents do that was missing for me and what had I wanted? I wanted to be hugged. I wanted parents that snuggle with their children. I wanted to be spoken to with soothing words. I wanted to feel special. I wanted to be nurtured.

When I was about six or seven, I was at the YMCA learning how to swim and I was in the deep end. I had learned some things about swimming, but I was still a little scared. My swimming instructor was a teenager who was 17 or 18, as I remember it. I remember getting scared as I swam toward her and grabbing her around the neck. I thought I had done something wrong or maybe I just felt embarrassed that I needed this. Maybe someone would laugh at me for being weak and needy.

But at that moment, I got what I needed – soothing, comfort, and assurance that nothing would happen to me. I was okay. What I was doing was okay.

It would take me until I met Celta and started cuddling with her to realize that I had hungered for this my whole life so much. I was starving for affection by the time I reached adulthood. I needed caressing, nurturing, closeness, and physical contact.

I'll talk about the need for validation and other forms of comfort in the next chapter, including empathy.

Chapter 2: Junior High and High School Years and Domestic Violence/Abuse

Note: the last names of females mentioned below are different than what they were at the time since they took on the last name of their husband(s).

Members of our extended family knew it was happening. The emotional, psychological, verbal, and physical abuse, not to mention the emotional neglect. We had an aunt, my mother's sister, Aunt Maureen (Bingham), who was eight years older than our mother. Aunt Maureen had three daughters – Sharon (Salerno when we were growing up), Karen (Gleifert), and Linda Bingham. We called them Sharon, Karen, and Linda.

They were our first cousins, and they were adults the entire time when we were growing up. Sharon had sons named Dan and Jaime. Dan was almost four years younger than me, and Jaime was over eight years younger than me. Karen had a daughter named Barbara (Bingham), a daughter Tracy, who was about the same age as Jaime, and a younger son named Wayne.

I spent time with Barbara from time to time since she was just over two years younger than me. We talked about the abuse (sometimes my sister Carrie was present). I liked spending time with Barbara the most. I always could relate to females better than males and some of the activities that guys like, I didn't like, e.g., sports like football.

I enjoyed spending time with Dan, but I felt more comfortable with Barbara.

The thing is that during our teen years, Barbara became interested in boys and that doesn't include your cousin. I could see how guys would be interested in her. She was my cousin so I wasn't looking at her in the way I might look at another girl.

As an aside, my female cousins and/or aunt might greet us with a kiss as well. Nothing inappropriate but I still remember my aunt Maureen placing her hands on both sides of my face and kissing me on the lips when we showed up for Thanksgiving. I had never seen a kiss between my parents that was any different.

It's hard to put your finger on things like this but I reflected on this years later when I visited my family with Lynn, my wife. Even when my brother and his wife had a "newer" relationship they showed less affection than Lynn and I did everywhere, including when I visited my family.

There was nothing new or unique about where Lynn and I were in our relationship. Anyone would have or could have said something like "aw, you can see how they are in love." Even without me trying to make some kind of declaration of my love – like when I read a poem about our love and read it to others. More on that later.

I had noticed that males are socialized differently. I didn't greet my male cousins with hugs. In our culture, there are differences in the ways that two males relate to one another. Males maintain a greater amount of personal space between one another, in general than a male-female relationship, even if you are talking about close relatives.

I could always relate better to females and so I felt close and was more relaxed with Barbara than perhaps with a male relative who was the same age as me. Anyway, with Barbara, I would lay back on her bed while she put on makeup before we were going out somewhere like to the mall or something.

Of course, my mother got jealous of the time I spent with my cousins. I remember her telling me that Barbara doesn't want to spend time with you because she is into "boys" now that we were teens. Or she might say regarding all of our cousins that "they have their own lives to live."

In a more extreme example of this jealousy and which may reveal the fact that our mother knew we were talking about the abuse, she would say "your cousins aren't going to let you go live with them."

So, anyway, we – my sister Carrie and I - talked to Aunt Maureen about how we were being abused. We spoke to Barbara about it... and I talked to Barbara when I was alone with her about the abuse. She spoke to her mother Karen about the abuse, and we also spoke to Sharon, Dan, and Jaime's mother, about these things.

Our parents were so cold and distant, which is a form of emotional neglect. So, I loved the contact of getting hugs from them at family get-togethers. It felt warm and so good to have these relationships.

When I talk about abuse, I am not talking about strict parenting. My paternal grandparents were strict, and they doled out spankings. They lived in the south, so we only saw them for about two weeks each year. I just heard stories about how they employed spankings. But it was for punishment. My grandparents never lost control of their temper or their actions. They were not acting in response to how they were feeling. What my grandparents did was predictable – a predictable result of a child’s behavior.

With our parents, mainly our mother, it was more a matter of what kind of mood she was in. And if she was upset, so was our father. I remember being punched by my father as late as my teenage years. It actually didn’t hurt at that point. I thought it was pathetic what he had done in that particular instance and I believe he knew his actions were wrong. He had noticed my scornful look but he had not responded to my response.

My mother had much less control over her actions and her explosive and unexpected anger. I have processed this in therapy, so I don’t want to go into details too much. I would be punched in the face, arms, or elsewhere.

I saw her strike out wildly at my brother John who was over eight years younger than me. This happened when he was in high school. I heard my mother say that John used Aikido (a form of martial arts) on her, and she fell to the ground. I had no idea that anyone would get away with that. I had never attempted that. I just took it.

What I would later learn is that I needed something more than “protection” or you could say that the idea of protection might be something as simple as soothing words. Maybe it is someone saying “I’m sorry that happened to you” to indicate that it does not reflect upon you or your worth when something bad happens.

I would discover later in life that so many victims feel “shame.” By shame, I mean the sense that there is something wrong with them as a person. I distinguish this from guilt. With guilt, we learn from mistakes because we feel bad for having hurt someone.

If we love someone and we do or say something hurtful, we feel guilt and that inspires us to not do the same thing again. We apologize, maybe we make amends and try not to do it again.

It would take years – when I was in graduate school - for me to figure out what was wrong with my mother. I will describe what I learned later in the book.

I did recognize our parents' inability to see things from another point of view.

This is what I had been noticing. Because of my mother's obsession with her specialness and other qualities it seemed that nothing I ever did was good enough. I never learned to develop a mind of my own until that was allowed after I went off on my own. When I came back from college and was talking to my father he responded with a defensive question "what's wrong with our values?" referring to his and my mother's "values." I wasn't speaking of moral values or ideas about right and wrong. I was speaking more along the lines of preferences and interests.

Maybe if they had psychology classes or certain forms of psychological counseling in high school, I would have learned not only about what was wrong with our family but a sense of what might interest me. I'd have to wait until I went off to college to learn about my interests and what kind of career would be a good choice for me. Instead, I went off to college in engineering which wasn't even close to being a good match for me.

A mother and father who never said, "good job, I'm proud of you" doesn't provide a key and vital need that every child and teenager have. It's so common sense and it's why we try to get the attention of our parents. We want approval... validation! Affirmations! Physical contact! For me, that would have to wait until first my friends in college provided some of that for me. They listened with compassion, empathy, and understanding. That relationship was transformational.

I had a counselor in college who provided those same things that I had always needed. And, dear reader, I'm sure you can imagine how this might have influenced my choice of close friends, romantic partners as well as a career direction.

Those friends also validated my feelings when I discussed the abuse. They felt with and for me. That's empathy. I would end up demonstrating that for patients and clients when I worked as an adult in the mental health/psychiatric field.

Let's briefly consider the book "The Five Love Languages" by Gary D. Chapman. The idea is that how we experience, and express love is different for different people. I took a psychological test recently and found out that my first preference is with physical contact, followed by quality time and words of affirmation. I scored lower in "acts of service" and "gift-giving."

This is often used to help couples but as a psychotherapist, while we do not use touch, we do employ the use of affirmations and validation which are related.

I would find these preferences that I valued matched those preferences of some very special females in my life.

Keep this in mind when I discuss my most meaningful relationships in adulthood.

If there is something profoundly missing in our lives, we will hunger all the more for it. **I may not have recognized this when I was growing up but later I would realize that I had been seeking to connect with others who offered and desired these same things.**

I wanted to cuddle, be nurtured, comforted, soothed, hugged, caressed. I wanted physical closeness, intimacy, and physical contact. I found that first with a special person and her name was Celta. By intimacy, I do not necessarily mean sexual or sensual intimacy in this regard.

There is nothing wrong with sexual and sensual intimacy though. It is a need, a hunger, a desire. It was met first with Lynn. We lived as husband and wife for years.

I had a hunch that I wanted a girlfriend and/or something romantic – some form of physical closeness – when I was growing up. I'll describe some of those ideas in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Boy Doesn't Meet Girl



I have seen the movie "Carrie" many times, but I always stop it at the point before they drop the blood on her at the prom. There is a sense in which it is a feel-good movie if you leave that part out, the entire ending.

In my life, I was shy growing up, but I wanted to fit in.

Speaking from experience, it seems more natural to want to work in the helping professions as a psychotherapist or counselor where you can help the outcasts, the scapegoats, and those with emotional/psychological problems... those who once were picked on.

If you are not familiar with the movie, it's about a girl, Carrie, that gets picked on by other girls in school. In one instance the girls act like total assholes tormenting and ridiculing Carrie. It's so strange and sad that one of the girls, Chris, has this strange obsessive hatred for Carrie and wants to hurt her. Chris comes across as a psychopath.

Anyway, another one of the girls, Sue, feels guilty for having participated in doing something really nasty to Carrie in that instance that I mentioned. In fact, the gym

teacher is shocked that Sue would have joined the rest in mocking and ridiculing Carrie during that particular incident. So, Sue convinces her boyfriend, Tommy, to ask Carrie to the prom.

I'm leaving out the entire supernatural angle to the movie because it is not relevant to my point.

I could relate to this movie also because Carrie was abused in various ways by her mother. The mother might have “problems “but that doesn’t change the fact that she hurt Carrie. I could relate to that from my own experiences growing up.

Tommy is incredibly good in the movie. You don’t see this until near the end when he takes Carrie to the prom. He is persistent about getting Carrie to agree to go to the prom, showing up at her house, and saying he isn’t leaving until she says yes.

The gym teacher was trying to protect Carrie and when she saw her outside looking sad, Carrie said, “I’ve been invited to the prom.”

“So, why are you sad?” she asked. And when she said it was Tommy Ross, she said “he’s cute.”

Carrie answered, “I know who he goes with.” She was referring to the fact that Tommy goes with Sue who had just done that nasty unmentionable thing earlier.

Then she took her into the locker room, in front of a mirror, and got Carrie to see that she was pretty. She just gently pulled her long straight strawberry blonde hair to the side. She seemed to have a nice smile as far as I can tell. Of course, inside the locker room, it was somewhat dark and grungy looking which seems to be a way to convey that more work would be needed before she would look pretty.

I'm not saying that appearances are all that matters but it seems that they had to do something to make her appear to be someone who would be an outsider. That being said, you would think that she was covered in pimples.

The gym teacher was afraid Tommy was asking her to the prom as a trick. She confronted both Sue and Tommy and Sue explained that she just wanted to help. And that was that.

So, they show up together and suddenly everyone is treating Carrie nice. Some girls asked where she got the dress and she said she made it. Instead of laughing about that they acted nice.

Tommy gets them a table and is very kind and not pushy at all. He begins to say “some of us are going to ...” and Carrie interrupts saying “if you want to go with your friends that’s fine” implying that he could take her back first.

Instead, he says, “if you’d let me finish, I was going to say...” and he invites her to go to some hang-out place in town. He says “great, it’s a date. For sure.” Carrie is genuinely happy, and her smile is so amazing. I noticed how Carrie looked at Tommy again and turned away. It seemed to me that Sissy Spacek had done a great job portraying a shy girl – the best I’ve seen an actor or actress portray.

Maybe I found Carrie attractive because I could relate to her in some way. Or maybe I was just feeling good because I would relate to how I might feel having someone or wanting someone to notice me as a real person.

For me, I had to wait until my senior year in college to get a first “date.” The person I asked out was shy too. I was too shy to even use the word “date.”

Finally, Tommy persuades Carrie to come out onto the dance floor. It is so weird for me to say that I find this a feel-good movie because I never did any dancing. I've always been too self-conscious. I think Tommy was trying to do what might make Carrie feel good. It does seem that the way he holds her close is sweet and it would feel good for two people.

So, when I saw Carrie out there on the dance floor and at first, she seems to step on his foot and her first instinct is to run away, with an apology. But Tommy gently guides her back saying “it’s okay.”

Carrie says, “I can’t dance, I can’t...” and Tommy just keeps repeating “it’s okay.”

Then something happens. I noticed what Tommy noticed. Carrie looked pretty. She is thin. Shapely. It occurs that we had already noticed that Carrie has enough breast development to create attractive cleavage. It wasn’t just that she was made up a certain way as they might do in other movies. I suppose how a person is dressed has

something to do with this. If she was all covered up in dirty clothes one might not “see” her.

What started out as a favor for Sue, his girlfriend was becoming something different. You get the impression that he is noticing her in a way that was not something Carrie had experienced previously. That's what I liked... I would have wanted that same connection but with a girl.

Anyway, Tommy "sees" her and is attracted to her as a female.

I wanted a girlfriend, romance, and other related things.

People seem to wear their own sense of low self-esteem like a costume each and every day. We embody our inner feelings and make them real.

During the high school years, I never dated. I never found the courage to ask a girl out. Unlike in the movie "Carrie", no one brave and outgoing made it possible for me to get a date or attend the prom. This made me feel, at the time, all the weirder and certain that there was something wrong with me and that others would figure this out.

You may know what I mean when you read “boy meets girl” – it’s a cliché. But for me, that story would have to wait for years to pass.

Chapter 4: Boy Meets Girl

There are many things I learned in college, but the most important learning came in the form of social skills and how to overcome shyness.

I had a psychologist/counselor for the entire time period I spent at the Georgia Institute of Technology, aka Georgia Tech. All five years. From the beginning of classes in August 1984 through graduation in 1989. This was at the Counseling and Career Planning Center and the services were free to all students at Georgia Tech.

It would take me most of the entire five years of counseling to ask out a girl for the first time.

I started going for counseling so that I could learn how to make connections, which required building social skills and confronting anxiety.

The details about how I did this will be discussed in a later chapter. I just wanted to illustrate how shy I was and how social anxiety held me back. The point of this chapter is that I did finally go on a date during my senior year and that this was a major accomplishment.

I was learning how to start conversations, how to engage in active listening and so many other communication skills.

I didn't realize it for some time, but these skills later would be very valuable both in my career as a psychotherapist and in acting with empathy toward others in my life. It turns out that these skills can be learned.

So, while I was at Georgia Tech, I discovered that learning social skills and overcoming shyness requires practice and homework just as it was with my classes. It turns out that there were other students at Georgia Tech who also were lacking social skills and needed help. My counselor facilitated a therapy group where we could practice our skills.

Of course, shyness isn't just about learning skills. I had a tremendous amount of anxiety. Social anxiety.

I was given an education on how to deal with these issues. So, I don't repeat myself, let me repeat that I will describe this in greater detail later.

It didn't take me long to start making new friends but meeting a girl was different.

If you are asking me if I was afraid and if so, what was that like, I would say that I avoided situations that might provoke anxiety. So, I wasn't blushing. I didn't have situations around girls where my heart was racing due to fear/anxiety. I was avoiding a situation where I might want to get to know a girl. If I didn't know for sure that someone was interested, I wasn't going to take a chance on rejection.

So, I was avoiding the actions that might trigger anxiety and thus I was avoiding anxiety but doing that meant being all alone.

By my senior year, I had come so far, and I was a totally different person. I cannot overstate how amazing this transformation was and how great therapy can be. I saw changes that I never thought were possible. Take the times when I was working at the post office. I made friends fast. I felt comfortable with my fellow students talking and joking as we sorted mail or waited on customers at the window.

The goal of asking a girl out was something that was particularly challenging. The fear of failure or rejection was immense. It's important to note that as much as I had changed this had been a long journey. It took years.

I did see a girl that I wanted to get to know when I was working at the post office during my senior year at college. She was attractive to me. She always wore these John Lennon/airline-pilot glasses. I am not sure why I associate these glasses with aviation or airline pilots. They were small and round with an almost black color to them.

There was something mysterious about her. She seemed intriguing. She also seemed "quiet" - like me. She seemed friendly.

I had made friends with girls through that job and could feel comfortable with them. Sharing stories, laughing, being very open about myself and my feelings. If I knew I just wanted to be friends with a girl that made it easy for me to talk to her, to laugh with her, to smile with her.

I had tools to conquer my fear of rejection. For example, I would ask myself "what's the worst thing that could happen if she says no?"

This was a goal and so I had to try. The goal was that if I was going to find a girlfriend, which I wanted - I knew that much - I knew I had to ask a girl to do something with me. To go on a date. Otherwise, I would remain the extra friend of other friends who were paired up. I had friends who were male and female who I met through friends that I already had.

I wanted something different. I knew at some level that I wanted a relationship that would be exclusive. That is the key aspect of why this goal was important to me and it demonstrates that still my self-esteem and my sense of self-worth were low. Still.

Being friends with someone who has a boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse means that there is someone more important in their lives than me. The ridiculous fear I had was that no one would choose to consider me the most important person in their lives.

Getting back to the girl at the post office that interested me... I would notice that she never seemed to have any boyfriend showing up with her for work or after work. I would stand outside the building where the post office was housed and attempt to build up the courage to ask her out.

This was a popular place on campus for people to congregate. The post office was in the same building as the student union. There also was a cafeteria there for grabbing a meal if you don't have time to go elsewhere. When I say elsewhere, I am thinking of the restaurants that were just off the campus or across the street from the campus. Most of our classes were in buildings that were very close to the student union.

If you had a little more time for lunch, there were places right off-campus. I usually found a way to eat at one of those places every day between classes. There was a pizza place near campus. The "Varsity" was a popular hamburger and hotdog joint, but it was a bit greasy and a bit more of a walk. There was another place that was like a diner. The waiter/waitress would take an order and shout it to the cooks using a vocabulary that all the staff there had to know.

I don't remember this girl's name. She was medium complexion - neither light complexion nor dark complexion as skin color goes for black girls – for guys also but I wasn't checking out the guys, obviously.

She was thin. I had said a few things to her but she had not been saying much in response. I felt I could recognize her reactions as a sign of shyness and not a sign that she was blowing me off – demonstrating disinterest. This was a significant memory and event and that's why I am filling in these details.

One day I found the chance when we both ended our shift together.

"Do you want to go for lunch?" I asked her.

"Okay." She agreed. I noticed she was struggling like me to make eye contact.

I said "or we can go ..."

"Pizza's fine, she said."

"Cool."

So, we started walking together.

While it is true that I felt shy about speaking in classes where people were gathered in groups of 20 or more people, I had walked this busy path between the student union and the next large building with classrooms many times with my head held up high or looking around for friends with whom to stop and talk.

This time I felt like if anyone saw me, they would see me with a new girl. I felt confident. I suppose that there is something that I have noticed that is common about the way any guy and girl walk together whether they are shy or not.

We made some small talk about incidental matters... when we were graduating... what we might do next. I noticed that we were both a bit nervous, but we occasionally held each other's gaze longer and longer. Had I been walking with a girl that I knew as just a friend, I might not have been scanning the crowd looking for other friends, but I also would not have been nervous.

I was turning over in my mind “is this a ‘date?’” and all the evidence that it technically was a “date.” This experience was both about the girl and about the goal of making a “date.”

It was funny what happened though. I could not believe it. I had not brought enough money.

I was fumbling frantically with my pockets trying to find some money. "I have to have some money on me, somewhere," I said. In my mind, I thought “Oh, my God, this is pathetic!" I didn't say that to beat myself up out loud.

She said, “It's okay, I have some money.”

In retrospect, the concerns I had were exaggerated in my mind. I am not saying she didn't deserve to have some guy make her feel special. I should have just said that.

She didn't even sound angry or anything but that wasn't enough to soothe my nerves. My heart raced. My face turned red.

Let's just say the theme of this chapter is "boy meets girl" and leave it at that. It was a “date” but I had felt such shame for forgetting to bring enough money and I had asked her to lunch. I guess I felt like I had broken a dating “rule.” I wasn't thinking independently enough yet. I let the inner critical parent voice recordings play out in my mind over and over – actual words I had heard from my parents... and because of that I never asked her out again. That's probably worse than having forgotten to bring enough money.

In case you are wondering, the photo below is not of her. I found a free photo online to use. The girl in the photo has a smile that reminds me of the smile that I got from that girl that I asked to lunch. What I see in the photograph is a sense of comfort. For a few brief moments, I saw that same comfortable smile on a shy girl that joined me for lunch. I truly believe that was because I also found enough of a connection to share a similarly comfortable smile with her.

There are so many other important aspects of my education at Georgia Tech which I left out. So, in the next chapter, we will go back and fill in those details.



Chapter 5: A New Life Awaits - University Life Begins

I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life when I went off to college for the first time. I had been preparing to go to college my whole life in one way or another. That's all I knew – that for me, success would come only after college. My father went to college and got a degree in engineering then he went to graduate school.

I decided on engineering because even when I was so shy, I could still excel in class as far back as I can remember. It was math and science where that was most evident. It seemed easiest for a shy boy to succeed in these areas. I didn't have to explain my answers. There was no subjectivity. I just had to come up with THE answer – often a number. If it was right, I would move on.

That picture of life was dull and cold. My father had told me that childhood was the best time of our lives which made life seem rather frightening. The only hope of pleasure or enjoyment came from material success, money, savings, and assets.

I would later find out that this was not true and in fact, the best times of my life were NOT when I was growing up.

Dear reader, keep reading to find out about the best years of my life which are coming soon.

How to build lasting connections of my own, a family, a meaningful life, I figured I would find out somehow, on my own.

Looking back, I can say these things. I was lost in many ways though. Torn in different directions. What passed as guidance was more akin to the indoctrination of fears about how things could go wrong if I didn't prepare and plan for the future.

The ideas about what might make me happy were the farthest thing from my mind. Individual thinking had never been encouraged growing up. Having a different point of view would be misunderstood by our parents. It might come across as a challenge to their values even if that was not your intention.

I would discover that you could value both individual differences, interests, and preferences and you can place a high value on relationships.

I also knew that engineering was going to be very challenging but that was consistent with the overall theme of how I viewed life in general.

We didn't have guidance counselors in high school that helped us carefully plan our future based on the best career choices for each student. I had not been exposed to psychology at all before I went off to college. This is relevant when you consider what would end up being the right career for me. The very practical tools of psychology can help people deal with life's challenges and problems. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

I was the oldest sibling and the best in school. Academic accomplishments are not everything but so far in our family, it had seemed like the only measure that existed for us.

We showed up in Atlanta, Georgia where the Georgia Institute of Technology, aka Georgia Tech, is located, on a hot day in August of 1984, just over two months after my high school graduation. I had graduated 13 out of 565 at Southington High School in Southington, Connecticut.

Parents are invited to join the students for orientation. We all arrived sometime shortly before classes would begin for the fall quarter - yes, we had quarters instead of semesters like some schools have (semesters occur 3 per year and quarters are 4 per year).

The south overall is much less populated than the north but Georgia Tech is situated nearly in the center of the city of Atlanta, GA. I had grown up in a town that had a population of roughly 30,000 and now I was in a city with a metropolitan population of about 5 million. To call this a culture shock would be an understatement.

I felt a mixture of pride and fear as we turn into the campus. Dad was driving.

We were looking for the Student Center. The first things we saw were some athletic fields and the Basketball stadium. Then we came across the fraternity houses - I just knew that was what we were seeing. They all had three Greek letters on the outside.

There were a few sororities too, but I know that males outnumber females by a ratio of more than two to one at engineering schools. That's okay, I was too shy to date, and that was not what scared me. I didn't think.

Maybe I would get to know some girls. Maybe college would be different.

"Check that out," I said, "it says 'I Hate Georgia.'"

"That's their rival," said Dad.

"Oh, well, it is sure weird to see when we just drove one thousand miles to get here. I was hoping to see something different."

I knew that all of us were the best of the best in high schools across the country until we got here at Georgia Tech.

I noticed how Georgia Tech fits into downtown Atlanta like a small hidden or forbidden community within a larger city that was filled with traffic, skyscrapers, and a huge metropolitan area.

Yep, this was going to be a very new experience for me.

Orientation and Rush Week

For "orientation" they separated the parents from the new kids, the incoming freshmen, for the most part. I'm not sure what the thinking was on that. The parents were about to leave and go back home. I was thinking that having parents attend "orientation" was pointless – they would be going back home soon.

I could feel how different this was from what I had known in life – It was unfamiliar. Don't get me wrong, growing up there were not many rules during high school. I can't think of a rule come to think of it. I didn't have a curfew. I just had to be home for dinner.

Now, I would be completely on my own. I was about to discover how great that would be.

During orientation, there were daily activities (forced activities) like the first day we went rafting on the Chattahoochee River, and I suppose the goal was to help us to start to connect to others. You don't have to travel far to get out of the city with the skyscrapers and find yourself in the country where you could go rafting. That's where I really felt like a misfit. I tried so hard to connect. It seemed like the others were talking to each other and connecting but I could never think of anything to say – to anyone at any time. That left me with a constant feeling of being “different.”

I was thinking that if I appear different then it would become increasingly more difficult to connect because I imagined there would be more time for people to notice that I was different. I wasn't scared or nervous, but nothing was coming to mind to say. I felt a sense of urgency to speak – to seem “normal.”

I wanted to make connections and make friends in this new environment. That meant I wanted to appear to be “normal” and just like everyone else. So, I felt an urgency to connect right away.

I didn't want much time to pass where people might start thinking something like “what's wrong with that guy, he doesn't speak to anyone, he has nothing to say.”

As part of this "orientation", both parents and the incoming students were told a truth that everyone needed to understand - not everyone who gets admitted to Georgia Tech is going to graduate.

We were told to look at the person to our left then the person to our right. "One of you will graduate!" You didn't have to spell it out. Two out of three of us would flunk out.

Hearing this I didn't feel any different. I felt like the weight of this challenge had been there in the back of my mind for some time. I felt a bit frightened, but it was about something more than the classes. I could not imagine what the classes would be like yet. I would learn that fear is just a label.

This wasn't high school. I didn't want to be an outsider. I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to connect. During these “forced activities,” everything seemed so much easier for everyone else. So often my thoughts were preoccupied with the fact that I

couldn't find anything to say. You get a chance to reflect upon these things when you are otherwise engaged.

I wondered if there is a way to get help for my problems. It was then that I realized something powerful and important. I was in control of things going forward! I could make things different for me! I was free.

I thought about how hard this would be to explain to someone else when I found someone to listen to me. In so many ways our parents gave us freedom through their lack of interest in what we were doing. We just had to be there for dinner and to do our chores. The latter was a joke because, in all matters, nothing was ever good enough.

Money was how they controlled us. Why had this not been clear to me earlier? I realized that while they were paying for this education, they wouldn't be nearby to judge, criticize, or approve of anything.

Growing up, if I thought I could use help dealing with my shyness, that would be used to belittle or criticize me for having problems. Then they might remind me how special they are for whatever they did to help me deal with these problems.

They were paying for my education, including tuition, books, housing and etc. However, they were not going to be present. I wouldn't have to explain anything to them!

Ah, the freedom felt slightly soothing.

I couldn't share with my mother and father the shame that I had been feeling because of my shyness. I had learned to avoid giving them reasons to criticize me. Part of me had increasingly, for years, been uninterested in their advice or approval. I suppose I wanted approval. It was frustrating that I wasn't hearing about how proud they were of me but my expectations were low by that time in life.

Part of me had increasingly, for years, been uninterested in their advice or approval. I suppose I wanted approval. It was frustrating that I wasn't hearing about how proud they were of me but my expectations were low by that time in life.

I didn't know what the experience was like for Mom and Dad, they didn't convey much of what they experienced. They said their goodbyes and good luck.

Now, during orientation, making friends, connecting seemed like a matter of survival.

I had a sense that failure academically, here at Georgia Tech, for me meant failure in life.

Evening fell hard each day with the weight of my isolation echoing through my mind. Everyone else was doing something. If anyone saw me all alone pacing the halls of the dorm, what would they think?

Growing up I had some friends and neighbors and felt somewhat comfortable with them. I had my cousins and my aunt.

Now I had to make connections.

On the second day after arrival, I was feeling an overwhelming need to do something. It felt like more than one day had passed and the weight of isolation had been so heavy. I couldn't face another night pacing the halls. Walking past the vending machines... the TV room. It was so quiet, and I felt so alone and scared.

Now, that night, we were having a barbeque with hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill. I had to try to socialize.

I noticed this guy who seemed approachable. There was only the two of them. I could handle that. Just move close and act calm.

I felt awkward and hoped it didn't show. They were talking about going to fraternity parties.

"Do you mind if join you?" I asked. Good job, I thought. I was direct and I confronted my fear of rejection.

Before long, we were walking off to a few of the frat houses. We stopped at a couple of frat houses that night, and then the next night we did the same thing, ending up at Zeta Beta Tau (ZBT) fraternity.

This was Rush week when the fraternities recruit new members – new pledges.

I felt different here at ZBT. When we visited any frat house, they all tried to make us feel special, but I just liked this place. The guys that I came with had been socializing with different people at the house. I couldn't dance and did my best to avoid the big room where they did that. I would move about with surprising ease.

They did "love bombing." That's the word for it. I knew they were making us feel special and yet it was helpful.

I met one person after another who sold me on what we needed to do. Johnny was really friendly and relatable. Danny was cool in an unusual way. Stew was the cook and he looked, well, always like he was high. How the heck could he do that and be a Chemical engineer?

I had the idea that this is what I should do. I needed to make friends and a connection and nothing like this had happened to me in such a short period of time.

Every once in a while, they would ring a bell and cheer when someone declares their intent to pledge the fraternity.

It took so much effort for me to find the courage to tell someone that I would pledge. I was so dreading the event when I would be the center of attention. I realized that this wouldn't last for long before they move on to the next person. Still, I had NEVER made myself the center of attention.

Well, I had to get this over with, right? I put my mind to it and went with the flow. I told this guy named Pat who was standing next to Stew and they cheered and rang the bell. I knew that I didn't want this so I had to force myself to do it knowing that if I thought about it, I wouldn't do it.

It was amazing how fast things change. The moment when they are cheering and focused on me lasted only a few moments and then it was over.

After Rush Week

Things changed after "Rush" and classes were getting started. Suddenly, you have been transformed from the person who was treated like they are so special to being treated like a lowly pledge. I don't mean they did anything bad. It's just that the dynamics changed. As a pledge, there are things you have to do. This will culminate in a final "initiation" when we finally become members of the fraternity.

We were given a pledge paddle early and you are required to wear a suit or jacket and tie to classes for part of the period. You are expected to show up at the frat house every day and kneel down holding your paddle up to ask for permission to enter in a ritualistic fashion. It was out in the open, so it wasn't hazing or anything nefarious. It just felt embarrassing.

I didn't want to be the center of attention anywhere. So, I would dress normally for classes, not bring my paddle to classes like everyone else but I would get it at the end of the day when I was expected to show up at the frat house. I would be sneaky and break the "rules" or "expectations" about what we were supposed to do when I was going to class or otherwise on campus. I couldn't imagine any punishment if I was caught.

Growing up, the only rules or expectations had to do with the needs or desires of our parents.

We did all our studying and homework at the frat house unless we had to do something on the mainframe computer stations, or if there were reasons to be elsewhere for study groups or lab work.

Toward the end of the quarter, we had "initiation" where we would become full members of the fraternity. The fraternity made this somewhat mysterious, and we had assignments to complete in groups. It was actually good for team building and connecting as a group together.

You might have seen some movie that tries to depict a fraternity initiation. Take an oldie like “Animal House” where the pledges bend over and are hit with a paddle and they answer, “thank you, sir, may I have another.” Nothing like that happened. We learned a “secret handshake.”

Some might call my book a tell-all book – that term is popular these days. While I am not going to be evasive in this book about embarrassing or emotional matters, that doesn’t mean I am going to tell you everything, dear reader. I am fine with keeping “innocent” secrets about matters that are unimportant to my story and that include details about the initiation.

So, that was my first quarter at Georgia Tech. The first few months of my “adult” life on my own.

Chapter 6: Getting Through Georgia Tech with Bragging Rights

Intellectual and Academic Challenges to Overcome

Having discussed in the last chapter the challenges I faced upon arrival in the big city and beginning college at Georgia Tech, I want to talk a bit more about the other challenges that go along with making it as a student at Georgia Tech and/or graduating. We are all entitled to bragging rights if we make it at Georgia Tech. The engineering and related majors are particularly challenging. That is such an understatement that I will need to illustrate this during this chapter.

This information is important in understanding part of my character, intellect, judgment, planning, and time management skills in life. Science is important as a guiding principle to rational reasoning even in the human services field. This book is about my experience as a Clinical Social Worker. Of course, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, as I mentioned previously.

Any time I have doubts about my competency in life, I think back to what I accomplished at Georgia Tech. While it might seem like just an academic challenge there is more to it than that. Pacing is important!

To stay sane, I tried, like others, to take Friday afternoon through Sunday mornings off from classes and forget all about the homework assignments, the concepts being taught, the formulas, the calculations and just put it out of my mind. The best analogy was to think of pacing yourself for a marathon or some other endurance exercise. Only this exercise was mental - an ongoing exercise of your brain. When I say I was trying to stay sane, I mean we needed balance in our lives - entertainment, enjoyment.

The dangers of excessive stress and lack of balance in life

I will tell anyone to this day that the more stressful your life is the more you MUST take time to include non-stressful leisure activities, time with friends and family, and so on. Balance. Self-care! Some people speak of burnout. I think a new term is necessary to describe what happens under excessive stress.

I'll give some examples below of what I did on Fridays and Saturdays when I wasn't thinking about classes.

Before long, every student would develop a certain respect for one another, whether they were enrolled as a Mechanical Engineering major, Electrical, Chemical, Nuclear, or some other form of engineering or related majors.

Your social connections were very important as well. You needed to know people who know others who can help you plan how you are going to get through all your required courses.

It's also important to understand that there were "weed out" classes that everyone must take in their first year and a half roughly. They were called "weed out" classes because many students flunk out early and never return to Georgia Tech.

We were all required to take six sequential Calculus courses. Yes, six! Plus, there were several courses in physics and a course in chemistry that were required.

The years I spent in these science and engineering classes are a blur of blackboards filled with mathematic formulas.

Before I made it to my junior year, I had a sense of self-confidence for the accomplishments that got me this far. It was boring though and I would struggle to stay awake often. I kept thinking, what's the point of this? Why does this matter to anyone? How will it bring anyone happiness or meaning? I know it is necessary and technology does provide great things, but this was so dull.

I did have classes in the humanities as required electives. And I discovered psychology and I was fascinated by those classes. I even got a minor in psychology.

Looking back, I should have majored in English with a specialization in creative writing, which would have meant going to another school. Of course, I had no idea who I was and what interested me. This was a period of self-discovery. Late in my junior year, I thought of changing to majoring in psychology. I was in counseling for shyness, as I mentioned but eventually, I'd question my decision to major in engineering.

These insights into who I am and what interests me are an important aspect of my story. They tell you, dear reader, who I am. I'll cover this in more detail later.

I could get through the classes and learn some valuable left-brain logical skills and ways of thinking, even if it didn't capture my interests. Engineering, science and math rely upon left brain, logical thinking and that alone.

I would go on to get a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering with a specialization in computer engineering. An analogous term might be software engineering – getting a computer to do what we want it to do. I spent countless hours pulling my hair out trying to get “programs” to compile and then run on the mainframe computer.

It was all “logical” thinking. I thought engineers designed things but there wasn't anything creative about what we were doing in engineering.

You might wonder what I was doing on the weekends since I said that I tried to keep my mind off the assignments, formulas, and classes from the moment I left class on Friday until I woke around 11 AM or noon on Sunday.

First off, during the week when I was in classes, not every class was overwhelmingly stressful, and I was making friends. Around lunchtime, I would enjoy a meal at one of the restaurants just across from campus. Sometimes with friends, sometimes alone. Some of my friends were from the fraternity house but they weren't all guys. Girls would come by on the weekends and meet people and become friends.

We studied together many times or did our homework together. I'm talking about people from the frat house but also some of us taking a class would meet somewhere to study or work on the homework together. It wasn't uncommon to be up until 11 PM or later with studies/homework during the week.

Then we come to Friday and the last class. There might be a party at the frat house, or I'd go for dinner with friends and then just hang out with others. I was living there by my second year. It's hard to put my finger on it but I didn't quite feel like I fit in as a frat brother despite living there. I never spoke at the weekly meetings or held a role. Maybe it was all in my mind.

I don't remember my roommate Thomas acting like one of the guys. It's only in retrospect that I realize that I was more self-conscious of my sense of not fitting in at times than noticing that I wasn't any different than a few other members. I wasn't noticeably shy. I had plenty of friends and made friends fairly easily.

On Saturdays, I liked to take the MARTA – Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority – a subway that would run to places in the metro area away from downtown Atlanta. There was a mall on the north line that ran up Peachtree Street – Lennox Mall with a movie theater. It was my escape to see a movie. It took my mind off other stressors such as the demands of classwork.

I often was doing this alone – going to the movies on Saturday... even into my senior year when I was much more outgoing. I guess I enjoyed the escape and while I very much wanted to be around people, it was hard. The party scene or meeting new people. It wasn't very hard, but I was still learning skills and working on my fears.

In the sessions with my counselor – my psychologist, I learned ways to speak to people and to listen. For example, I learned about “free information” – the weather, something a person might be wearing, a shared experience like something from class. Then to keep the conversation going, I learned about active listening. That could mean summarizing what someone just said, rephrasing it in different words to confirm that you understand... asking follow-up questions and the best ones are open ended.

I also learned a technique for dealing with social anxiety. Suppose I want to meet someone or just be more friendly. I was challenging my fears as opposed to not trying or telling myself something will go wrong. I learned a three-column technique based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques. This is something I did all week actually. I had a pad of paper, a pen, or a pencil all the time.

I would imagine scenarios and ask myself “what is it that I fear if I acted instead of avoiding what I feared.” It wasn't actually those words that I asked but there were so many examples that no single example can capture the essence of the fears. I mean if the fear is that I approach someone I don't know and say something foolish or incoherent, then avoiding the action avoids the negative emotions that might show up in the form of a racing heart.

That is just one of the countless examples and probably not a good one. Anyway, in column one, I write our automatic thought. He/she won't like me. She won't be interested in ME! Then in the middle column, I write the name of the "cognitive distortions that I can recognize. Maybe, for example, I am "predicting the future" which is a cognitive distortion, or I am "discounting the positive" – positive aspects of myself. There are common cognitive distortions that people use. In the third column, I wrote challenging statements. Depending on the situation, I might write about evidence of how I am liked by the friends that I have.

This is something I did every week, frequently, for years. See what I mean when I say that picking any one example might not convey the breadth of potential negative thoughts. To be clear, this happens to all kinds of people not just shy people. I was trying so hard. A simple way to figure out what the automatic thought was is to think about asking oneself, "what's the worst thing that can happen?"

In a prior chapter I described how I found the courage to ask a girl out. That is an example of how this work on social skills and social anxiety paid off. I also described in that chapter how I felt somewhat extroverted. I could easily socialize with people on campus such as at the campus post office or just walking across campus.

Despite all the improvements I made, I never met girls directly at the parties at the fraternity house. However, I became friends with girls who started hanging out at the fraternity house often because they were girlfriends of one of the frat brothers. I have no idea how my friend Thomas met his later wife since he was geeky, not very outgoing at parties. Like me, Thomas never danced.

The next topic is related to another aspect of my self-discovery and that would involve my discovery of the true career direction that was a match for me. How I made that discovery is the focus of the next chapter.

Section Two: Self-Discovering and My Becoming

In this section of the book, I will describe the time period that begins when I begin to discover who I am and the things that I want out of life. I had started Georgia Tech as an engineer because I had no idea what mattered to me and what would make me happy.

Success and accomplishment had not made me happy in life. Not really. That's not entirely true, when I went off to college and started making friends, making connections, I had done that all on my own. That was an amazing accomplishment and one of many successes.

Psychology had taught me that people have certain motivations. This is from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which is a well-known theory in psychology. Abraham Maslow postulated that we have different levels of needs which amount to a hierarchy. At the lowest levels, there are survival needs - food, water, safety. Once these are achieved, we can strive for high-level needs. We can pursue meaningful relationships, self-esteem needs, and at the top is self-actualization.

For me, success would be defined by my relationships with others. This is expressed even in my career in social work. That should be self-evident since social work is about things related to our social lives. It's more complicated than that. Social workers do seek to address the most essential and basic needs of people, but you get the idea.

Meaning and happiness for me would rest around a single main organization theme or principle that one might call "social" or something to that effect. Helping others to find true happiness, peace, connections, and self-actualization would occupy my mind from this point forward. This is what mattered most to me. No wonder engineering was so wrong for me!

Chapter 7: Self-Discovery and Career Path Changes

My counseling was an education in itself. It was once a week, every week for five years, not unlike the various classes I was taking.

I was just beginning my junior year when I had an epiphany. Previously, I knew a friend from the fraternity where I was living who said he thought restaurant management might be more interesting to him, but he felt that engineering at Georgia Tech was more prestigious. I listened intently and with compassion, as my skills in this area were increasing, i.e., active listening skills, and empathy skills.

I finally asked him if he "wanted to be an engineer for the rest of his life." He would end up leaving Georgia Tech for his preferred professional direction. Then it hit me out of the blue. I asked myself the same question from a very practical and pragmatic standpoint. "Do I want to be an engineer, myself?" The answer was not immediately obvious.

I was thinking that I should discuss this with my psychologist. I had been seeing the same psychologist each and every week since my first year at Georgia Tech, so he knew me very well.

This was part of my self-discovery. I would think about how amazing psychology is. I had taken psychology courses and they seemed so very practical to me.

Anyway, I showed up at a session said to him, "I don't think that engineering is a good match for me. I think I might like very different things."

My counselor explained that there is a psychological test that is very popular and useful in finding answers like the ones I was asking. It is the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (or the Strong Campbell for short). The idea is straightforward, and it looks at your interests in terms of how you like to spend your time in order to see how they compare with others who are in various career fields. This includes all ranges of careers, not just those that require advanced degrees.

The Strong-Campbell test gives results that are broken out into specific careers and the themes that might describe certain careers. The themes are "Realistic", "Enterprising", "Artistic", "Social", "Investigative", and "Conventional." Engineering is a career area within the theme of "Realistic."

The themes where I scored highest were "Social" careers and "Artistic" careers. My specific score for Engineering was just an 8. This means that the percent to which my interests in various activities matched those of an engineer was about 8%. It was among the lowest scores I received for any of the listed careers. I have almost nothing in common with engineers.

No one is a carbon copy of another person in the same field. However, it was easy to understand that a good match for a career was not among the careers with a "Realistic" theme. To say that this confirmed my suspicion that I was in the wrong field is an understatement!

My counselor was very helpful as I considered what career would be a good match for me. A counselor doesn't tell you what is best for you, but they help you figure that out for yourself.

We considered psychology since the "Social" theme area, as it was described on the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, was of interest or a match with my interests, i.e., the activities that interested me matched those who worked in those types of fields. I also was getting a minor in Psychology at Georgia Tech.

With further careful consideration over a long period of time, I landed on social work as a proper and appropriate career path for me. I applied the logical and rational reasoning skills that were helping me get through Georgia Tech to help me with this major decision. I had to be certain that I was right. Let me expand upon this idea.

I had seen how much the ideas from psychology had helped me deal with my shyness. I had gone from being so incredibly shy to feeling like an extrovert. I was also getting a minor in psychology. I found psychology to be absolutely fascinating and practical. I studied social psychology, personality theories, theories about human development, and abnormal psychology.

I had noticed homeless and poverty for the first time in my life, as well. In a big city like Atlanta, this is very obvious. It seemed like an obvious moral problem for America, and I wanted to do something about social problems. I could sense that there was a need that I hoped I could address. I saw individuals – people. One of my friends joked that I might have more money if I didn't give money to the homeless – it was a joke because my opportunity for giving was very limited.

I learned that with a master's in social work, I could do the kinds of things that my counselor was doing for me. I also identified with the values of social workers. Even if I wasn't going to change society, I could still relate to these values and that was more important than the additional scientific education of a psychologist.

I came to know that I wanted to be a psychiatric social worker and to work as a psychotherapist. The more I learned about the job duties of people in this career the more appealing I felt this was to me. In a course about abnormal psychology, I learned about mental illness. Conditions like schizophrenia intrigued me for example. Maybe that isn't the right word since it can be debilitating. The idea of understanding unique people and helping others was what I mean. I could imagine doing that and it felt good and right.

My counselor and I discussed the challenges I would have for continuing after I left Georgia Tech - everything had to be carefully planned. I didn't want to overlook any of the challenges that I would face. This was going to be a major change for me so I had to map out a detailed plan for the next chapter of my life - the chapter of my life that would ultimately define me.

We discussed getting into graduate school so that I could obtain a master's degree in Social Work (MSW). I figured out that with an MSW I could pursue my goals and dreams, so I could be successful in life. However, that was going to require that I get some experience after I graduated from Georgia Tech because of how different a career in social work was from engineering. I had to be practical. Just to get into graduate school, I would need letters of recommendation.

I started talking to my parents about an undergraduate degree in psychology at Georgia Tech. At first, I said I wanted to get an undergraduate degree in English, but they said they weren't going to pay for that additional education.

I was thinking about how I could get into a graduate program with a four-year degree in a number of different fields. It didn't seem relevant to explain this to my parents. I wasn't seeking their approval. I was an adult by now.

My friend Suzanne recently commented on how English isn't practical. I would argue that learning things that interest you and doing things that interest you is very practical.

My father acknowledged that he had long known that engineering was not right for me. **Yet, he never brought that up.**

I would come to discover soon just how little my interests, my preferences, my goals, meant nothing to them! Now, I am frustrated at myself for even discussing this with them!

As much as I wanted to learn more about literature and psychology before graduating, I mainly had a focus on the goal that mattered most to me.

The freedom to make my own plans and live my own life these past five years had been so transformative. I had discovered myself and my interests. For the most part, I wasn't discussing my plans with them because they seemed uninterested. I just knew that they weren't going to pay for additional undergraduate studies or graduate studies.

I shared these plans with my best friends and of course, my counselor and I were discussing these issues.

I decided that I was going to live with my parents for a little while. I knew they were not going to pay for graduate school but that was fine. I had discovered that there was a state psychiatric hospital near where my parents lived, and I thought I could volunteer there.

Great, that gave me a very specific plan now. I could volunteer with the social work team at that state psychiatric hospital in Augusta. Just thinking about it was exciting. I would prove myself there and get the necessary letters of recommendation from whoever was supervising me on the staff there - letters of recommendation that would open other doors.

Everything was carefully planned in every detail.

I was seeing the same psychologist every week for all five years, and he was so very helpful. Having realized I had spent five years in the wrong field was a profound motivation for me to make sure I wasn't making any mistakes with my new plans.

My psychologist was totally and completely supportive of my plans to enter the field of psychiatric social work. I NEEDED to know that I had not just found what was interesting to me but that I had the right aptitude and other traits necessary for this new career direction. There are almost no words to describe the valuable nature of the relationship I developed with my counselor over these years I spent at Georgia Tech. Having someone to listen to me and to whom I could bounce ideas off was infinitely valuable.

I had overcome so many challenges and had so many accomplishments. I wasn't nearly as shy as I had been. When I started college five years earlier, I hardly had any social skills. Now, I felt rather competent in this area.

Still, I was graduating without a job offer. I was interviewing with companies that came to campus but unlike other students, I wasn't getting any job offers. It was infinitely obvious to any employer that engineering was not a good match for me. I wasn't an actor. I couldn't fool any employer no matter how hard I tried.

My supervisor during my several years at Digital Equipment Corporation, Bruce Smith knew that I wasn't in the right field. During my exit interview as a co-op employee, he said "you don't seem like the other co-op students. I don't think this is the right field for you."

I answered, "yes, I have figured that out. I am going on to get a graduate degree in Social Work after I graduate from Georgia Tech. "

Anyway, on the day before my graduation, my best friend, Thomas Faison, and his wife, Jo-Lee, had come to see me graduate. I alluded to Thomas in the last chapter. He was my roommate until he graduated so for about two years. He had come from Chapel Hill, North Carolina to Georgia Tech and I had come from Connecticut, up north. Jo-Lee and I were best friends too and we hung out together all the time before joining Thomas in Massachusetts where he had gotten a job after graduation.

An aside – the wedding of my friends.

I was the best man at their wedding. It was interesting. I have one more story to tell here. I said I never only had one “date” through my undergraduate years a few chapters ago when I described asking out the girl from the post office where I worked.

There was one other girl that I went out with a couple of times. Around the time of their wedding, Jo-Lee asked her friend whose name I cannot remember, to show me how to dance for the required “dance” the best man would be forced to do. I felt sorry for Thomas who also had to engage in this ritual of a similar “dance” that he would hate as much as I did, I imagine. The only thing that stands out is the dresses that the brides’ maids and maid-of-honor wore. The maid-of-honor held my attention though in the very revealing low-cut dress that made it hard to not notice her breasts.

She seemed friendly and kind as she tried to guide me, and she was acting considerate of my discomfort. Right now, I cannot even form an image of me trying to dance.

After the wedding, there was some event with many people over at the home of part of Jo-Lee’s extended family. Jo-Lee was from the area. I was thinking about asking Jo-Lee about her bridesmaid, trying to find the courage to do this. I don’t remember the details about how I came to find her attractive and I hate that the only thing that sticks in my mind is that she had nice breasts.

Anyway, then Jo-Lee pointed out how much her cousin Marleesa was interested in me. I noticed she was pretty too but don’t ask me to describe her for this story. I just remember noticing that and I am considering what followed. At first, I was in denial, still doubting that any girl would be interested in me. I was a junior and this was before I asked the girl out from the post office, which I described in an earlier chapter.

Eventually, I started noticing everything that Marleesa was doing to be nice and show her concern. I remembered they had a dog at that house that was annoying. Marlessa noticed my annoyance and got the dog away from me. I then looked up at Thomas and Jo-Lee who had a look like “see.”

Okay, so I started talking to Marleesa and she invited me to an Easter play in which she was acting through her church. It was interesting to be meeting the family for this first date after the performance. She seemed so interested that I thought I should kiss her.

She turned her head away and I was silent, and my face was red with shame. I had not done anything wrong other than read a signal wrong. The one time I had not invested hours doing my Cognitive Behavior Therapy homework with the three-column technique and I got it wrong. I felt like the air had been sucked out of me. I was frozen and silent.

For a while, I would reflect on this with shame as if I had done something wrong or broken a rule that I should have known. I had not been forceful at all and as soon as she turned away, I had shrunk within myself. I was just so confused.

She had been far more “aggressive” at the party with others around and here we were outside after dark where privacy might allow such things.

That was the last time I saw her. I wasn’t mad - just confused. I don’t want to give the impression that she owed it to me or that she was playing games. A girl can change her mind at any time. I just felt shame for MY mistake, like I needed to learn more about making a connection or how to deal with rejection.

Looking back over the past three decades of my life I have never had such an experience where I misread the desires of the female that I was with... no one has turned away.

I’ll tell you about the decade after college but first, let’s get back to my graduation from Georgia Tech.

As I mentioned, I was feeling bad about not having a job offer yet and I had been speaking to my parents. They weren’t insulting me directly, but I had a vague sense of disapproval from my mother.

Thomas noticed that I didn't feel good about myself. Thomas said "you got through Georgia Tech and you didn't even like this stuff. Jo-Lee couldn't do this, and she loves this stuff."

Was Thomas saying that I was better academically than his own wife?

At about this same time period, I noticed something bizarre. It seemed like my mother was telling me (with my father joining her it seemed) that she expected me to work as an engineer first. It wasn't just a suggestion that I would have more money working as an engineer and could better pay for graduate school which they thought I could do part-time.

They were telling me what to do now, again, for the first time in years. I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt nauseous. My heart was racing, and my hands were clenched as they hung by my side. What had I gotten myself into? What was I thinking?

Not only did they not care about my interests or want me to pursue them, as per our earlier discussions about changing my major. Now, it seemed that I had to find a job as an engineer despite the fact that I knew no one was going to hire me. In my mind, I didn't disagree with the fact that I could make more money using the education I just acquired but I knew I couldn't sell myself in an interview.

I did know a pre-med student at Georgia Tech. He said that almost any degree in science would be accepted as preparation for medical school. He didn't have plans to work once he got his degree from Georgia Tech.

Looking back, I realize that he didn't have parents telling him he wasted their investment and neither do graduates with four-year degrees in English have to be subjected to these kinds of attacks on their judgment or planning.

I also knew even then that the transition to social work was more complicated. I couldn't just work as an engineer and then hope to get into a graduate program in social work.

So, now that's all I have for a memory of this was a sick feeling if visceral disgust that I want to forget.

That's the topic for the next chapter.

In the next chapter, I will discuss some other issues that are related to what was happening at this time in my life just before I made the transition into my new life.

Chapter 8: Assaulted!



During and just before my senior year in college, as an undergraduate at Georgia Tech (as opposed to my later graduate studies), I was assaulted with some shocking news.

Let me fill in a few tidbits that will be important to consider later. Just before I started my senior year in college, I got a call from my sister. She reported that she had been assaulted by both of our parents. She was extremely emotional and distraught. She was about 19 and had started going to a community college in Florida after graduating from high school.

Let's back up a bit. After I started at Georgia Tech, my father got laid off and then got a job in Florida. Carrie, my brother John, and my parents related to Hobe Sound Florida from Connecticut. This was a long-distance move of 1300 miles. Carrie was still in high school when this happened.

I got the call as I was starting my senior year at Georgia Tech. I was glad to be someone with whom she felt she could share this news. She described what she and her friend had discussed. I knew which friend she meant as she described the matter. To be honest, I didn't know this girl that was friends with Carrie, but I can remember it was the friend that was incredibly sexy. I'm just saying this to fill in the most minimal of cues.

Obviously, by now, dear reader, you understand that I am not shallow, but I do notice things. I had some conversation via email with Carrie last year in 2020 about this and at first, it sounded like she was going to tell me she forgot it. So, I blurted out, "you had talked to your friend who was that sexy girl."

Anyway, back to 1988. Carrie was attacked but she said they didn't call the police. She and her friend had decided when they are talking after she was attacked by both our parents that "next time they would have to call the police." Instead, she moved.

We used to fight growing up but then we got closer to each other. The fact that she told me something so emotional never left my memory over all these decades.

They had said "Next time." Yes, there would be a "next time." We had been abused growing up.

Sadly, Carrie NEVER had a meaningful relationship in her life! I cannot give you the name of one single guy who she ever mentioned in over fifty years!

I remember not knowing how to act around our parents when I came there for Christmas and before the next quarter at Georgia Tech. If I was too friendly with Mom and Dad, would Carrie think that I condoned what was done to her? She definitely knew that I knew this was so wrong!

My brother had an easier time because he was 5 foot eleven and could stand up to our father.

There are other things that I remember about that time period that might have indirectly created problems between my parents and me.

I started feeling good about myself because of the support I was getting at school/college from both my counselor and some very good friends, Thomas and Jo Lee. I don't have clear memories of what I shared but just that I discussed the various forms of abuse with both of them.

Anyway, when my parents came to my graduation, Thomas and Jo-Lee were there as well. I had not told my parents that I had needed to reach out to friends for support. The way in which I grew in self-esteem made me feel so much better about myself. I had self-compassion. As such, I felt the confidence and comfort to share my experiences with my good friends.

At my graduation, Jo Lee made the most effort to be cordial with my parents. She had her "feelings" though about the things that happened to me which they caused and about me having been hurt. For my friend Thomas, it was much harder to act friendly and cordial because of what he knew. He was a much quieter person than Jo Lee. So, what was interesting was that after graduation, my mother said that she got along fine with Thomas, but she didn't feel comfortable talking with Jo- Lee.

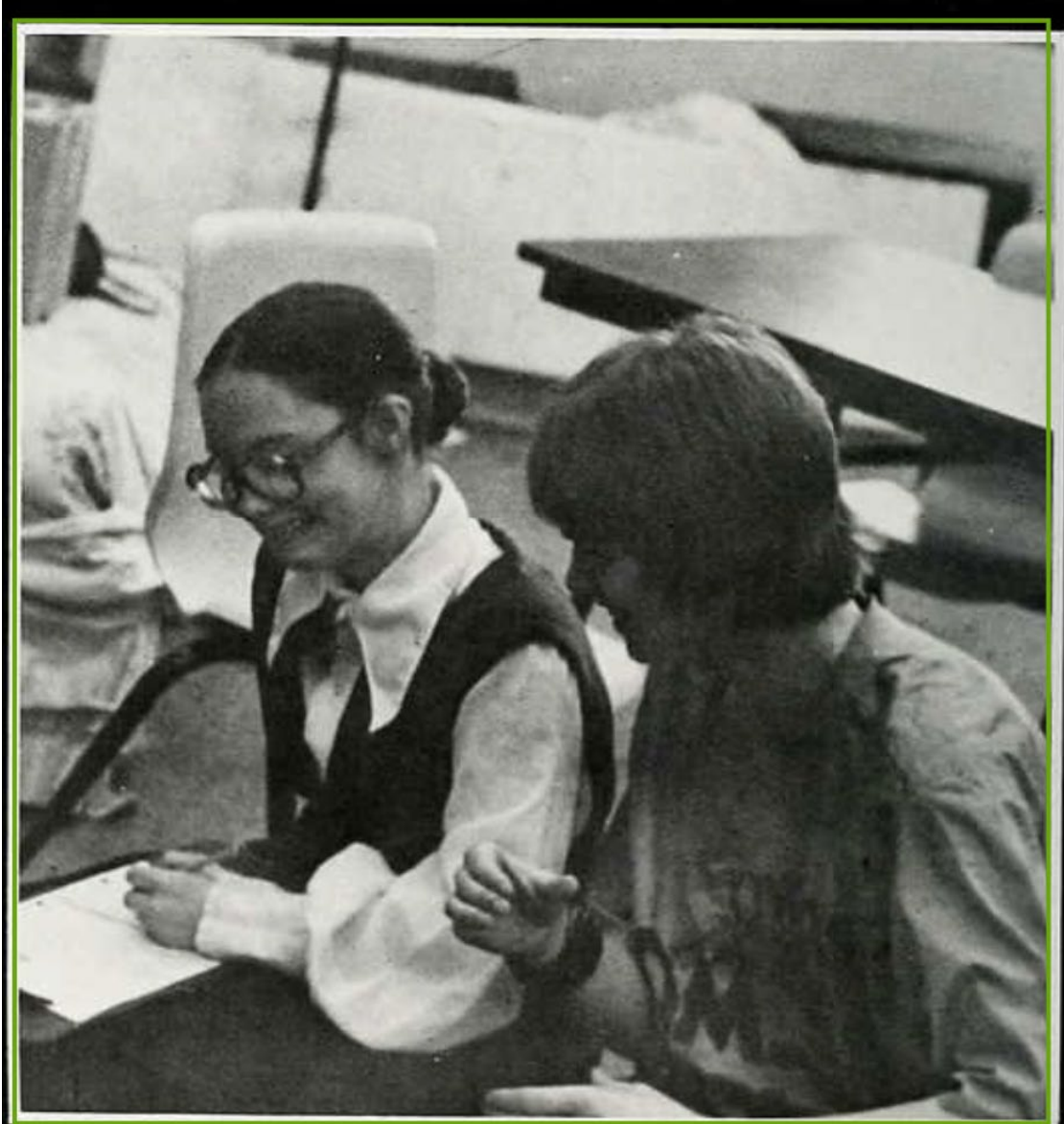
If she only knew how much more intensely Thomas felt toward them, she would have been even more shocked. Obviously, she picked up on the tension, and put two and two together. However, her way of dealing with it was to deny, deny, deny among those who had been present like my siblings and me. I am NOT saying that the topic of abuse was ever broached at all by any of us. Thomas, Jo-Lee, my parents, and I had tried to find things to talk about, but you could sense the tension.

In terms of her denial as a coping mechanism, I began to realize she even fooled herself into forgetting things.

It was against this backdrop that I moved in with my parents after graduation without realizing or considering the tension that would characterize our very strained relationship during the next two years, and a few months before I moved on to live on my own when I got a job in a new city - Wilmington, North Carolina.

In the next chapter, I will begin to discuss this next chapter of my life. The next chapter would be a life full of far greater joy, love, and success than I had already known.

Chapter 9: Celta and First Love



(Left) Drama Club member looks over her wardrobe before her performance.
(Above) **Celta** Head and Van Epperson practice their lines.

I found the above photograph, a high school yearbook photograph - Celta Camille Head through Ancestry.com. I had not known her in high school. In fact, she is 8 years older than me.

In this photograph of her, she is 16. She's thirty-one now when I meet her for the first time.

After I graduated from Georgia Tech, I was feeling good about my career prospects and I had a new direction in life. I had a clear path in front of me. I finally knew what I wanted and how to get where I was going ... or so it seemed upon graduation from Georgia Tech in December of 1989.

The problem was that I chose to move in with my parents after graduation. This would be a decision that haunted me for the rest of my life!

Ironically, just as I somewhat regretted my decision to move in with my parents, knowing how toxic they were, what began in the 90s would make this time period among the best years of my life. I'm talking about the chance I had to meet Celta in 1990. Also, the opportunity that I had to volunteer with the social work team at Georgia Regional Hospital - a state psychiatric hospital was so rewarding. I learned so much and I realized that I have a knack for this kind of work - psychiatric social work.

The work I had done in undergraduate school got me to this point. I knew that I had developed some powerful **social** and **communication** skills during my five years of undergraduate studies. I had learned to demonstrate empathy. I had overcome so much of the social anxiety that I had previously.

I want to tell you about someone special that I met.

I knew that some work needed to be done before I could begin to realize my dreams and to find success in my field. I was making a transition from having a degree in engineering to working as a social worker, a psychiatric social worker.

As I was saying, I met Celta in 1990. In an earlier chapter, I stated that I had only one date during my years at Georgia Tech. There was one other time when I went out

with a girl who was a cousin of one of my best friends but we had only one date. That was my entire dating experience since I was too shy to date in high school.

I wasn't expecting anything special or amazing to happen in 1990.

I met Celta in an unusual setting. She had been in the hospital when I met her, making this story even more complicated, unexpected, and unplanned. She had anorexia. That is why she was in the hospital for a short while - her weight had gotten dangerously low. She was about five foot two and weighed under 60 pounds when I met her. Maybe less!

Even as I write this, I feel a bit uncomfortable mentioning these facts. How can one measure a person or their worth by their weight?

I had a cousin who suffered from anorexia and one of the medical interns mentioned Celta saying that maybe by becoming friends with her I might gain some insight into anorexia. This was different than my usual role as a volunteer with the social work team at the hospital. I will discuss that later.

The idea was that I could be friends with someone, or I could meet with someone as a member of the social work staff. Intuitively I knew that these boundaries are important.

It was Wednesday, January 3, 1990. I walked into a room at the hospital and saw her pacing. She seemed frustrated. I remember how they had dragged her to another building to be weighed. As our eyes met, I could feel a sense of serenity and peace.

This wasn't how I imagined this moment. In my imagination, I had thought about ways I could get to know her and gain some insight into a mysterious disorder called anorexia. I had not been assigned to do a social work assessment on her so I wasn't approaching her in that capacity.

At this moment, I did not feel any sense of pressure to make an excuse to talk to her. My mind was at peace. What was it that I felt?

A smile washed across her face as if it hasn't been there in a long time. Maybe this was my own impression of what life must have been like for her for a long time. I wondered what she was thinking as I moved toward her.

"Hi, I'm Bruce," I said, "I am a volunteer with the social work team, but I am finished with that for the day. I wanted to meet you."

"Hi," she answered. Her smile remained the same. I noticed that she didn't seem to be responding as she usually does when she is approached by members of the staff.

"Can we talk?" I ask her.

"Do you want to go outside?" she asked me.

There was a swing outside where two people can sit together. It reminded me of the one that my grandparents had on their porch.

I realized that at this moment I was not brainstorming or rehearsing things to say as I usually did when I met someone new. For the first time in my life, I was meeting a person and not feeling fearful or timid!

Sitting there on the swing, outside seemed almost like we had privacy, as much as was possible to have when you are out in the open.

I explained that I am not here to gather information. "This isn't my job."

She just smiled.

"You seem almost happy," I said, jokingly.

"I will be here for a while," she said with a bit of a laugh that conveyed a sense of resignation to her situation. She then explained that she had been in the hospital before.

I would visit her almost every day just before she was discharged. We would walk around the grounds and I began to tell her things about myself and my own experiences in life. I think she enjoyed listening to me and sharing even the most

mundane events. There was no one else that she described as being part of her life other than a mother and father.

She listened intently... with concern and interest.

Before long she was writing letters - diary entries of everything she observed... the smallest details all laid out for me like some running conversation. Sometimes she mailed the letters to me and other times when I showed up, she gave me the letters.

It did feel a bit awkward because I had not thought that I was coming here to make a friend and I wasn't sure that doing so was okay. I was just starting out in the field. Before long, it seemed like the patients and staff knew we were friends. I was Celta's friend, and I also was part of the social work team/staff. Those were two entirely different roles.



It was March and just two months had passed. "I want to show you something," Celta said, inviting me to walk. "See how they have faces?" she said pointing to some pansies.

I found myself momentarily making out the expressions on the human-like "faces" on the flowers.

On the next few visits, I noticed that the pansies seemed to smile or frown at us as we gazed upon them as if they reflected our feelings that day.

Celta had asked me to draw an image of how I saw her. I laughed and said that I cannot draw, but I asked if I could draw the picture with words.

I learned that her name was chosen mainly by her father who was interested in Celtic and Gaelic history. Her sister's name was Gael, as in Gaelic.

She returned to Augusta, Georgia when she was well enough to leave the hospital. Our friendship was growing. Her financial situation was a big problem, and I was worried about her. She was so thin, and I was so worried about her health because it was obvious to me that she was at an unhealthy weight. I put her up in a hotel one evening but that didn't go well.

Finally, she said she had a mother in Athens Georgia. So, we started driving there.

When we got there and knocked at the door her mother came and her first reaction was to turn her away. I didn't say anything, but I had such a desperate look on my face. It's sad but that might have been very influential in her mother – Faye Head – opening the door and letting her in.

I gave her a hug and got her phone number; told her I would be back to visit as soon as possible.

Her father rented an apartment for her in Athens.

I met some other friends of her and her family. It was curious that one of them, a woman said that Celta only uses people and that she cannot love anyone. This was

clearly not true. Celta was doing so much that demonstrated she was thinking of me and concerned about my well-being and happiness.

It's important to note that I was living with my parents at the time. This was a temporary situation. I cannot overstate how profoundly disinterested my parents were in me and my life, my dreams, hopes, aspirations, and desires!

I loved to hear about Celta's talents. She had studied acting beginning before she was in high school.

It was Sunday. April 15th, my birthday. It was a bit cool this morning as we arrived at the Botanical Gardens in Athens. She had suggested this place.

The sun was passing through the misty morning fog as we walked along a path. I reached out to take her hand, feeling as if something emotional was rippling through me at her touch. It was still early in the day and Celta was wearing a white coat made of soft cotton. I was warm-natured and only had a short-sleeve shirt on.

"Can I take off this glove?" I asked. "My hand will keep your hands warm."

She smiled as we gazed at the misty sun above and ahead. This felt so good and right. I felt awkward at first as I saw another couple. Celta and I were not a "couple" per se. I let the thought go. This felt too good.

Her hand was so very thin. As I mentioned, she had anorexia and was very much underweight. I could feel her tiny fingers intertwined in mine sent feeling up my arm, almost like a chill or a soft rippling stream flowing up my arm. Her smile as she gazed at me gave me butterflies. I felt a lightness, almost like floating. I felt serene. And smiled back.

What did she see in me, I wondered?

"This is nice... good," I said. Adding with a slight chuckle, "I have always wanted to feel this. I mean even as a kid. It is like a hunger that I forgot that I had or that I was too afraid to acknowledge..." I then added, "maybe acknowledging it would have made life too sad because I would know that I wanted something that wasn't available."

She understood that I was talking about what had been missing in my family. Celta always seemed to know when things had not been going well at home.

We developed synchronicity of mind and thought... respect and love... yes, respect and love felt like it was not something I had known previously. This was strange because Celta and I had a completely platonic relationship and I have had supportive friends previously. My friends Thomas and Jo-Lee were real good friends, but the way Celta looked at me was different.

And was it platonic? I mean was it free from sensual desire? It seemed that way but occasionally my body reacted differently.

What do I mean when I say we developed synchronicity of mind and thought? I don't mean the tired cliché of completing the other person's sentences. The way we looked at the world was the same. The way we felt about things. The way we moved toward one another and the way our expressions were mirrored by each other.

The days and weeks passed, and I kept coming to visit her on the weekends...

Celta could seem to pick up on the emotional pain I had been experiencing during the week, with my parents. It was almost like she had a psychic connection to me. **Almost** like that!

I could talk to Celta about anything that was happening in my life. How and why, I felt such low self-esteem living with my parents... the emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse I experienced from my parents. I could talk about it all.

Sometimes I didn't need to keep talking about something that was on my mind. I had a sense of being in sync with Celta and a sense that she understood and felt with and for me. So, I let myself reset in the comfort of her arms. It would begin with my arm around her at the waist and her arms around my back and we just stayed like that smiling at each other.

All week, whenever I became stressed, bored, or had time to dream, my thoughts went to Celta.

My parents were completely unconcerned or uninterested in where I went or what I did with my life. I spoke to Celta for over an hour, maybe hours on the phone each day. We had only one phone, so it's a miracle that it was possible to find the phone free for that long.

I don't think they heard anything we were saying. I could tell if someone answered another phone. Celta could tell from my voice if I was having a hard time at "home." No, it wasn't a home for me.

I struggled to explain to my parents that I was doing the best I could to find ongoing gainful employment. Yet, I never felt good enough. They thought I was deliberately refusing to work as an engineer and use my degree. I thought we had gone over that. I was going to use my undergraduate degree to get a graduate degree. They seemed to think I was deliberately sabotaging job interviews! It was absurd. I would have loved to have a way to get out of that house and live on my own.

Yet, when I saw Celta, it was as if I was ten feet tall. I felt confident, valuable, worthy of love, and important.

Perhaps I was keeping this relationship private in a way - it was mine; she was mine. That sounds like something you might say in a devoted, romantic relationship. Yet the relationship was completely platonic.

Spring days passed through April and into May and for me it was like I was riding on gentle waves on an ocean – rising and falling – it was so soothing and peaceful. One Sunday or Saturday was like another.

It was an ordinary day in late summer like any other day. Sunday, May 13th. I greeted her with a hug. Instead of parting, we remained in one another's arms. Smiling at one other. It felt so different. I felt at peace... but I had something on my mind that I wanted to share.

"Can you hold me?" I ask indicating her bed. "I want to lie down next to you." There wasn't much room on her bed, but we weren't big. She laid against the wall facing me. My first thought was to curl up into a fetus position, but I turned to face her.

"Something happened?" she said in the form of a question.

“The same things ... my mother... ah actually...” My voice trailed off like a sigh of relief. My breathing slowed. I felt like my muscles were relaxing. I had been feeling restless, but I noticed my body was sinking comfortably into the bed. It suddenly seemed unnecessary to discuss what had been on my mind.

I looked down at her hands to see where they were. She looked at me. I raised her right hand with my right hand, placing my left hand over her hand while turning my eyes up to meet hers. We smiled.

For a few moments, we just looked into each other’s eyes. I noticed our breathing was synchronized. I briefly thought I was never good at keeping a beat and let a slightly more amused smile pass across my face which was matched by Celta and from that our smiles drifted back to a more serene smile.

This was hypnotic and I let it last a moment longer. I was lost in her gaze... unaware of anything else. Her eyes looking into mine.

"This feels different to me," I said. "I think I have hungered for this nourishment for as long as I can remember. When I hold your hand, I feel something amazing."

After a brief pause, I add, "I love you."

"I love you too."

On another occasion, I remember how her very incredibly thin body became so evident at one particular moment. It was a warm spring day in early June and Faye, Celta’s mother wanted a few photographs of both of us. I wanted copies of the photographs myself. The three of us selected different poses because I wanted to remember and hold onto the image of Celta looking and smiling at me. I needed that so much! It was a passionate hunger that I felt to see that. Even if the angle that her mother was using to take the photograph could not capture her face or her eyes looking into mine, I would see it. I knew I would see that perspective.

Anyway, there was one pose where Faye suggested that I get down on one knee and let Celta sit on my other leg. I remember Celta starting to fall and I was scared. I gasped “grab, hold me” as I tried to find a place to catch her. She had a short-sleeve shirt, and I was aware of her bones around her sides, back, and her arms. I was afraid

she might get hurt no matter where I tried to hold her because she was so thin, with hardly any muscle or fatty tissue.

She rested upon my arms and didn't indicate that she had been hurt.

When we were apart, each day we told each other those words "I love you." It was so easy, so natural, and so right. To be honest, I was so excited that I would go first. I guess I am just passionate in that way. But if it was not reciprocated, it wouldn't be as special, or I wouldn't feel such a desire to tell her "I love you."

Sometimes I would put the phone down after talking, lie back, and smile, resting in the serenity and joy of the moment. Picturing her. Reflecting on our shared experiences.

We were both trying to find meaning and direction in life - a purpose. I'm not just guessing. We talked about these things.

At one point she seemed to be searching for something to say about our feelings for each other. She looked up and saw a song playing on the TV. It was called "I Don't Know Much but I Know I Love You" by Aaron Neville and Linda Ronstadt.

"Yes, indeed!" I said with a smile.



It is hard to overstate how surprisingly disinterested my parents were in anything at all that mattered to me and that included a lack of curiosity as to who it is I that I am speaking to so often... or who I am seeing.

Kathy, my mother, (as I write this, I have divorced myself from my so-called parents) would become so angry at me for "hiding out in my room." Yet, it seemed that both parents had no interest at all in my life! Plus, growing up she never took much interest in me spending quality time with her. It really disgusted me. She brought it on herself by her lack of interest in anything at all about what made me happy or where I was going with my life. It was mind-boggling to me just how any parent could be like this!

This feeling of disgust would come to a head sometime later when Kathy reached out her hand to touch me and I recoiled instinctually before I could think about how she might respond to that. It was like realizing I had touched a snake - I have a

phobia of snakes. She became so furious and didn't want me staying in her home at all, she was literally spitting and wanted to throw me out that night.

That's all I can remember about that. It was chilling!

The fact that I had an existence apart from her frustrated and angered her. And my father could only go along with his wife's feelings. So, they seemed to criticize everything that I was doing because it wasn't "right" in their minds... as if there is only one right way to do things.

As I mentioned, Celta was picking up on these tensions and how hurtful it was to me. She was visibly sad, disturbed, and angered that anyone would hurt me.

I wondered how many people in the world experienced these kinds of singular experiences. I mean during times that seemed dark, it makes a difference when you have someone who respects, values, and honors you as a person?

I noticed how easy it was to connect to and empathize with Celta as my friend.

I know that the other experiences I had as a psychiatric social worker at Georgia Regional Hospital were extremely positive and rewarding. I could sense that I had developed some amazing communication skills and a capacity for empathy. Patients would tell me this or they would tell my supervisors and they would ask when they would see me again. We shouldn't leave that out of the narrative.

My sense of self-confidence continued to grow as well.

There is something important that I must discuss first before we move further on with my journey of success which we will pick up in the next chapter.

Chapter 10: Love's Salvation

I left out some details about what had happened when Celta left the hospital. In this chapter, we'll rewind the clock and review some things that I left out.

Celta had a problem with alcohol addiction as well as having anorexia. To a layperson, the word would be alcoholic. When we went to AA later people said "Hi, I'm Bill and I'm an alcoholic."

I like the term "Alcohol Use Disorder" better since I am going into the psychiatric field and I prefer more scientific. At this time in the 90s, we used the terms Alcohol Addiction and Alcohol Dependence.

Celta had been in the hospital because her weight was dangerously low, and they had to get her to a weight where she wouldn't die within the first thirty days of release from the hospital. Yes, they said that to me.

It was March when she got out of the hospital. I found her intoxicated in a single-room apartment to which she had been released. Her father had left her some money to get started. I couldn't understand the situation. I had bought her a pretty short sleeve shirt with a picture of a cat on it. It was like having a girlfriend to be doing this. She had still been in the hospital when I brought it to her. She had liked it.

Now, seeing her like this, intoxicated, I felt so overwhelmed and frustrated. I pulled out that shirt that I had bought for her because it made her smile. I said, "remember this?" I left the shirt draped over the dresser so she would see it when she did get up.

I had been seeing her every day when she was in the hospital. Now, I wondered if I would find her sober when I showed up.

Again, this was not a conventional relationship.

I was somewhat concerned that my supervisors on the social work team might think I was doing something wrong. I was still new to the field and had not had any specific education that touched on professional ethics. Later in my career journey, I would have avoided this probably. I had told Celta early on that I was not meeting

with her as part of the staff. I had always told her that we were friends. If someone had asked me, I would have explained this.

It just had felt like an unusual way to develop a relationship and indeed it had been. Plus, she smoked and normally that would not be attractive at all to me. I hope you understand, dear reader, that I do not judge people based on external characteristics, like physical attractiveness. Despite that, her very low weight did frighten me. She was four foot eleven and weighed about 60 pounds. That is extreme anorexia. This meant that she was all skin and bones.

I could see and feel her bones when I held her. Her heart was still beating. When we had been close, I would feel a tingling feeling. If I was sitting next to her, I felt it at the point of contact of our legs, hands, and arms. It felt like a current flowing through me and her. It was almost as if the pulsating beats of our hearts were synchronized and felt everywhere our bodies made contact.

Now, I was so sad. I wanted her to be with me. I told her I would be back the next day. I had gone and bought some food from a Subway fast-food restaurant. I thought I knew what she would like.

When I came back, she seemed so bad. She was passed out. She said she had to leave the apartment because she couldn't pay the rent. I had no clarity of mind to problem solve the situation. I took her to the hospital – a regular hospital not where she had been - because of her weight and condition.

After she was put in a room I left for a little while and headed home. I had to think of something. It seemed like she would be okay at the emergency room for a little while.

I got a call and was told to pick her up. They said they couldn't keep her overnight. I felt my voice assume a voice that was like pleading, and I asked for a little more time and saying, "what can I do?"

They said, "we are not responsible for her."

I had been working on jobs – everything from being a busboy to a waiter. My parents made sure to add to my level of shame for not working as an engineer. It was

reprehensible. I would have done anything to get a job that would pay me enough to not need them for anything. If they believed that I was stubbornly choosing to not work as an engineer, they should be the ones in a psychiatric hospital.

I hated them but I had to act cordial and see if I could shake that feeling.

Many people overuse the word hate. In my experience as a therapist, it is rarely something that people admit to feeling. It's what you feel when you are exposed to something noxious, or repulsive! That is precisely what I mean when I say that I hated them! I found them repulsive!

So, I decided to take Celta to a motel in Augusta.

She was sober now. We spoke for some time.

She said jokingly, "you can say that you spent the night with a woman finally."

We had not "slept together" as they say. This day didn't even allow for cuddling.

I said, "I better get home, my parents think I am working. It's weird how Mom suddenly wants me to be around her while I live there. Growing up this was never an issue. Now because I moved in with them, they want to SEE me. I can't say I don't want to SEE you to Mom."

It felt good to laugh about this. We had talked about this unusual situation and would continue to do that. My self-esteem was being dragged down due to the emotional and psychological abuse and so I wanted to avoid my mother as much as possible. My father was more tolerable, but he still went along with and supported my mother's point of view.

The next day I showed up at the hotel and her room. She wasn't in. I walked around frantically looking for her. A light rain was falling. This place didn't look too inviting in the day, as they had not kept up the place too well. I passed people as I looked and listened in the rooms nearby. I was never nosy, but I was feeling desperate.

"Have you seen a small woman?" first upfront at the reception desk and then I asked some people who were walking around.

No one was very helpful.

I walked around the front which faced the highway. I fell to my knees, more like collapsing than praying. Then I said in a voice that was audible but not loud, "Please, please help me."

I walked back around and spotted someone who I had seen earlier. "You are looking for a small woman?" a woman said.

"Yes."

"Come this way. I think she went in a room over here."

We knocked on a door. I saw her in a bed with some guy without her clothes on. What had he done to her? What happened? I could see beer bottles. I must have looked pitiful.

I registered voices saying, "nothing happened, she passed out here." ... "She had been looking for something to drink."

I'm thinking "does she look like someone who should be drinking?" and "what kind of guy is this to take advantage of her?"

I looked away as she dressed. She had looked so boney that she looked like she was starving to death like those pictures from Ethiopia that I had seen on a TV ad. My reaction around her when I noticed how thin she was from time to time felt embarrassing and confusing. Maybe it was more like I feared for her health than that I was repulsed by her appearance.

Back in her room, I told her that I didn't know what to do. She said her mother lives in Athens, and I said I would take her there. It was about an hour and a half away. We weren't sure that her mother would take her, but I felt like we had to try. Yes, she knew how to get there. I thought "don't call, just go. Just show up."

We found the house and I knocked on the door. Her mother saw us and said, "she can't stay here."

I looked at her pleadingly. “I... I don’t know what to do. I tried other things.” Tears were running down my face as I said, “I’m scared.”

She opened the door and we entered.

“I’m Bruce.”

“I’m Faye.” Adding, “we’ve had problems and fought before.” She was small herself but not sickly underweight.

“Thank you for helping. I don’t know what to do.”

I said goodbye to Celta and said I would be back to see her soon.

Her father had come from out of state and rented an apartment for her. There was one more episode of Celta drinking before things settled into a relatively normal life. When I say "normal life" I mean she was not drinking. She had gone on what seemed like a binge of drinking and then stopped. There would be one other episode months later but that was it.

This was when I met a couple that was friends of the family. The woman was the one that told me that Celta cannot love people and that she is a user and a manipulator. She warned me not to be an “enabler.”

Indeed, people with substance abuse or use disorders can be like that. They can act like sociopaths where they use people, lie, manipulate others, and might appear to act like they don’t have morals. However, I am a bright person, and I am observant when it comes to the actions and intentions of others. Celta was never asking me to do things that I didn’t want to do. In fact, I could tell that she was genuinely concerned about how I felt, and she was extremely concerned about my happiness.

That is what is so profound about this story. I honestly never knew anyone who was so interested in me and no one had made me so happy. This is an observation I was making as the story moves into April of 1990.

I knew my parents were extremely judgmental of others. So, I was keeping this relationship to myself. I had enough to deal with when it came to them without

getting into a fight if they said anything derogatory. Still, their lack of curiosity was strange.

I was calling Celta every night. We talked for at least an hour. At some point in May, I started telling Celta "I love you" every time we spoke. Just as I was saying goodbye with a promise to call the next day and she would answer, "I love you too." I felt butterflies in my stomach. After I put the phone down, I would look up at the ceiling with a smile on my face.

Most of the time I came on Sundays. She had suggested the Botanical Gardens in Athens. They had a flower bed in front of the main building. In April the pansies were in bloom. I was looking at them holding Celta's hand as we imagined what kind of expression they had on their yellow or violet faces.

Inside the building, they had exotic plants with different names. Some were trees with variously shaped green leaves. A wide range of flowers. Some of the trees sprouted flowers as well. There was a restaurant upstairs and another downstairs. It always seemed too quiet, and Celta didn't even mention eating there. We would walk around the grounds most of the time. They had paths or trails with various plants labeled along the way. Along the parking lot, there was a place that was slightly woodsy.

During this time, when we were apart, she continued to compose hand-written letters to me, and we found things to talk about on the phone every day.

I would treasure those letters. Her letters made me feel like I was with her even when we were apart. I would read them again and again. There is something magical about a person sharing their most intimate thoughts and observations in real-time, uncensored - a stream of consciousness observation.

"I think it is amazing," I said to Celta.

"What?"

"Well, your letters to me are about your experiences and observations. Yet they feel like gifts to me. I used to think that we should not just talk about ourselves and our own feelings. That's not true."

During this time, I would often go to the Catholic Church with my parents and my brother on Saturday evening. Then I would drive to Athens on Sunday.

Celta started going to the AA – alcoholics anonymous – meetings in the mornings. I thought that her anorexia and the psychological was equally serious, but I was too new in the psychiatric field to know what would be best for her. She told me to come with her.

I said, “are you sure I can?”

“Yes, it’s an open meeting.”

“Okay.”

I sat there holding her hand... occasionally looking around... often my eyes rested on her while she seemed to be listening.

Just before the end of the meeting she gestured to get up and said we can go now. She had told me her religion was Episcopalian which is similar to Catholicism which I had known. As we got up and started walking out the front door away from where we parked and toward the church, holding hands, I felt ten feet tall, that feeling I would have with her.

Sometimes we showed up a bit early and stood outside where they had the meetings. We stood there, arms around each other, looking at each other, lost in words, dreams, and our own world.

One time I stepped away to use a restroom which was in another area and some people were talking. Some of the literature caught my eye. I was feeling a bit out of place though. A guy and a woman approached me. “I’m Linda,” said the woman. The guy said, “Oh, you’re Celta’s boyfriend.”

Without a second thought, I just said “Yes,” and said we are going to church now. I had not even thought about what I had just said until later and it just brought a smile to my face when I reflected upon the moment. For some reason, I didn’t mention that to Celta.

I walked upstairs and found Celta standing by herself in the hallway. I smiled and wrapped the fingers of my right hand into the fingers on her left hand and we walked toward the doorway passing others who were congregating. It felt like a formal procession. That's why they assumed we were boyfriend and girlfriend. What else would one think?

I would open the doors for both of us hearing the lyrics from the song "Miracles" by Jefferson Starship drifting through my mind.

If only you believe in
miracles, baby
so would I
{pause}

I might have to move
heaven and earth to prove
it to you, baby



And we walked like this the short distance to the church. I spotted Faye, Celta's mother and we walked there. I slid down the row and next to her mother with Celta

on my right – me in the middle. No one gestured for Celta to sit in the middle next to her mother.

On another visit, Celta mentioned that she had met a guy named David at one of the AA meetings and asked if we could visit him. I took it like she was reaching out to help someone like I might do the same. He was staying in a residential facility for people with alcohol problems.

When we got there, I noticed the long entrance roadway into the place. It was a nice summer day with the green grass flowing over a gentle hill.

“Were you here before?” I asked her.

“A couple of years ago for about a month.”

We found David and decided to walk a bit toward a shaded area. I reached for Celta’s left hand and she took my hand. I guess I felt a little jealous. She looked at me and just smiled. I managed a smile back.

There was another visit where Celta asked to visit David again. I couldn’t let her down, but I wanted my time with her. No, she wasn’t looking at David like she looked at me. I was a bit surprised at my feelings. I was slightly upset but didn’t say anything. As I took her hand we walked a bit and then she reached out to take David’s hand too with a playful childlike look on her face.

We were near a swing set. “Have a seat, I’ll push you,” I said.

I pulled her forward a bit and pushed her back.

David started to talk about something then his voice trailed off.

I was pushing Celta away and she would return. Not too far, just past the triangular poles of the swing set. Her brown hair caught the sun at the farthest crest – just to the right of her head. Everything was quiet. Our eyes were locked. She smiled that look that said she was happy to be with me. I mouthed the words “I love you” silently, and she smiled, in a rhythm with the swing, as she was closest.

It was hypnotic. We breathed with each cycle of her moving toward me and then away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed David shift a bit almost restless. I then felt bad for him. Celta had not averted her gaze from me. She seemed content.

After another few moments, I noticed she was wanting to swing higher. I wondered, “could she fall?” and then gently caught her legs and said, “what if you fall?”

She just smiled.

“It’s getting late,” I said.

On another visit, we went to a zoo that was near the Botanical Gardens. They had some black bears, a few monkeys, a few wolves, foxes, a bobcat, snakes, turkeys, deer – not in the same enclosure, of course. It was called Bear Hollow Zoo.

I told Celta that this felt like I was going on a vacation when I came. An escape. A getaway – that’s a good word.

I got to meet her father too. He was nice and he took some photos of us.

The time I spent with Celta seemed to sustain me through the workweek.

I have no idea why but there was a period of just over a week in early September where she had another drinking binge. I wasn’t mad, I was mystified by what happened.

Then things seemed normal again with our relationship. I felt comfortable with her.

It seemed like she picked up on my feelings around this time and the sense that I was hurt and scared. It wasn’t like she intended any harm to me. If she had this problem for all these years and it had been so troublesome to everyone, what was different now?

She seemed a bit off the next time I saw her. I guess it was like she felt shame for her problems and the impact they might have on me. I had mentioned previously how

someone who knew the family told me that Celta was just a user and manipulator. Those are words I knew that people say to people like Celta hoping to motivate them to change.

But she was beating her problems.

When she had been in the psychiatric hospital, I remember they said they worried that if she died within 30 days of her release, they would be libel. So, it seemed like she had to gain a certain amount of weight. It seemed like they then changed their mind and decided that they can't keep her forever. It had been a grim prognosis and it offended me. But she had lasted all these months and seemed okay despite being so thin.

It felt like love had saved her – not just my love for her but her love for me – our mutual love.

We began talking about our relationship and the nature of the relationship. She had this pensive look on her face as if she was remembering something as she looked away, out the window. Then she said, "I love you, but I am not in love."

"Okay, because... I don't know either what we have." I answered. "And..." I started to say something. "I don't know what to say. I haven't thought about things like this before."

It was a late summer day in September. What was my question way back when she had looked up at the TV and saw a video of the song "I don't know much, but I know I love you?"

Nothing had changed in the following weeks when I saw her. For example, the following week I came and at one point she took a seat on her bed and I looked down at her smiling with a feeling of joy almost bordering on amusement as I looked into her eyes. She was looking up and she had a look on her face like she was in love or delighted by something. I want to say "hungry", but she was just looking.

When I sat down next to her on her bed, I was on her left and I touched her right leg. I was thinking that I wanted to be closer, to feel her body next to mine. She moved her legs over mine. My hand rested against her lower back. Her arms went around me.

I felt peaceful, serene. Nothing was said. We just smiled at one another. I could feel every place where our bodies touched. It wasn't exciting but peaceful. I could feel a tingling feeling and chills. Slow and repeated like some wave.

I felt peaceful, serene. Nothing was said. We just smiled at one another. I could feel every place where our bodies touched. It wasn't exciting but peaceful. I could feel a tingling feeling and chills. Slow and repeated like some wave.

The fall moved into the Georgia area and the air-cooled. The leaves were falling off the trees.

We came to the place where the pathway met the parking lot. I looked up to an area in the trees. I was thinking that it was cool enough that there wouldn't be any snakes. I gestured to the left. "Up there, it will be a little private for us." I said adding, "I don't want to be disturbed by the others."

I was telling her what to me didn't sound very exciting - just something about where I used to go hiking when I was growing up. This somewhat reminded me of that. We had woods behind our house where we lived when I was growing up. I was saying that just behind our house the woods didn't go very deep. We were unpacking the food we brought.

I looked up and she seemed transfixed with her full and complete attention on me.

Wow! I almost wanted to ask, "what do you see in me that is so interesting or exciting?" but that didn't seem necessary with Celta or maybe it didn't seem appropriate to me. We had a connection. Wow! What was it that was happening? I had never noticed anyone so interested in me. It was almost as if I had hypnotized her.

Later, I would think, "that was a moment I should capture in a poem."

How did holding hands feel so special? Or her listening to me with interest? Or how can non-sexual touching feel so powerful?

Moments later we were walking hand-in-hand. My mind drifted to the various feelings that I had. Sometimes I had felt peace, calmness, serenity. Other times I felt

excited or aroused. That's hard to talk about because I had not even been in the habit of talking about those things with myself.

We would exist in a place of tranquility, peace, and serenity. I tell her, "I can just stay here with you forever."

Chapter 11: After Celta: From Tragic Loss to hope and escape.

In the last chapter, I told you about the joy I found in finding someone to love and someone who loved me. I told you about the experiences I had, and I hope it was clear just how meaningful this was in my life's trajectory. It was so important to present the profound and positive impact this had on my life.

This was life-altering.

The experiences I had growing up, in my home environment were toxic to the development of the kind of self-confidence and self-worth that I would need to achieve my career goals. Something had been missing despite all the improvements I had made in my sense of worth.

It's hard to know what you need to overcome a problem that has existed throughout your life. My therapist or counselor in college was very talented, competent, and profoundly helpful. However, we failed to fully appreciate all the negative impacts of abuse and devaluation that I had experienced in my home life from my parents.

Then I met Celta, and something happened. She seemed to delight in me. She was so interested in my experiences. She also was concerned about my well-being and happiness. I knew she was thinking about me for most of the day each and every day! Her diary-style, stream of consciousness letters told me this.

I knew she was thinking about me for so much of her day, each and every day, because of the letters she wrote to me - her diary of sorts composed with me in mind as someone she wanted to share her life with. I had realized that I previously thought that I was not that important to anyone. This is what I meant by seeking a relationship with some aspect of exclusivity or the idea that I could be the most important person to someone.

I knew that I was the only one that Celta loved the way she loved me. Previously, I had friends, but they all had a boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse or the relationship wasn't as close.

After I was with Celta, I felt like I was ten feet tall... confident... worthwhile, and deserving. My self-esteem was higher than it had ever been in my life. I also felt safe trying new things. This idea might seem unexpected. She was just a small girl (woman). I sensed that she deeply cared about me and thought about me and that was transformative.

It's important to underscore these important points before I move on with this story.

When I say that our relationship was platonic, I mean that we were not boyfriend and girlfriend. We didn't have a physical relationship. That being said, we did exchange "I love you" on a daily basis or whenever we talked on the phone or saw each other. We were close and perhaps somewhat intimate and physical but not in a sexual way.

Late in December, something happened. I had moved to kiss her as I was leaving. It was impulsive. Her lips were so thin that I didn't feel what I imagined I would feel. This was my first kiss. I felt confused. She had not turned away or signaled in any way that she didn't want me to proceed. So, why was I uncertain? I didn't have to be shy with Celta. But I didn't want to use her for my own personal "experience."

I would play this back in my mind as I drove away. Yes, I wanted to kiss her. Having decided now for sure what I wanted, next time I would kiss her.

Sometime later I pictured my face turning to the right and moving closer to her as she moved toward me. I had been in sync with her and felt so comfortable. I knew that she might have said that one time that she was not in love but when we were together there were so many times when she had that look of someone who was so happy, comfortable and it sure looked like she was in love. Well, she definitely had "romantic" feelings.

Also, when I was with her, I could see myself and my feelings. You just know those things. There were so many subtle behavioral cues that told me what she was feeling and how she was responding to my touches... how I held her... where I touched her. Everything had been welcomed. I played back memories of how when I touched her she moved closer to me.

As I replayed the imagined kiss – next time - I would begin to tilt my head to the right, bend down, she would be acting on instinct, without taking the time to over-think it – that’s what I would do, and she was my mirror. Sometimes we do things as if the moment is such that it is inevitable. She would move to meet my lips... she would be transfixed upon my eyes and I hers. I felt excited as I replayed this in my mind.

It was as if it had happened already, almost.

It would never happen.

On New Year's Day of 1991, I got the worst news of my life. A phone call. I was in my room on the second floor of the house owned by my parents. "Celta died last night," I was told.

"How?" I asked as if this wasn't possible or real. I was stunned. I wanted my willpower to make it not real!

"There was a fire... she died from smoke inhalation." It started from an exposed electrical cord on a TV.

My mind registered information about the funeral, its location, and time but I could not find the words to begin to convey any sense of what I was feeling. I had spoken a few times to the man previously. He was friends of the family. Tears were flooding my eyes. I just said, “Okay, I’ll be there but I can’t talk...” my voice breaking. I needed the family to expect me.

I dropped the phone and began to cry so bitterly.

I hurt so much!

I cried so much as I drove the way to the funeral. Just before the funeral, I looked at the closed casket and was overcome. Someone was standing by it and for a brief second, some part of me wanted to open the casket and find out that it wasn't Celta that was inside.

At the funeral, I cried more than everyone else combined. I didn't care how I looked.

It was at the Episcopalian church where I went with Celta and where I would sit down next to Celta's mother and Celta. I was still Christian, meaning I went to church on a regular basis.

Standing outside after the funeral people were talking. I was looking at the closed casket unable to believe this was real. I was still crying. Celta's mother instructed me not to come to the burial. She could tell that I was not going to make it through that event. My state of mind was such that I needed to be told what I should do now.

At the burial the one person who loved Celta most, who felt a visceral sense of grief above and beyond that felt by the others... that one person would be missing. I would not be there. I had followed the directions of Celta's mother and left Athens (Athens Georgia).

I certainly felt betrayed and abandoned by God. However, I did go to grief counseling at the Catholic hospital in Augusta, Georgia. A nun was leading a grief counseling group – spiritual counseling. She was using guided imagery, relaxation techniques, prayer, and biblical references. I met with her a few times and asked for tape recordings of the sessions.

In the group sessions, she spoke about the stages of grief. We were encouraged to bring in things that were mementos of our experience with our loved ones. I listened intently as others spoke. I was by far the youngest. I had studied the grief process in a psychology class at Georgia Tech. I read some more about this from a “clinical” standpoint. I was keeping reality at a distance.

I was in denial at times and at other times I would be overwhelmed with the idea of not being able to see Celta ever again and I would cry and cry.

So much is strange about this time period. The struggles with my parents were never intentionally instigated by me out of anger for anything. They just seemed uninterested in me and my life, other than to tell me what I ought to do.

I suppose I wanted to share the fact that someone had loved me to explain what had changed. It was surreal that there was such denial that anything had happened or changed. I might be in denial as a symptom of grief but I wanted to celebrate the relationship that I had. Where would I begin?

Family dysfunction and the loss of a relationship with my brother (a flashback) ...

During this time, John, my brother, and I became great friends. He was finishing up high school. Carrie, my sister, had moved up to Connecticut earlier after she was attacked and assaulted by both parents. So much of this time is blurry. Plus, my brother and I drifted apart as adults, so I don't have memories that include him during this time.

Child Abuse by My Brother John Whealton...

Here are a few songs about child abuse...

"Her Demon" Child Abuse Awareness By: Hollow Hearts & Infectious ft: Calli Kathleen



“It Shouldn't Hurt to be a Child” - ORIGINAL SONG Child Abuse Awareness ft. Calli Kathleen



And “Luka” by Suzanne Vega



Maybe I am forcing him out of my mind. Years later his daughter told me that my brother had caused done something that was potentially abusive. Then I saw him throw her up against a wall like she was a rag doll. I asked Child Protective Services to look into the matter.

I expected them to be discreet and assumed they would not reveal who called. I wasn't trying to hurt him and wondered if anything would come of the matter.

My brother found out and never spoke to me again.

I heard later from my father that they were afraid I would call Child Protective Services again!

I was asked by the agency that looked into the matter to write a piece about the cycle of abuse.

That was in 2002.

It's bizarre how things happen. He was the only one in the family who got aggressive in response to our parents' physical abuse or threats of violence, but they chose to invite him and his wife to visit on holidays and disinvite me ever since. Our family is so dysfunctional! I have an adult niece who doesn't know anything about me.

Anyway, getting back to 1991, to cope with the tragic loss, I started drinking. A lot.

I was put on a tricyclic anti-depressant by a psychiatrist. I had developed panic attacks as well. The anti-depressant had the effect of creating a sense of positive feelings even with my mother standing there one morning ironing something for work with my father getting ready too. Those fake feelings were only transitory. It is reminiscent of the song by REM titled "It's the end of the world as we know it."... and I feel fine. I guess I felt "high."

The days flowed around me like a mystical experience in which I flowed in and out of my body. I wasn't fully alive or so it seemed... betrayed even by God.

It was all a blur. My entire existence.

Somehow, I did get a job finally that could have made my parents satisfied. Everything was always about them. They never asked about anything that was happening to me. So, they never inquired about why I was going for grief counseling because they had no knowledge of this.

Anyway, I got a job at the National Science Foundation as a contractor. I was developing a network for the museum and that involved network programming in the C programming language. I was a software engineer. I did accomplish a great deal in that job capacity and my supervisor was very impressed with my talents.

Again, this was not at all interesting to me. Yet, I was making sure that I successfully met all deadlines and deliverables.

I vaguely remember a summer trip to Las Vegas. The company paid for this to cover some training related to my work. It was amazing. I had this incredible per-diem rate where I was paid my salary plus extra money for expenses that exceeded the cost of the hotel room.

Vegas was probably the worst place for me to go with so much free cash and free drinks in the casinos. Somehow, I made all the presentations for the training that I was sent there to attend. In the evenings and free time, I hit the casinos and made some decent money. Nothing to write home about. Gin or vodka was an escape but somehow, I didn't drink so much so as to get sick at night or even the next day.

As I try to write this now, I have only momentary snapshots with no full running narrative memory. Just random disconnected sensations. My hands were unable to touch the leather inside a car. The sun shimmering on the pavement. Casinos. Drinks. Sitting at a poker table. Pulling a lever on a slot machine.

I must have done what was expected of me. I don't remember any complaints from my boss.

Yeah, I moved through time like a robot.

The job was going well, as I said. I was proud of how well I was doing.

I was drinking more and more during this time period after the trip to Las Vegas. Everything except beer. Vodka with tonic or orange juice. Gin and tonic. Whiskey with ice, water, or coke. Not so much wine.

I was passing out and once or twice I would puke. I really hated throwing up, always.

I did meet this girl from the home office of the company that was paying me. She lived in Alabama and I was in Augusta, Georgia and we decided to meet in Atlanta, Georgia where I had graduated not long before that.

My supervisor was joking that I had "jungle fever" because I was a white guy who was going to date a black woman. He was black, as well. I didn't let that bother me. Spike Lee's film "Jungle Fever" had been out, and it was an important film. I have always been fine with having a conversation about race if that was something that was desired.

My mother actually asked about my date. I suppose her name sounded ethnic and my mother asked about that guessing that she might be Italian. I said, "no, she's black."

I remember that this was the first time I kissed anyone other than a brief kiss that Celta and I shared back in December of the last year. I mentioned that above.

This was extremely passionate. She brought her kid and left him in the car and parked near the Student Center - the same building where I worked on the bottom floor in the post office.

We were looking for someplace to sit or be as private as possible outside after dark. I remember making out at a few locations here and there. I could feel her large breasts against me, and I was aroused.

My first passionate kiss. Before Lynn. We'll get to that later.

Did I feel guilty about dating so soon after Celta? Maybe. But I wasn't actually feeling nor was I "aware" during this time period. I was so numb that I needed to feel something. To wake up! I was trying so hard to wake up. The tricyclic antidepressant made me feel good for a few moments. That didn't make it a meaningful experience.

Then later there was the fact that she said in December that she loved me but wasn't in love with me. I had only known her for one year, from January through December 31 or 1990. I do know that countless times she had that look like someone in love when she looked in my eyes. I was fairly certain she was trying to protect me from being hurt. But I never got a chance to ask her.

And that kiss? I had stopped, not her. It was my first time kissing anyone and I should have been aware that her lips were so small that if I didn't feel anything at first I should wait or stay there. I was always comfortable with Celta. She had never rejected any of my touches.

My mother had made me feel so not okay and so had my father somewhat. This "date" was a way to get out of the home and to appear normal to my mother. If I was going out with someone from the company that employed my services, it made me appear less worthy of the criticism I had been getting from my parents. That's how I figured it. It was an escape.

Some people with Borderline Personality Disorder or trauma disorders will cut their own skin with razors or something sharp just to feel something. The date was something like that.

There wasn't a second date. I had expressed my concerns about pre-marital sex. We weren't even in a committed relationship. I drove to Atlanta to meet her for a second date, but she never showed. I was frustrated out of embarrassment. Then I just forgot the entire matter by the next day and never thought about the matter further.

The various medications and the alcohol impeded grieving and dare I say reality testing. People who are grieving are in such a state of denial that it is almost like a temporary psychosis. From what I was reading and hearing in the stories of grief that I studied, "normal," healthy people did for a while embrace denial to such an extent that it bordered on delusional thinking.

The loss of Celta could not be washed away with alcohol, grief counseling, or an intimate date.

Poetry as an outlet...

I can thank my mother for introducing me to Martin Kirby, who went to our church and he was a professor of English Literature and related subjects at a college in Augusta, Georgia. He would become my writing/poetry mentor.

I would show up on a regular basis for poetry readings where I shared my poetry and got feedback, advice, and guidance on writing good poetry. He also heard me write about my experiences with Celta and listened to my experiences. This was very helpful because I had no other outlet for this or place to talk about Celta and my relationship with her.

He said he thought it would take about 10 years for me to be able to write good poetry about Celta because the feelings were too raw.

I was living in a difficult environment with my parents. I was dealing with a major tragedy and yet the name Celta wasn't even being mentioned.

Between drinking, the different medications I was put on, and the panic attacks, I had to go to the Emergency Room (ER) on two occasions.

The psychiatrist tried me on a major tranquilizer, and I had these horrifying muscle spasms that twisted my body up into contortions that made me think my bones were going to be broken in my neck and elsewhere. The doctor said that in higher doses the drug is used for psychotic disorders but somehow it would help with my depression, I guess. That was the reason I was taken to the ER once. My father took me.

Another time I had a panic attack and again my father took me to the ER. It's strange that they weren't asking why all this was happening. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. NEVER!

The only ones listening to my stories about Celta were Martin Kirby and his wife as well as the attendees at the grief support group. Again, my parents were not

interested to learn anything about this matter. They never seemed to have any awareness that I was even going to grief counseling.

This is so utterly astonishing! I had not deliberately been trying to keep everything a secret about what was going on with me. On the contrary, I looked for an opening to discuss the matter. I wanted to repair and improve the relationship. I wanted to share the fact that I had found someone who loved me.

With all this going on, all the problems I was having, I began to doubt that I could achieve my goals in life, my career goals. I wondered how I could help others when I had so many problems myself.

It should be noted that while I was put on a major tranquilizer, my psychiatrist NEVER said he thought I was psychotic. We knew I had problems coping with overwhelming stressors.

There is a positive aspect of this time period of 1990 to 1992 that I did not mention. My parents had friends that had adopted a young girl who was about 12. I have always been great with kids. I love kids and enjoy the chance to be like a big brother.

I was so impressed that she wasn't shy at all when I first met her. I went to visit with my parents, and they invited us to come swim. It was either 1990 or 1991 when I met her. I was like a big brother and I had a great time doing so many things with her.

After the job with the National Science Foundation ended, another opportunity presented itself in March of 1992. I was offered a job in Wilmington, North Carolina, to work with Corning as a Technical Writer. They wanted someone with a technical background.

This would change everything. I was about to be on my own again. Finally!

My perception that I had long-term "problems" would disappear as if by magic, literally - it was unbelievable. My problem had been living in a toxic environment and that was complicated by the grief and the effort I had made to ignore, suppress, or deny the natural process.

My own doubts about my ability to achieve my career goals in life were contributing to the problems I was having.

It's hard to believe that I had only known Celta for one year – the year 1990 and when that year ended, so had Celta's life.

The tragic loss of Celta did not erase the positive impact she had on my life. There were other positive experiences during this time. I had become more confident.

I had been writing poetry about the experiences I had with Celta and I wanted to share that with others. I had been sharing that with Martin Kirby my poetry mentor but now I wanted to share this with others. It was so important and meaningful!

Chapter 12: My Introduction to Psychiatric Social Work

After graduating from Georgia Tech and knowing where I wanted to go with my life, I needed to take steps to make this major transition. It's so crazy how my parents seemed to know that engineering was so wrong for me but they spent so much time still trying to get me to work as an engineer. I'm not saying that the money would not have helped but no one was going to hire me because I am not an actor. Celta was the only one I knew who could act but that was another story.

Beginning in January of 1990, I approached Georgia Regional Hospital and declared my desire to work as a volunteer with the social work team so that I could build a career as a psychiatric social worker. I explained that I planned to get a master's in social work, but I did not have experience in the field. I just had a passionate desire to help others.

I would volunteer a few hours every week. I met with the Licensed Clinical Social Worker on the Adult intake unit of the hospital. This is the unit where new arrivals were admitted. There was also a medical unit and an area for those who were criminally insane.

This was in Augusta, Georgia. I had moved in with my parents as I mentioned previously. They used various coercive measures to get me to find work while simultaneously making me feel like shit for not working as an engineer... and even the types of jobs I was encouraged to accept added to the shame. Busboy for example was one such job. I had spent five years running a mental marathon to bus tables! I could feel the shame of that. I am not one that looks down on others but during this time as a Georgia Tech graduate, I was made to feel shame for doing jobs like this. The pressure I felt from my parents was an inspiration to take whatever job existed.

I alluded to various other jobs that I had during this time. It's not relevant to this story to list them all. Some jobs eventually required me to use my mind but not all of these jobs required a college education.

At Georgia Regional Hospital I was instructed in how to do an intake assessment that the social work staff needed. Not only was it a requirement but the information could and would be used for their treatment while they were patients.

The building had locked units. However, people could go outside once they had been there for a little while. That is an interesting policy given that some if not most of them were required to stay there. I suppose if a patient was suicidal they might be watched closely.

The intake assessments were very interesting to do. I got a chance to get to know people and what brought them into the hospital. I want to emphasize that it wasn't just about the problems that brought them into the hospital. I was getting a full psychosocial history from and/or of the patients. This wasn't busy work for my own education. I was doing a task that was very much required and necessary.

This was immensely rewarding.

I had access to other information from nurses and doctors, including psychiatrists. So, this was quite a learning experience also.

My social skills were continuing to grow through practice. I was seeing people at their worst. And some people had problems that directly affected their ability to communicate. This required on my part empathy, compassion, active listening skills, and various other social skills.

I also spoke to family members and others outside the hospital to gather additional information.

I was learning about diagnoses. Most importantly, I was learning about people and the problems that affect others. I began to see how just talking to others as I was doing is helpful. People wanted to talk to me. People wanted to share their stories. I'm not saying everyone was easy to talk to.

There were patients who had problems that made communication difficult. Some people had problems with reality testing. Some had difficulties related to their insight into why they were there or why they had been brought to the hospital.

I sat in on staff meetings as well. A rotation of medical students or interns was beginning just as I started that year of 1990. I felt like I belonged.

It was a great experience - the entire time I was there. I learned so much. It was challenging but I found everything so rewarding that I was eager to do the work that I was doing.

I knew that I had made the right decision to go into social work - psychiatric social work. I knew I was on the right path.

Section Three: A Love Story: A Connection: The Role of Cystic Fibrosis

This section of my book covers building a family as an adult. Beginning in April of 1992, I would move out on my own leaving the life I had living with my parents. You will notice that the "problems" that I had described when I was living with my parents and dealing with grief will almost magically disappear. The environment in which I was living with my parents had become very toxic.

In this section, I am writing stories that read like a love story when taken together. When I speak of starting a family, I mean sharing my life with another person, eventually as husband and wife. So, this is about falling in love. I had dated a little but no one other than Celta played a role in my history. There was a moment when we almost kissed – do you remember what I described?

I suppose some it can be confusing. Nothing “sexual” happened. That being said, I never held hands with my male friends, or cuddled with them, or stared into their eyes, felt the need to repeatedly tell them “I love you.” You get the idea.

The book overall is about my interest in building connections – social connections. For me, this is a form of self-actualization!

It's important to note that the same efforts involved in overcoming shyness in order to be able to find someone to love were helpful in my career journey. So, this section is a very important part of my overall autobiographical story. It offers a background for the other later chapters of the book.

While these chapters within this section can stand alone in part, the best way to understand everything and appreciate the love story here is to have read every chapter that has come before these next chapters in this section of the book.

For a brief moment, before I moved out on my own, I worried about my own mental health and whether my "problems" would have an impact on my career plans. That was where things were left at the end of the last section. Never again would I wonder about this. Clearly, the environment where I was living with my parents had

been extremely toxic. That narcissistic household would be left behind and replaced with brighter days.

At this same time in my history, I would embark on my career goals and dreams. I am going to describe that aspect of my life in Section Three where I will have to back up in time to cover that aspect of my life.

Regarding shyness, I would say that I was a "shy person in recovery." I made up that term and you will come upon this later in this section of the book. I use that phrase to indicate that I had accomplished so much with regard to overcoming the paralyzing effects of shyness, but it has been an enduring aspect of my life story.

Cystic Fibrosis and My Life with Lynn Denise Krupey

It's also important to note that the girl of my dreams, the love of my life, the one person I would fall madly and passionately, totally and completely, in love with, had a chronic illness called ***Cystic Fibrosis***. I will discuss that later in this section of the book including the implications this had on our life together.

The Role of Religion as A Toxic Influence

For the longest time, I was still a believer in religious ideas – the ones I had been exposed to growing up. God, spirituality, heaven, and sin of course. We can't leave that out. I would come to feel such great shame for things I said to Lynn when we were living together. She would ask if I regretted the things, we did. I would answer "no, of course, not." I knew we had an incredible relationship, and we were committed to each other forever, we had an incredible connection.

Everything we did was so right!

Being an atheist like I am now, would have been easier. I can be philosophical without looking for supernatural answers.

Lynn was always open- minded and curious... practical but curious. I'll explain the practical part. By curious, I mean she listened to our friend Jean as he discussed and applied to the tarot. Her mother went to someplace on Sundays that didn't preach any particular faith or religious dogma.

Where the Story Begins and Where it Leads

I pick up the story when I turn twenty-six and move to Wilmington, North Carolina - my home. Things are much different than when I arrived in Atlanta Georgia for college. It's true that I didn't know anyone in Wilmington when I first move there. However, I am not paralyzed by shyness and social anxiety - I had developed social skills as well.

The experience of being in love was more amazing than I had imagined. I could not have known what it is like to be in love until it happened. I suppose no one does... but no one tried to convey the happiness and serenity that comes from being loved and being in love.

Please join me... this promises to be exciting.

Chapter 13: Moving to Wilmington: My Adult Life Takes Off



In the last chapter, I ended with the announcement that I was moving to Wilmington, North Carolina. I had a six-month contract to work at Corning Glass. I was working as a technical writer. They needed someone who had a technical background, and I was told that my engineering degree and experience working as a software engineer met the requirements.

I was a bit nervous or had some uncertainty since this was just a six-month contract. The past year and a few months had been extremely difficult. I was not doing well, and my self-esteem had plummeted or so I thought.

As it turns out, I only had to move out on my own and get my life back on track. I had to resume my quest and continue with my career journey.

It also is obvious that the only problem I had had was that I chose to live in a very toxic environment when I chose to move in with my parents between undergraduate school and graduate school.

I had spent over two years thinking about how unacceptable I was in the eyes of my parents. I could NOT make them happy for me to save my life.

What do I mean when I state that I was living in a toxic environment? I constantly worried that I wasn't good enough... I wasn't making my mother happy... My mother had made it know that she believed that I was stubbornly unwilling to work as an engineer. That nearly constant psychological and emotional abuse hung over me like a dark cloud... Other than with Celta.

When I was with Celta, I felt acceptable... loved... special. I felt good enough. I could just be.

Prior to coming to Wilmington, I had been writing poetry and sharing poetry with a friend of mine named Martin Kirby. I give my mother credit for introducing me to him. It was interesting that she noticed that I might like poetry.

At any one time in life, there are things that stand in stark contrast to everything else that was going on. I mean, my family had overall been completely unaware of everything meaningful that was going on in my life at that time. They were not at all interested in knowing that Celta existed and had played a role in my life. They didn't care to know why I had been so sad for the past year. My family showed no interest at all in my career plans or what I had done to move forward with those plans.

None of that ever seemed to matter at all. That was so exasperating but then my mother introduces me to a poet and English Literature professor because she knows that poetry is interesting to me. Yes, I am grateful that she noticed that but why could they not notice all of the things that mattered to me?

The subject of the writing that I shared with Martin, my poetry mentor, was not something that either parent cared to know about. So, I'm grateful that my mother cared enough to introduce me to this talented professor of English literature but that was the extent to which either parent demonstrated an interest in anything that interested me or that would make me happy.

Anyway, this new interest of mine in poetry would prove to be important as I started to build a life for myself as a young adult.

I had found a roommate who had a room for rent before I moved. Anyway, my roommate's name was Donna Bender. She had an extra room that she was renting. She was a thin pretty woman who had been in a domestic violence relationship and had been involved in the domestic violence community.

Anyway, when I moved to Wilmington, I obviously didn't know anyone, other than my roommate. I did socialize a bit with my roommate. I remember going downtown to a gay bar with her once. Apparently, a guy was interested in me and Donna said that I am straight. It was interesting.

Somehow, I got separated from Donna either that night or on another night in downtown Wilmington. I think I had stepped outside for a moment and the next thing I knew; I had lost Donna. I remember walking home that night from down by the riverfront area - near the Cape Fear River - to Sabra Drive in Wilmington. It must have taken me about an hour and a half at least to walk home.

This wasn't my main source of entertainment or enjoyment after work and on the weekends.

When I first arrived, that first week, I had in mind that I needed to make friends. I thought I would see what activities are available in the city. So I picked up an entertainment weekly paper. I had in mind looking into the poetry reading scene in the area. I believe my poetry mentor Martin had suggested this to me.

This is how I would build a social network and a social life.

That first week when I arrived, I decided to call the contact person from the announcement in the newspaper. That person's name was Jean Jones. He would go on to be an important friend of mine for many years, decades.

Anyway, I had asked if people read their own writing and he confirmed that this was the reason we gathered for the poetry readings. Yes, people read their own poetry.

So, I made a decision to attend, and I had in mind that I would share my poetry with the group. This was something for which I had to prepare mentally before showing up. The choice to share my own writing was based on two factors. One was the fact that I truly wanted to share my experiences with others. I had been through an amazing series of experiences and I wanted to make a connection with my stories. The other reason was the fact that I wanted people to know me.

Somehow, I found the courage that very same first poetry reading that I attended to share my poetry. I cannot overstate the courage, effort, and conviction that was required to do this. I had been a very shy person as you know, dear reader. The mere concept of being the center of attention in any group had never occurred in my life. I had avoided that.

Remember, I had hoped to speak in a classroom before graduation from Georgia Tech. Yet, I was too shy to reach that goal - actually my self-esteem was a bit lacking to do that. I remember being in a Literature or related English class and wanting to say something. Maybe there were about 30 of us in class. I just could not do it.

So, if I did find the courage to read my poetry at the poetry reading, this would be a first for me.

I can only imagine that my experiences with Celta were so very transformative. There was one other thing that was very important to consider which I haven't mentioned yet. I had done volunteer work at Georgia Regional Hospital in Augusta, Georgia. I was living with my parents at the time.

The experience as a volunteer at Georgia Regional Hospital was important because I had a specific plan for my career and the rest of my life. I knew I was meant to work as a social worker but that would require that I go to graduate school. The undergraduate degree was in engineering which would allow me to enter graduate school in social work. However, I figured I was going to need experience in an area that is closer to my field of interest.

I had that in mind from back when I was still a student at Georgia Tech. I knew I wanted to be a mental health professional and more specifically a psychotherapist. Georgia Regional Hospital was a state psychiatric hospital and so that was perfect for me to get experience. I volunteered with the social work team. I

also knew that I would need letters of recommendation to get into graduate school in social work.

So, I had all this planned out for a long time. In addition, this experience was very helpful in my ability to gain a great deal of self-confidence. I did interact occasionally at some staff meetings with perhaps 8 or so people there. They included social workers, a psychiatrist, and some medical students.

None of that involved being the center of attention. However, I did feel like I had been helpful to others. I knew that I had a great sense of empathy and respect for others. People opened up to me without any hesitation for the most part. Some patients had problems that made it hard for them to communicate - this was related to their being admitted to the hospital.

Still, it seemed that so many people were happy to share their stories with me. I was able to get them to open up. I got a sense that I was helping them. Sometimes people just want someone to listen to them and to try to understand them and what they are experiencing.

While those experiences were helpful in increasing my self-esteem and self-confidence, I have also described the painful experiences that were so destructive to me and my sense of self-worth and self-confidence which only increased following the death of Celta.

With that background, I found myself in a different place emotionally and psychologically having moved to Wilmington and out of the situation in which I was living. It truly was like magic and it was like night and day when you consider just how different everything was when I settled into that first week in a new city.

There was another theme that exists in this book. First, when I went off to Georgia Tech as an adult and lived on my own away from my home, I found that experience to be transformative. Now, I moved away from living with my parents, and again almost like magic life is different, better... safer.

That is the situation that describes me when I showed up at the Coastline Convention Center at 7 PM Sunday, the first Sunday I had in a new city. Shortly after 7 pm, the sun was setting on the Cape Fear River with the red, orange, and then blue

light reflecting into a room with the lights turned low to create a peaceful atmosphere. Large windows lined an entire wall from the ceiling down to nearly the floor. We were on the fourth floor.

A small group of people was there... perhaps 10 to 15 people moving about quietly, each taking their turn to read. A woman named Dusty was the emcee. She was such a special person and that probably had a factor in my choice to summon the courage to do something I had never previously contemplated.

I somehow found the courage to walk to the front of the room after getting some directions from Dusty. She had an air about her that was motherly and serene. Peaceful. Welcoming.

I heard my voice on the microphone and it was an unusual experience. I had never heard my voice amplified. "Is that what I sound like?" I wondered. If you had asked me a few years earlier, when I was in my first two years or more at Georgia Tech if I would ever do this, I would have said it was impossible.

In later years at Georgia Tech, I knew I would have to do this, but I also knew that finding the courage and self-confidence to do so was something that would take a tremendous amount of work and effort.

Years later, in other times and places, people have spoken of poetry readings as "performances." I thought of it as reading. Sharing. That was enough of a challenge. Asking me to perform would have seemed even more usual and inappropriate.

Something special was happening that evening. This was the beginning of my life as an adult. This was my becoming. My greatest accomplishment! Finally! I did it. It almost seemed like a test. This was a very, very different test for me. And I passed. I did what I had wanted to accomplish.

I recited a few of the poems that I had selected. I was nervous and I hoped that it wasn't too obvious. I liked the applause and the recognition. Dusty was standing to the side of me as I was finishing up. Her smile was comforting. It said, "thank you for sharing." "You did well." It was accepting. She was about a generation older than me and I realized that this acceptance from a mother figure was something that I had wanted for so long.

The feeling from the experience overall, as I stepped away, from the group was, “you belong.” “You did well.” I felt like the nervousness that I felt could be contained within the warmth of the room and the welcoming nature of the setting. I belonged. Yeah, I felt like I did belong. This soothed my nervousness and helped me relax.

There would be more Sunday nights just like this. Dusty called this sharing of our personal poetry a sharing of a gift to the group. I liked that idea. I had personal poems about Celta that I had wanted to share.

On the second night that I attended I approached Jean. I knew he had a master’s in fine arts (MFA) with a specialization in poetry. He was the contact person that I found in the weekly paper announcing the group. I shared with him a poem I had been working on about a memory I had with Celta. I called it “The Swing.”

The poem was about a memory I had with Celta and I had gone to the park in the summer of 1990, less than two years ago. I had been pushing her away knowing she would swing back to me. First, she would pause at the farthest point from me, her brown hair backlight against the early afternoon sun. She had asked me to take her to meet a male friend of hers. I left that out. I noticed how her look had been transfixed upon me. Her friend’s voice faded as if whatever he was saying didn’t matter at that point. I could tell he was looking at us. Out of my periphery, I noticed his movement that said he felt awkward and maybe intrusive. Yet at that moment despite the fact that I am incredibly sensitive to the feelings of others, I felt mesmerized.

As I write this in 2021, decades later, there are aspects of this memory that are new along with my ideas for the poem. Back then I was using words like the undulating motion of the swing and I had the notion of pushing Celta knowing she would come back to my arms. Jean was friendly and helpful, crossing out large parts of the poem.

It’s funny how memories flow back to us like waves when we least expect them to do so. Celta’s movement on the swing was wave-like in nature. I had mentioned that in the poem. But like my poetry mentor, Martin Kirby had said that it would take ten years for me to write truly good poems about Celta and our experiences.

Somehow, I would find a way to move on with my life. I was going to meet another special girl named Lynn. I had hardly noticed Lynn, yet. I had still been processing the loss of Celta... and when I shared poems about these things, which was such a challenge, Dusty called our poems gifts! So, sharing our hearts and memories with someone is a gift! Nice. I liked that! I liked that very much!

This was the beginning of a quest to pursue a set of goals, dreams, and aspirations. I knew I was going to be tested again in the career I had chosen. I would have to rely upon skills like this and courage like this.

Friendships and Family...

There were a number of regulars that came to the poetry readings. This was where I would build my friendships that would last a lifetime. I am about to describe one of those individuals, Lynn Denise Krupey who will figure prominently in this book.

Another important friend who was coming to these readings is Thomas Childs. I have considered him to be part of my family of choice. Thomas, along with Celta, Lynn and my second wife Elee are the four most important people to me - those individuals who have been most dear to me in my life.

Blissfully Ignorance of the Coming Darkness...

I was blissfully unaware that in just over eight years' time my life would become a living nightmare. I was blissfully ignorant of the psychological impact of victimization, injustice, grief, and loss.

Chapter 14: Meeting Lynn

In the last chapter, I spoke about attending the poetry readings at the Coastline Convention Center. It was April of 1992 when I arrived in Wilmington, North Carolina. I started attending the poetry readings on Sundays.

This was part of my new identity that I was discovering.

Somehow, at these poetry readings, I felt a sense of belonging. Everyone was so welcoming, and the atmosphere was serene and accepting. Many of the attendees had been English majors in college and they had English Degrees. Jean Jones, who was the contact person in the newspaper announcement, had a Master's in Creative Writing with a focus on poetry. I believe he was the most educated in the area of creating writing or English.

I wanted to understand a poet and the ideas that poets have - these poets. I wanted to connect with people who express themselves through the written word.

Martin, my poetry mentor, gave me enough courage to believe that I could be a poet. As a reminder, I had been visiting him and his wife (I might have left her out of the story earlier) for coffee, tea, and reading poetry – his, mine, and that of famous poets. He was a professor of English.

Some of the craft of poetry would allude me, such as meter and rhyme, but I learned that there is a form of poetry called "free verse" that doesn't require as much effort to be expended in the craft and I could get to the point of communicating ideas and sharing ideas, which was the most important aspect of what I wanted or needed.

I'm only saying these things because I have always had some insecurities about my talents.

At this point, as I started this phase of my life, I noticed that for the first time, those insecurities were virtually gone. I know this because I was making friends and connecting with others. I was a part of something that was important. Something special was happening on those evenings and at those poetry readings and other events.

There was something serene about the setting that made it easier for me to get up in front of a group of people and read my poetry. The sun would reflect across the Cape Fear River casting the soft rays of sunlight into the room.

My ability to get up in front of a room of people every week was an amazing accomplishment for me. Again, I have always been shy, fearful, quiet. I NEVER put myself at the center of attention anywhere EVER... until I started coming to the poetry readings.

This ability to be the center of attention would have a profound impact on my choices and my future as I built a career for myself. I would reflect upon the struggles and accomplishments that brought me to this point.

Dusty, the emcee for the poetry readings, made it easier too. She worked at the lounge on the fourth floor of the Coastline Convention Center, where we had the readings. She had a magical quality of attending to the guests of the Convention Center whether they were there for the poetry or not.

Something about Dusty made you feel welcome and comfortable. She was a motherly figure in a way because she was older than some of the other regulars who were like me in our twenties.

I also had noticed this other girl that was coming every week for the poetry readings. There was something about her that got my attention. Her name was Lynn.

She was very thin. She had a cough and that's related to her condition, Cystic Fibrosis - a genetic illness. I must have overheard Lynn talking about that. It's not the kind of thing that you ask someone about... like "why are you coughing all the time?"

Lynn was quiet but I didn't think she was as shy as I was.

She did share her own writing and she would share or read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot. I'm not sure when I first noticed this.

There are so many little things that you observe when someone intrigues you.

Lynn definitely intrigued me.

What was it about her? Did I already think that she was the most beautiful girl imaginable? Do I dare admit to myself that I am entertaining such irrational thoughts? I don't think it was love at first sight but something about her intrigued me. I was a bit surprised that I was thinking about finding a girlfriend after the loss of Celta.

When I had previously “dated” someone in 1991, the year following the death of Celta it was at a time when I was still in shock – something akin to what a heavyweight boxer must feel right after he has just been hit with a few blows to the head, he staggers, trying to stay on his feet, stumbling about, dazed, confused, disoriented, not thinking clearly at all, on the verge of passing out? That was me for most of 1991 and into 1992 in the wake of the loss of Celta.

Back then, if you had asked me if I was ready to date or find someone meaningful to love, I would have said that the question makes about as much sense as it would to the boxer in that state of mind.

I had not been thinking or feeling for so long ... until sometime in May or June of 1992.

This was different. Undoubtedly, being out of the toxic home where I was had made the difference. Being in that environment had kept me from grieving normally.

I should add that it wasn't only her looks that made her attractive to me. There was something that united all of us who were regulars that came to the readings and I held everyone in high regard. There was a connection that I felt to the people I was meeting.

That being said, Lynn was stunningly beautiful. Her voice was hypnotic and alluring. She had all the things that one considers in feminine beauty and shape or so it seemed to me very early on. She seemed perfect.

I loved her voice both when she was at the microphone and when I was close to her. And her face, her skin, her legs seemed like gentle features I might have created in my own mind if I had the imagination to do such a thing.

Yet, I noticed she was alone.

I mean she didn't seem to have a boyfriend. I would come to the readings and try to get a sense of whether or not Lynn had a boyfriend. I didn't want to risk rejection.

Asking a girl out was a very difficult thing for me to do. I would calculate the possibility of rejection.

To avoid that I was trying to come up with a plan for seeing her outside these readings that would be something easy and without the burden of her having to size me up to determine my value as a male companion when she heard the question that I was trying to pose. I was trying to come up with a request to see her outside the poetry readings here.

I was wanting to see if she would want to spend some time with me - as in **just me**.

The words echoed through my mind "see her outside these readings," "do something," "date," and "ask out." No, I probably wasn't going to say "do you want to go out with me?" Then I thought, "wait, why not?"

Well, I wasn't at the point in life where I could say "it's a date." Not yet!

I was like a shy person in recovery. That's a phrase I just made up. It's the best way to describe the way I thought of myself and my fear - my concerns, my judgments about how to proceed.

We were coming up on July 4th and nearly 3 months after I started going to these readings. My social life involved going out a few times with my roommate, Donna, who was nice, but we were not making a connection like I was making at the readings. Plus, I wasn't into Donna.

A big poetry reading was coming up this Sunday the day after the 4th of July. I thought of Fort Fischer where Jean Jones works. Fort Fischer is a historical place. There's also the aquarium nearby. And there is this jetty that goes out to some tiny island which is a mini-animal conservation spot of sorts.

Anyway, the poetry reading was a big deal. Flyers were everywhere it seemed. Maybe I just noticed them in town because I was into that kind of thing.

Yeah, we (Lynn and I) could go together. I was pretty sure she wasn't seeing anyone else.

How it was possible that she didn't already have a boyfriend, I didn't know.

On the last Sunday before the 4th, I found myself at a table by the window at the lounge where the readings were held. She seems receptive to me. Sure, why not. At some point, I found the courage to ask her "do you want to go to the poetry reading next Sunday with me?"

"Sure," she said.

"Oh, my God," I thought. "It worked. Okay, I need to do more."

"Can I call you?"

Before long I was getting her phone number. I don't know if I was nervous, but I think she was nervous too. Her hands seemed to be unsteady. She wanted this to happen. Maybe she was just as shy as me.

The sun was still above the Cape Fear River and reflecting back into the room a kaleidoscope of orange and blue. It seemed that my awareness of a room full of people had departed and I was only aware of us.

While this was happening, I added, "We could go down to Carolina Beach on Saturday too. There are things to see down there."

"Okay," she said in a voice that was soft and warm.

I wasn't sure how psyched she was, but I was so excited! I don't know if I was psyched because of how easy it went or what it was.

I was surprised too... not because I expected to be rejected but because of how much I wanted this. I wasn't reflecting on matters at this point. I was just acting on instinct.

In the back of my mind during the week, I was thinking about what to do. I wanted to have lots of suggestions to offer Lynn. I wasn't sure what she would like.

I had called her and said that I knew of a peaceful and scenic spot where we could go. Maybe we could go to Fort Fischer and see if Jean was working there, or to the aquarium.

So, now, it was July 4th of 1992. I picked her up at her home on Wrightsville Beach. We drove through Wilmington and continued toward Carolina Beach. It was somehow amazing just how easy the conversation was going for both of us. I would have expected that I would have been nervous.

There is a jetty that runs out to a tiny island south of Carolina Beach where the Cape Fear River meets the ocean. It's the farthest point south if you drive down Highway 421/Carolina Beach Road from Wilmington, North Carolina.

We decided that we would go to this spot.

This is our first date. I think it's a "date." I don't have much experience dating and so if you are wondering, dear reader, what I mean by saying I was shy, these are just a few examples of what it is like. I don't think Lynn had a great deal of experience with these kinds of things either.

Since I was driving, I double-checked to see if this was where we wanted to stop first. She agreed.

So, I parked the car near the beach near that jetty that I mentioned.

The jetty is not on the open ocean, so the waves only gently lap against the beach and the rocks that form the jetty. It's just a bunch of rocks that have been stacked against one another to make a bridge of sorts. On top of the rocks, they put pavement to make it into a bridge that could be crossed.

A photo of one such jetty/bridge is shown below.



We walked out there toward the jetty together, but we were both shy a bit about the nature of the relationship that was developing.

As we started walking onto the jetty, I noticed it was a bit slippery because the saltwater had washed over the bridge recently.

I had not expected this to be slippery. I could not let her slip and risk anything bruising or scratching her perfect skin... not to mention the fear I would feel if I saw her fall.

But I was so nervous.

I had to do something. I reached out my hand to her.

"Wow!" I thought, "She took my hand. Wow! And why am I repeating this thought?"

My fingers crossed over her palm between the thumb and first finger on her hand. I felt a tingling sensation beginning in my fingers and rising up my arm, like the small soft waves beside us. The sensation came to rest in the center of my chest.

I took a breath as if I needed air. It was a lightness that I felt in my chest as if a weight had been taken off me – as if my own weight was pressing down with less force than previously.

I wasn't expecting to feel anything like this. I was just catching her to keep her from falling.

"Do you want to keep going?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, pausing to take in the scene with me. Her straight blonde hair swayed in the gentle wind. The gentle waves washed against the rocks below us. It was peaceful.

There was something interesting that I was feeling. Holding her hand was "exciting" - like I had never felt excited before (which isn't true) ... AND this moment was also relaxed and peaceful. It might not make sense because being excited and relaxed are usually different feelings.

We walked for a bit further but then decided that this was getting too slippery.

"What's next," I thought. Then I said "Jean works at Fort Fischer and they have a tour of the historic site. We could go there."

She agreed.

I guess I was eager to spend as much time as I could with Lynn. I didn't want the day to end. I didn't want to drop her off and leave.

We let the windows down and Lynn eased back into her seat, letting the wind blow softly – we weren't going fast. She looked comfortable and dreamy. I wasn't sure what that meant other than that she was "comfortable" or relaxed as she sat back in

her seat looking out the window. I didn't have much time to see if she was looking at me at this moment.

That same feeling continued as we walked the grounds at Fort Fischer – a Civil War historic site. We spoke to Jean for a bit.

It's hard to recount everything that we did that day, but I wanted to say that while I was coming up with things to do, Lynn was contributing to the conversation and helping come up with ideas. She wasn't just saying "sure" or "okay." For one that would have been discouraging to me and secondly, Lynn didn't seem like the type who went along with things.

That instinct would be confirmed later but it could have gone something like "I have some things to do... and that was nice but..."

The day faded into the night and we made our way to downtown Wilmington.

We saw the fireworks that night, over the Cape Fear River and near the Battleship.

After the fireworks, we were walking back to the car and we walked by the place where she worked at a historic home that had been converted into a shelter for youth runaways. A co-worker of hers asked her if I was her boyfriend. I heard her say "No, we are just friends."

Darn. I thought this was a date. Actually, even if it was an all-day date, we were still *just friends*.

I could wait.

The next day I picked her up again and we went to the poetry reading down in Carolina Beach.

There must have been a few dozen people when I read my poetry. This was a major accomplishment. I had an awareness of being nervous, but I had no awareness of any noticeable physical sensations. There could have been a hundred or more people and I would have felt equally anxious.

Lynn took a seat on the side of the stage facing where I was standing after I read. She took the microphone and read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot.

I was taking photographs, including photographs of her.

As I reflect on these two dates or days spent together, I realize that I cannot fill in any more details. Decades have passed.

Looking back at the nearly three months when I was sharing my poetry, it's interesting to note the subject matter of my poetry... It had been about grief and a special friend named Celta. Yet here I was totally focused on this new girl named Lynn. It's hard to overstate the meaning and importance of this.

Chapter 15: The First Year with Lynn

Part I

In the last chapter, I mentioned that I asked Lynn out and we spent a weekend together at outdoor events in Wilmington and Carolina Beach, North Carolina. This might be taken out of context to imply something more intimate happened... something more than holding hands. That's not what I meant.

I dropped her off at her home after the fireworks on the fourth of July and picked her up the next day for the poetry reading that was also in Carolina Beach.

Plus, it's hard to describe but there was something more that I felt just holding hands for a few moments when we walked out on that slippery. That's the thing with feelings, sometimes we discover a language that exists that cannot be expressed in thoughts or words... after all, words are the medium by which we think.

I was still struggling with my shyness but only in vague ways. Insecurities about whether I was really that special if only one person, Celta, had looked at me like I was so special like I was their whole world like they could love me or be in love with me.

Maybe she was shy too. I played these ideas over in my mind. "What does she think of me?" "Is she into me?"

As I said earlier, this was a bit surprising to me. I had been grieving the loss of Celta for a long time, but I would not have pursued Lynn if I was not over that loss.

After that fourth of July weekend, I was so invested in wanting to see her every day and as much as possible. I would find myself at work trying to come up with things we could do together that afternoon. It wasn't hard because she lived across the street from the beach. She lived on Wrightsville Beach just across the street from the beach, the ocean. Her mother, Diane, and stepfather, Bob, owned a house that was to be their retirement home and she was living in that house.

I have to admit that I was working hard here to persuade her to make plans with me. I had been doing that for a little while - maybe a couple of months. I don't mean to exaggerate. It wasn't overly difficult to make plans with Lynn.

I was very invested in making sure that I did nothing to cause her to back off for any reason at all. **It would not make sense to talk her into doing something that she didn't want to do.** That would defeat the purpose. I mean I really wanted her to like me and to be "into" me.

From my conversations with other guys or from TV shows (no one incident stands out), **it seemed that I wasn't like any guys that I knew.** I just felt like I was more feminine for as long as I can remember like I wasn't fully male. Plus, guys seem to make assumptions that a girl is into them if they are seeing them regularly and they will pursue more of their "desires."

Anyway, as I was saying, I don't identify with those ways of thinking and if that means that I am not very masculine, you are catching on dear reader. I am not much of a man.

I certainly didn't assume anything. I would take whatever I could get in terms of a relationship with Lynn.

The topic of whether we were seeing anyone else never came up. I am sure with my persistence she must have known that I was only into her. It was difficult because I had to ensure that I never did anything to push her away. It wasn't that I had low self-esteem, but I just sensed that she was strong - psychologically and emotionally. I mean I sensed that she didn't NEED to be in a relationship, and I didn't feel entitled to her time.

Persistence! But not pushy. Not self-centered. Not coercive. Yeah, coerciveness would have ended things in the blink of an eye.

I felt a bit weird to be pursuing and not finding the interest I had reciprocated for a while. How could I know that would change?

Why was I so obsessed with and excited to just be talking to Lynn or sitting next to her on the beach... maybe holding hands?

I noticed that the first couple of months with Celta were more “comfortable” for me and there was more of a sense of mutual interest. With Lynn, for nearly a couple of months, I felt like I had to persuade her to do things every day. Maybe it didn’t take a full two months for me to start seeing that Lynn was very interested in me. I was just frustrated for a while that I had to try so hard to persuade her to spend time with me.

To be clear, for the first time, I really wasn't thinking of Celta... for the first time... just when I tried to understand where I stood with Lynn and what I was feeling.

It was becoming something of a routine. I guess I liked it when her stepfather or her mother was there.

"Is Lynn there?" I'd ask if they picked up the phone.

With her mother, Diane, the response was "just a moment." With Bob, it was "hold on." Then I would hear, "it's Bruce."

I would show up early sometimes after work. I was parking down the street from her home and would pass the time reading from the paperback book that I had. It had the stories "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" by Lewis Carol.

I respected what she had said was a good time for me to show up. ***I was too nervous about showing up early.*** Again, there was no way I was going to do anything to make her uncomfortable or to act in any way with disrespect.

I didn’t have to work really hard to persuade Lynn to go out each day. I just wanted her to call me more, sound excited when I called, and help me to feel that she was interested in me. I would later find out that initially, for a little while, I was more interested in spending time with her every day than vice versa. That would change.

When I recount stories like this to people, these days, they seem to comment from the perspective of how things normally work when a guy and a girl are dating. For example, I was talking to a female friend of mine and she said something along the lines of “a woman wants a guy to...” I try to explain that I am not like most guys. I don’t think Lynn wanted a traditional guy.

Growing Comfortable Together and Serenity

I don't know when it happened exactly, but it seemed like things were going more easily for me. I didn't feel like I had to try as hard to persuade her to spend time with me. I could tell she was becoming genuinely interested in me. This is what I “felt” or “sensed” – how exactly, I can't say.

She smiled when we were together. It seemed that her mother was noticing this too.

One day, it felt so natural to bring my camera over and photograph her on the back porch where she was living. She sat on the railing, her head against the corner board with the setting sun reflected off the marshlands behind her home. Her mother was in the other room and she seemed to me to be happy. That felt good. It suggested I was being discussed.

Discussing my future plans...

I was glad that I had someone with whom I could talk about my dreams and plans for the future. I needed that. Yes, we talked about Lynn's interests, but I am reflecting on my need for confirmation of my plans. I had been moving forward with my career plans, but I'll discuss that later.

It was a major change in my career from engineering to psychiatric social work. I didn't have this kind of support six months ago living with my parents. That environment had been toxic, and I was glad to focus more on this new life.

I was glad to be receiving the validation I needed about my career plans from Lynn. She was intelligent and someone I respected. She listened and asked questions. When I talked about what I specifically had in mind for starting graduate school, for example, she was very supportive. That included my plan for how I would pay for graduate school.

Lynn knew I was eager to start to move forward with my plans and she encouraged me to do that.

I knew the contract job with Corning was ending soon. Somehow things still seemed okay. I'd figure things out.

An epiphany

It was September 2, 1992, when I had this peak experience, an epiphany.

We came to Wrightsville Beach, after my work at Corning. It was evening and we sat down together near Johnny Mercer's Pier. The sun was still above the horizon and behind us.

I liked this feeling. It was peaceful. I NEEDED to feel this.

Often my mind was so busy trying to figure things out all the time. Worried about impending problems - a job ending, where I would work next, how I would get into graduate school. Something inside myself told me to enjoy this moment. To be here now and forget about everything else.

It was the clearest thought that I have known... I felt serenity. My eyes moved between looking at Lynn and watching the waves coming and going. I wasn't trying to work through my plans with Lynn's support and advice. I was just at peace.

For Lynn, this was just another day at the beach.

I was excited to be able to hold her hand and walk north down the beach at Wrightsville Beach... aroused. It seemed so right. Sometimes I wondered why I was the one asking for her hand when we were walking together. Maybe other people don't ask themselves questions like that, but I wanted to be sure that she was into me and wanted that contact with me.

I liked being seen with her. I felt special. I liked that she was so glad to see me.

Lynn was into pottery and I would show up at the Art Center to pick her up. I wanted to know and celebrate everything about her.

She would show me around the place. She would show me her work on the different shelves in various rooms. She showed me the kiln which is used to bake the clay after it is shaped. Sometimes I would sit and watch her shape earrings or work with clay on the wheel.

The wheel is used for larger items. It does just what you would expect, it spins the clay around a center. Lynn explained that some of the bigger items on the shelves were too big and heavy for her to do. She was almost my height. I'm five foot seven and she was about five foot six. But she was much smaller than me and thin. Healthy looking but thin – yes, I noticed and can add that she was shapely.

I can't remember how she introduced me that first year. I'll explain what I mean later but you might recall that after the first date on the 4th of July, she said to her co-worker who asked if I was her boyfriend, "no, we're just friends."

Yes, we were becoming an item. Yet, the word boyfriend or girlfriend had not been used, yet. I reflected on all of this and felt that everything was absolutely amazing to me.

The First Kiss...

There was the synchronicity of desires. It was October. What we did when we were together was not something discussed or planned. I mean so far, we had not been talking about what anything means. I can't speak for what was going through her mind but while I might have had a desire that she take my hand first when we went for a while, I didn't say "why don't you do reach for my hand first."

I suppose I was more impulsive. I don't know but somewhere I got the notion that typically guys make the first move and call girls, ask them out. This did not apply to our relationship. Lynn was self-confident enough to speak her mind. She recognized my more feminine traits – not that I looked effeminate but in terms of how I acted.

We were just sitting together on the beach in October, and we knew what we wanted. I looked into her eyes. I was sitting on her right. I could feel where our arms touched, our sides and legs.

I moved toward her instinctually and without hesitation or fear. Her head was tilted slightly back and turned a bit to the right as my face tilted to the right. Her blond hair waved a bit in the gentle wind. I reached my arm over onto the sand, then brought my lips to hers.

My left arm moved over her right shoulder and onto her back. I felt her right arm move to my back as she leaned forward. My right arm moved to her back. Our lips parted ever so slightly as we kissed.

I was only minimally aware of others on the beach. It was more as if I was aware of where we were and that it was not dark yet.

It seems that we were communicating something for which there were no thoughts or words... It was as if we had discovered a new way to communicate. Feelings, passions, desires. Inescapable, undeniable, and so right.

This was a new aspect of our relationship. I imagine she and I hungered for this as much as she desperately needed air in her lungs.

Chapter 16: Greater Intimacy and the First Year with Lynn Part II

The summer flowed into fall and colder months, with colder nights.

In November, we went to the beach dressed in warm coats... the sun had set and it was dark. We climbed a lifeguard's platform. We were standing. The wind blew across the dark beach making it even colder.

"It's cold," she said as she turned in the direction of the ocean. I was behind her looking in the same direction. I wrapped my arms around her from behind her.

I was confused about my physical arousal. This had not been the first time I noticed this happening. I was still haunted by religious brainwashing but everything that was happening was so right. I'm not just talking about this night. Our feelings, passions, desires spoke making everything seem so inevitable.

Don't imagine, dear reader, that during this time period I am leaving out details about what happened. You don't have to wonder if I left out details about whether we went further than kissing or holding each other. I'll get more specific, in a moment, about what was happening during this time period.

I felt a sense of peace in my life. As winter moved into Wilmington, I found work in the human services field working with individuals with developmental disabilities and other similar problems. It's amazing how we can find solutions that match our career trajectory when we are psychologically healthy.

Without the negativity I had known during the first two years after I graduated from Georgia Tech, I could think more clearly and find opportunities. I had discovered the relaxation response.

Lynn and I would kiss so passionately at my place when the roommates were out and at her place on Wrightsville Beach. My roommate Donna had rented a second room to a nice girl named Terri.

It was awkward when I showed up at her place and her stepfather, Bob, was there. He was not much into making conversation. He spent almost one week every month at the house. He was a pilot for one of the big airlines and so he made good money. I felt like I had to make some conversation with him because technically it was his house along with Diane, Lynn's mother. My parents would have made it known if this was their home.

At one point, I had to ask Lynn, "should I be more polite to him and think of things to say?" I asked her.

She said "no, he's just like that. If he doesn't talk, you don't have to talk to him."

This is what I mean by Lynn having a strong sense of self-esteem. No one was going to control her or disrespect her! I wish I had maintained that attitude with my own family. There was nothing shy about Lynn when it came to her life, what she wanted, how she expected to be treated.

It was just awkward from time to time when he was there. If he answered the door, he would just say "come on in" and then shout "Lynn."

I would then hear, "coming" from Lynn.

Bob didn't try to make conversation. He acted as if I wasn't there. So, I didn't say anything either. There was no "thank you for inviting me in." "How are you, today, Bob?" Still, if we were hanging out together in a common room and Bob was there, I didn't like Lynn to walk away because if Bob came walking by it felt awkward because he didn't speak.

I didn't need his approval though. It also was clear that what we did together was none of Bob's business!

Lynn's Character & Intimacy at Her Place

Lynn was quiet at the poetry readings or elsewhere. She wasn't looking for recognition or attention in those settings. She wasn't trying to achieve something. I remembered going canoeing with some of the regulars at the poetry readings. I thought I was the newbie at the readings much more than Lynn was. But then I remember Will referring to Lynn as "the girl in the canoe with Bruce."

Lynn had been coming to these readings longer than I had. She even had a degree in English like most of the other regulars. To me, it had seemed that she would be the one who fits in more naturally with that crowd.

Anyway, Lynn knew I felt a bit awkward with Bob in the house so we would go to her room and shut the door. We talked for hours - when we talked.

It was so refreshing to have this privacy. Her mother would stay for a week every once in a while, but she completely respected Lynn's privacy.

Most of the time we were alone.

I was confused about my body's reaction when I was kissing Lynn so passionately on her bed. I wasn't trying to get aroused sexually but it was happening.

I have to talk about Lynn's medical condition. Lynn was born with Cystic Fibrosis (CF) which affects breathing. Her frequent cough made that obvious. CF causes excess mucus to build up in her body and that causes problems with the lungs and her digestive system. She had to take pills when we went out to eat to help with digestion.

So, as we were getting passionate, on her bed, from time to time, she seemed to want or welcome me being on top of her when we were kissing. I was careful to support my weight to be sure that I wasn't creating problems for her breathing.

I asked "am I heavy? can you breathe, okay?"

This scene was somewhat common. You will note that I haven't mentioned getting undressed during this.

I would be on top of her, and I am trying to support myself. I asked, "Am I too heavy?"

She paused for a moment to answer "No" and then drew me closer to continue kissing me - yeah, French kissing as they say. I was surprised that she didn't need to come up for air more often. Anyway, our mouths would part, and our tongues were intertwined. It seemed natural as if it was instinctual.

I could feel her arms wrapped around me holding me as we kissed. I didn't have to worry about her breathing because she held me so tightly. It seemed like she was telling me to stop interrupting and asking this question.

Of course, she would tell me if I was heavy, and we would shift positions.

On one such occasion, I was on top of her kissing her passionately, my hand underneath her back, sliding down toward her waist. Her arms were wrapped around me. I could feel our hearts beating against each other, her breasts pressed against me. Her shirt was loose-fitting.

My hand first slid under her shirt and against her back. It seemed like my fingers were erogenous zones. I felt her soft skin, as my hand caressed her back and then her arms.

As I supported my weight with my left arm, my right hand moved across her stomach and up the side of her body. She squeezed more tightly. I could feel my heart beating against her - fast and loud. I could hear it beating.

She didn't seem to notice that I was aroused as our waists pressed against each other.

Her arms slid under my shirt and she held tight. She preferred to squeeze me tight, and I preferred moving my hands against her body, caressing her. I didn't stop to tell her to do the same to me, caress me. I didn't want to interrupt what was happening. She seemed to be holding me tight to tell me not to stop. It was a signal of "don't interrupt." It would require an interruption for her to actually say that.

I slid a bit to my left and moved my hand toward her breasts. I was so excited as I reached under her bra and caressed her breasts. I was concerned that my hand pressing against her left breast would be uncomfortable, so I moved my hand over to reach under the top of her bra toward her right breast.

This was frustrating for her too. She sat up and loosened her bra and let it drop off. She was still wearing her shirt at that point. I moved toward her and she met me. Her body seemed to be telling me she wanted, needed, or hungered for this to happen.

As we resumed, I caressed her breasts feeling waves of excitement.

I hated to pause because that allowed intrusive ideas to interfere with what was happening and to create confusion... religious ideas (brainwashing) that had filled my head from childhood.

I was reacting sexually even though we were not having sex. This wasn't genital contact... yet.

I felt embarrassed and confused when I had to clean myself secretly in the bathroom right next to her bed. It reminded me of being a child and discovering how it felt and what happened when I rubbed my genitalia. The release of fluid had seemed like something that needed to be kept secret – hidden. So, that instinct was still there, unwanted and just confusing.

The idea of hiding my reaction from Lynn made me feel ashamed like I regretted what was happening. This was a foreshadowing of what would happen later when we were living together. My head had been filled with all these religious ideas that were just so confusing and messed with my mind. To imply that I regretted making us feel good and physically demonstrating my feelings would be wrong and hurtful to Lynn.

In these earliest moments of passion, during this first year together, everything seemed so right or the kinds of thoughts that get expressed with words do not exist - our bodies were speaking to one another each time we were intimate, not sexual but intimate. My body was responding as if it was sexual.

This scenario could describe more than one such occasion when we were together.

I was not thinking about the depth of our intimacy and how far we had gone in terms of sexual or sensual intimacy. What I mean that while I felt that annoying instinctual shame about how my body was reacting, I didn't think that we did anything wrong. This was the most physically intimate I had been in my life.

Yes, dear reader, if it's not obvious, I was still a virgin like Lynn. I was so amazed that Lynn had been available when I met her in 92 because she looked so beautiful to me. But she wasn't shallow, and she didn't need to be in a relationship.

If you are wondering as to why we didn't go further, why we didn't remove our clothing when we were alone in her room at her home with no one else in the home... it was more of a problem with me. Lynn was aware that I was Catholic and that I went to church on Sundays or Saturday evenings. Fondling and sensual caressing was one thing, but she understood that one thing would lead to another if she had started to undress. I know this in light of how she acted after we were living together.

Lynn wasn't shy about asking for what she wanted or acting upon her desires. Neither one of us was coercive but there are ways to act that signal a desire for closeness. I've always seen in TV shows and movies where it is the female in a relationship that wants to wait.

I suppose she was looking for signs as to how far I wanted to go.

The Christmas holiday approached, and I was going to share with my roommates some outdoor Christmas photographs that I had taken when Lynn and I went to a neighborhood in northern Wilmington where people go to see how they go all out decorating their houses.

That's when my roommates, Donna and Terri said they wanted pictures of Lynn and me together. We decorated a tree and they asked us to pose together in different ways. It felt good to know that this somehow meant something to my roommates.

I noticed how comfortable I was now with Lynn. I wasn't wondering if she was into me as much as I was into her.

The best gift that Christmas for me was what Lynn told me. I was telling her how uncertain I had been about whether she was interested in me. She laughed and said, ***"I'm glad you were so persistent."***

Okay, so I was right. At first, she wasn't invested as much in the relationship as I was.

I thought I can't imagine anything better. I'm definitely going to embrace this life with Lynn.

Lynn and I were "an item" and that felt so right. I never took things for granted. I would savor every little thing as if my mind was taking snapshots to populate an imaginary photo album within my mind.

Remember Dusty, the emcee for the poetry readings? She worked at the Coastline Convention Center as I mentioned. Because she was so welcoming, I would go there alone sometimes or arrive alone before Lynn joined me. Dusty would ask about Lynn and what was happening with her... how she was doing.

So, among our social circle, people saw us as a couple. Still, there were some formalities to be discussed.

Chapter 17: Relationship Formalities - Lynn and I Are More than "Just Friends"

It was almost July, and this would mark the fact that a year had passed since we started seeing each other.

It would be an understatement to say that I was a feminist and that this was something that was attractive to Lynn. I suppose if I had thought about it, I would have said that I was very feminine.

Anyway, the obvious fact that occurred to Lynn was that nothing was said about the nature of our relationship. I mean when we first went out, she had answered at the end of the first day, when asked if I was her boyfriend, that we were "just friends."

I had not pushed the matter. It's also important to realize that if Lynn thought I was seeing someone else she would not be doing with me what we were doing. She had a very strong sense of her own self-worth. She knew that she deserved to be treated like she was special.

It was Friday, July 2, 1993. The sun had set and we were outside at my place. We could hear my roommates from time to time inside and the TV. The sliding glass door was open except for the screen door to keep the bugs out. The light was just fading from the sky.

With just enough light still in the sky, we found a spot that was outside the lights from the sliding glass doors that lead into the living room where my roommates were watching TV. This says something about how much Lynn wanted to be intimate with me.

No, we were not undressed but it would have been awkward if either of my roommates walked out and came upon us. I think they knew this much. Maybe Lynn did too. Yeah, they had a good idea of what we were likely to be doing.

I guess we could have just been talking. As I mentioned earlier, having someone to share my dreams with was so valuable to me. I wanted and needed that

confirmation that I was on the right path in life. I knew I was, but it still mattered that this was confirmed for me.

After a while, we took a seat on a lounge chair and another chair outside. I sensed something was on Lynn's mind.

Lynn said, "Are we more than friends... do you want to be more? Do you want to be boyfriend and girlfriend?"

I was taken by surprise because I had realized that of course, we were so much more than "just friends."

I did feel comfortable and understood enough about Lynn to know that this was not a question that I had to fear. It wasn't like we were going to surprise one another with our feelings. Lynn had already told me she was glad that I had been so persistent. So, why had this not come up?

I said, "Yes, definitely."

I commented with almost a bit of amusement in my voice, upon the passionate moment we had shared sitting on the lawn just barely within the light coming from inside where my roommates were watching TV behind a partially closed sliding glass door.

I said that I don't kiss my friends like that. So, we are boyfriend and girlfriend or vice versa... does it matter? I guess we both realized that we wanted to make this official.

"We are boyfriend and girlfriend, right?" I asked her.

She said, "yes, I wanted to ask, though."

I said "I am so glad you asked this. It's important. You are so important to me. I feel so amazing. I want to say something more, but I guess you know... but I want to say something more."

I caught her smile as I looked up. That only made this more special. I mean the idea that I could make Lynn feel special and happy was a wonderful feeling for me.

"I love you," I said without thinking and her eyes lit up like something amazing.

She answered, "I love you too."

I felt butterflies in my stomach. I don't mean the kind of feeling that I get when I am nervous. This was real and yet I almost thought I was dreaming.

"We should tell my roommates," I said. "They will like hearing about this. I like how they add to the moment. Do you know what I mean? It's like they are genuinely excited when they see us together."

So, we joined hands and walked inside. Donna was sitting down near the TV and then looked up and said, "Hi."

Terri walked into the room also.

I said, "This is my girlfriend, I mean, Lynn and I are boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Yes, we know that," Donna said looking at Kelli with a curious and amused look on her face.

"We were just talking about this, just now."

"We knew that already," they said laughing. I noticed that there was something pretty about the way Donna smiled and laughed.

"Well, we just were talking and decided this now... or we made it official."

It's so great when others are happy for you. When other people in your life rejoice at your happiness.

I was discussing this with a female friend recently and she was thinking and observing things from the perspective of how things generally work out in relationships. Please understand that what Lynn found attractive about me were those traits that are more commonly associated with females – my feminine character traits.

I cared deeply about the relationship and she knew that even if I didn't come out and say it. That's a guess. Like the guess that I didn't have to worry about how the conversation would go when she asked if we were more than just friends or if I wanted to be more than just friends.

My roommates, Lynn and I were talking. I said, looking at Lynn, "I know, for a while, a few months ago, I was worried that you weren't going to be as interested in me as I was in you."

Lynn said, "luckily Bruce had been very persistent."

I said to my roommates, "it's great that you were both here for us to mark this occasion."

Terri looked surprised. "This is the first time that you have called each other boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Well, yes, but I guess everyone knew... Knew we were seeing each other," I said.

Even I was a bit amused at this point.

I admitted to everyone that I was so glad that I had the courage be persistent.

From roughly this time forward, I wasn't feeling shy around her and she had never been shy about speaking her mind and saying what she wanted.

Everything was comfortable and serene. We were in-sync. We were best friends. And more. In the next chapter, I will fill in some details about both of us and how we spent our time during this period. I will later expand on the work/career aspect of my life.

Chapter 18: Reflections on The Connection We Had That First Year

I noticed that during this first year we didn't have "dates" in a traditional sense. We didn't say "let's go on a date." After I no longer had to persuade her to do something with me after my day at work or on the weekend, we just did everything together.

She was working but not full-time. I'll explain why later. I was working at least forty hours per week. So, we came to know each other's schedule and we discussed together, "what do you want to do today?"

Sundays we went to the poetry readings at the Coastline Convention Center. Sometimes we would show up there on other days to just visit Dusty. We also attended different events in downtown Wilmington by the Cape Fear River.

Our social circle was almost the same. I had gone to the poetry readings to meet people and among them was Lynn. In addition, I was making other friends and most of them were mutual friends. One of our longest and best friends was my dear friend Thomas Childs. He was a mutual friend. Like Lynn, he had a degree in English. I will discuss him more later in the book toward the end.

There were other poetry events that we attended besides the Sunday poetry readings and the big poetry reading in Carolina Beach that I mentioned earlier.

For me, I was making professional connections – technically I was still a paraprofessional but in another sense of the word, I am referring to activities for which we are paid. I was meeting people who work in the mental health and developmental disabilities fields. This was leading to new job opportunities.

Lynn made friends through her pottery which was a hobby of hers. She made colorful jewelry and other objects like plates, bowls, cups, and plant holders and so much else. Through that work, she got to meet people and socialize with them.

The Azalea Festival was in August. The Art Center had a booth there. It was at a park that is situated between downtown Wilmington, Wrightsville Beach, and the Highway that heads down to Carolina Beach.

This occupied most of Lynn's time so I could only show up to see what she was doing and then try to occupy myself somewhat alone. The first two years when I attended this, I didn't have anyone to join me at the festival and I felt a bit frustrated because it looked like fun and I wanted to see everything, but Lynn was busy. I was making friends but I still felt a bit lonely at times like this.

Around Halloween time we went on a tour of haunted Wilmington. No, I didn't believe in ghosts, but it was still fun. It was just Lynn and me, but I think we ran into some friends. It felt mysterious. Wilmington is a historic town, and they try to make the historic district entertaining during this time.

We had a few favorite restaurants depending on the occasion. For lunch or dinner, we could go to a place that had awesome fries with a special seasoning and burgers. We had nicer places that we frequented for special occasions like Valentine's Day.

Each year, I started going to a Christmas party that was at one of the homes of some folks in her pottery class. I didn't know any of them, but it was nice to go with Lynn all the same. It felt really good to be seen with Lynn. I thought she was so incredibly beautiful. Plus, I was feeling comfortable with her. I don't know if I went the first year that I was with Lynn. I don't know how she would have introduced me.

By the second year, I was her boyfriend, of course. **That felt good.**

It gives me the same chills now that I felt at the time running up my back and neck. I'm not even holding her hand now. I remember though. I remember her speaking to someone or a couple of people and my arms are wrapped around her. I could tell she liked it. She would take my hand or place her hand over mine as I wrap my arm around her waist.

She was good about recognizing me and sensing that I felt out of place. So, she would try to mention something about me to whomever she is speaking to. Maybe bragging about my career plans, my current job, where I was going.

I can see a similar scene that was some event with her pottery group that the second summer. We walk in together hand-in-hand. I am being only clingy enough to signal that I feel a little out of place. We had discussed this already. I said I don't know the people, nor do I know pottery.

We were outside on a porch. I said “here sit on my lap and you can talk to your friends” taking one of her hands and allowing her to face her fellow pottery classmate/friend as she sat down.

I could not help but notice how shapely her legs were. It was strange how she had not gotten a tan despite living across the street from the beach. I felt a bit excited or aroused and shifted in my seat. She hardly noticed. She was sitting with her right leg over her left and I also noticed her small sexy feet moving ever so slightly. My hand was high up on her leg because her shorts were not too long. It was nothing obvious though. It didn’t strike me that she was showing off at all.

It just seemed comfortable to her... for me, it was comfortable too. The “excitement” I felt subsided, and I just felt peaceful.

She was so considerate too. She turned to me with a smile and said, “are you doing okay, sweetie?”

“I’m fine,” I said with a smile that was intended to reassure her.

Yeah, it felt good to be with Lynn. I could feel chills up my back on my neck. I caressed her leg in a more provocative way when no one was looking. She just smiled, amused and I could tell she wanted more. I had seen the look. This wasn’t the time.

At moments like this, I also caught my breath. It was strange that sensation and the best description of it - “takes my breath away.” One might imagine that this would signal fear or a feeling of shortness of breath. No, this was different. It felt good.

It feels good. The memory.

We were doing almost everything together, at least by the time we were officially boyfriend and girlfriend. It was comfortable and serene. My thoughts were wrapped up in her. The next chapter expands on this concept.

Chapter 19: A Life with Lynn At the Center



As I talk about my goals in life and my plans it occurs to me that I should talk about what Lynn might have wanted out of life. I certainly don't mean to imply that she lacked ambition.

First, let's consider my observations of our other friends who were poets and/writers. Many of them had a four-year degree in English. Some of those who were part of the poetry scene had degrees in other fields. By and large, though, most of them had a Bachelor of Arts in English. It's interesting that many of them might say that they were English majors which might incorrectly imply that they had not graduated.

If you are thinking as the world thinks or as people think in America, you might think that this degree is not very practical. That's because people only think about how they are going to make money with their degree. They might say "what can you do

with an English degree?” In fact, that kind of toxic thinking is what I had known growing up. So many things that I heard from my so-called family over the past few years implied a similar attitude that I find offensive.

I know that my siblings and parents never made such statements to me or around us during this time period that were critical of people who don't get more “practical” degrees. That would have crossed a line and been obviously offensive to me based on who I was with - who I loved.

Dear reader, did I say I loved Lynn? I'll get to that.

Anyway, yes, I had conversations with my siblings and parents during this time period. I honestly do not remember much based on what has transpired since then. I'll get to that.

Lynn's self-esteem and assertiveness were contagious. That is one of the things I found so attractive about her. One of her statements that she commonly used was “that's unacceptable.” I really wish I could think of a context where I heard this statement. I'm sure it might have been in relation to something I said. The point is that I had become much more assertive too. I was no longer taking any kind of abuse from my parents.

In many little ways, I would have made it evident that I would have rebuked any statement that was insulting or critical of something like the choice Lynn made to get a four-year degree in English. They did have a more “traditional” view of the man of the house supporting his wife which is relevant even before Lynn and I talked about taking our relationship to that stage. I was more abrupt and assertive with them than I had been in the past.

The next relevant fact is that Lynn had to qualify for an insurance program for people with cystic fibrosis. It was a state program that had income requirements. People with cystic fibrosis can require medical care at any time to maintain their health. In addition, she had medications to take. There was equipment that she needed for her health needs. The point is that she couldn't take a chance of not having medical coverage. Therefore, she had to limit her work hours and her income.

So, now, what were her dreams or what did she want out of life? She had discussed with me the idea of getting a master's in fine arts (MFA) in poetry as our mutual friend Jean Jones had done. With his MFA, he wasn't using it directly for employment purposes. Therefore, from a certain point of view, Jean wasn't using his degree, per se. Jean had been published in academic press publications and had quite a publication history.

Lynn wasn't seeking that kind of recognition. She said her poetry was initially just for herself. Obviously, she was sharing it at the readings but that's it.

We both valued having someone in our lives that admired and respected us. So many people seem to instinctually look for a relationship as something they feel they ought to do. This does NOT mean that we did not value the relationship itself. If it had not been "right" or if there had been "problems" it would not have lasted.

Of course, we argued. We were constantly talking about every little thing... the meaning of life for us... debating topics. I know how I felt when I said something mean or blurted out something. I didn't let much time pass before I apologized. I just don't remember anything that stuck in my mind as worthy of including in this narrative. I guess the reason is that we moved past any problem.

Gift-giving...

You think of holidays... Remember from the last chapter, how Donna and Kerri were so excited to get photos of the cute couple? Yeah, it was all magical and fun - delightful.

This was the first time I had thought about wanting to buy gifts for someone I loved. Yes, loved. After that evening around our one-year anniversary, when Lynn brought up the topic that we needed to declare that we were boyfriend and girlfriend, I had said "I love you" and she responded, "I love you too..." after that it was common and comfortable for us to say, "I love you."

She might have conceded that I was the more impulsive in the area of romance. I would be the first to say "I love you" many times - not always. She was more likely to call me "sweetie" or "honey" and I tended to just call her Lynn.

We both liked public displays of affection too. This would not diminish over time. I didn't have to be the one to take her hand. She was somewhat playful and mischievous. It wasn't corny like playing "footsy." She had a sense of what felt good to me. If we were out somewhere, she might take my hands and sit in my lap... caress my legs, or face and arms.

I remember Valentine's Day the February after we declared that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I felt so good walking into a shopping center and looking at the roses. I asked someone for help because I had never done that before. We had discussed going for dinner. I must have hinted at what my plans were, and she was thinking that she would pay for dinner. We were going to go to a sushi place.

I wanted to be seen as I picked out the roses. It might have been at a grocery store, but it was just magical to me because I had wanted to be seen. Before my time with Lynn, I didn't bring attention to myself. I felt chills it felt so good. Looking back, I felt ten feet tall like with Celta, but I wasn't making that comparison at the time.

In the past, buying gifts for me was a quiet matter. I just wanted to be noticed and spoke up. "Hi, I need roses for my girlfriend" I declared so the employee would hear me and the other customer. "Yes, for the card, something decorative maybe? It should say 'I love you,' obviously. I guess I will write Lynn and sign Bruce." I wanted to be saying this out loud.

"Oh, you can pay at the register when you leave the store," she said. And I thought, "great, more people will see me carrying flowers for Lynn. They'll know I have someone special and someone who thinks I am special."

It was like the second Christmas. We both had ideas about what we wanted but I went to a jewelry store. I had no idea what to buy. I walked in and waited for the lady behind the counter to come.

"I need a gift for someone I love – my girlfriend." It seemed important to say more than just 'my girlfriend.'

"Okay, do you know what she prefers – silver or gold?"

“Silver,” I declared. I wasn’t being cheap, but I just knew she preferred silver. We looked and looked. I had to admit what my budget was, but I was thinking of Lynn and not winning the approval of a store clerk. She could tell that I was thrilled to find something that we thought was pretty. I had asked her opinion and another girl there who was a little younger. My dream-like smile must have given away my feelings, plus, there was the declaration that this was for “someone I love.”

When we were together, everything about us said that there was no one else in our lives. Two creative types falling in love know what they feel. I guess. I mean we had not needed to say to each other that we aren’t seeing anyone else.

I thought about everything that was happening in my mind, turning over the events. I didn't take anything for granted or think about it as a routine thing that happens in life. In other words, finding a girlfriend wasn't a stage in life that was expected.

I know from my own observations that becoming a couple can be seen as an event that happens quite often. It could have been that way if I just followed the guidance of the future that was laid out for me when I was still growing up. You might get a sense of what is supposed to happen in life. At some point, boys will be into girls as the most important thing to them and vice versa.

Have you ever heard the song “That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be?” by Carly Simon? Here's a video of the song on YouTube:



It's peaceful and sweet but there is a sense that there is a bit of melancholy as she sings:

“My friends from college they're all married now
They have their houses and their lawns
They have their silent noons
Tearful nights, angry dawns
Their children hate them for the things they're not
They hate themselves for what they are
And yet they drink, they laugh
Close the wound, hide the scar”

This was not like that. I had seen “love” in my family and elsewhere and this wasn't that. What I had seen was routine. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be, we weren't boyfriend and girlfriend because that was a stage in life. This was an experience.

I think that Carly Simon **overuses the word hate. Hate is an emotional reaction to something noxious, repellent, and repugnant.** Elsewhere I have carefully chosen the use of the word hate to describe the feelings that I felt toward my parents. I said it with full and complete awareness of the visceral reaction that I experienced toward them.

Getting back to Lynn and our love...

A touch, a look, a smile, was a declaration of our love. We were two poets sharing our love publicly like reciting a poem.

The same could be said if someone saw us kiss. I'm not saying we kissed passionately in public and made others uncomfortable, but it was slower and more expressive – a slight pause to make sure our eyes met, a smile first, then a gentle meeting of our lips.

Some of the substance of this chapter includes things that I thought about holding back for later to avoid being repetitive. Our relationship would grow in intensity and I might want to describe a slightly similar scenario again.

If we had argued and she got upset, for me, I felt bad about us being mad. I would approach her, smile, say "I really love you and I'm really sorry." She would smile with amusement because she couldn't stay mad no matter how much she wanted to.

I hope it is obvious that it would not be acceptable for us to lose our temper and slap or hit. I just don't remember the substance of the arguments.

Let me jump ahead a bit to present how an argument might play out. I don't even know what we were fighting about but it got to the point that we were going out together for a book signing event in which our friend Jean Jones was releasing a chapbook of his at a coffee shop downtown. I was driving.

I think my brother and his girlfriend were with us. Note that the fight was not enough to keep us from our plans. Anyway, we took a seat upstairs. We sat down together without saying anything. I announced, "I'm going downstairs, I'll be back."

I walked downstairs and then approached Jean. "Let me get two copies, Jean," I said. Can you sign one to or for Lynn, please?"

I then ordered an iced tea and walked upstairs. Lynn had a sullen look on her face as I rounded the table. I guess she had not noticed the iced tea or maybe she didn't notice that it was prepared the way she liked it with a lemon.

I first handed her the chapbook and said, "This for you, Jean signed one for you, too."

Lynn looked at me and a smile spread across her face – an amused smile as she briefly looked at our guests and then back at me. "How can I stay mad at you when you do this?" She said with amusement.

I responded, "well, it doesn't mean that I don't love you just because we are fighting."

Anyway, that night my brother left soon after that either because he was bored or because he sensed that Lynn and I wanted time alone. I hesitate to give him too much credit for sensing such things. The ice had broken between Lynn and me and we wanted to make up for the lost time that evening.

What attracted me and what I shared with Lynn...

One of the things I mentioned above, in this chapter and earlier, was about her dreams, goals, interests in life. Perhaps she would get a master's in fine arts. Oh, she also spoke of getting her own kiln – it's used for baking pottery (after you shape the pottery it must be put in the kiln). Anyway, I had not talked about my goals and plans.

Lynn was very practical, I noticed, and this was attractive to me. When I spoke about my plans or ideas for the future – e.g., my graduate education plans or job opportunities – she would ask questions, let me bounce ideas off her. I would be thinking out loud in a way. This is what I need to learn as I move into a career in the helping professions or the psychiatric field. How I was thinking of paying for graduate school – yes, there are loans specifically for this purpose.

It was refreshing to have someone again who would hold my happiness in success as I defined it in such high regard.

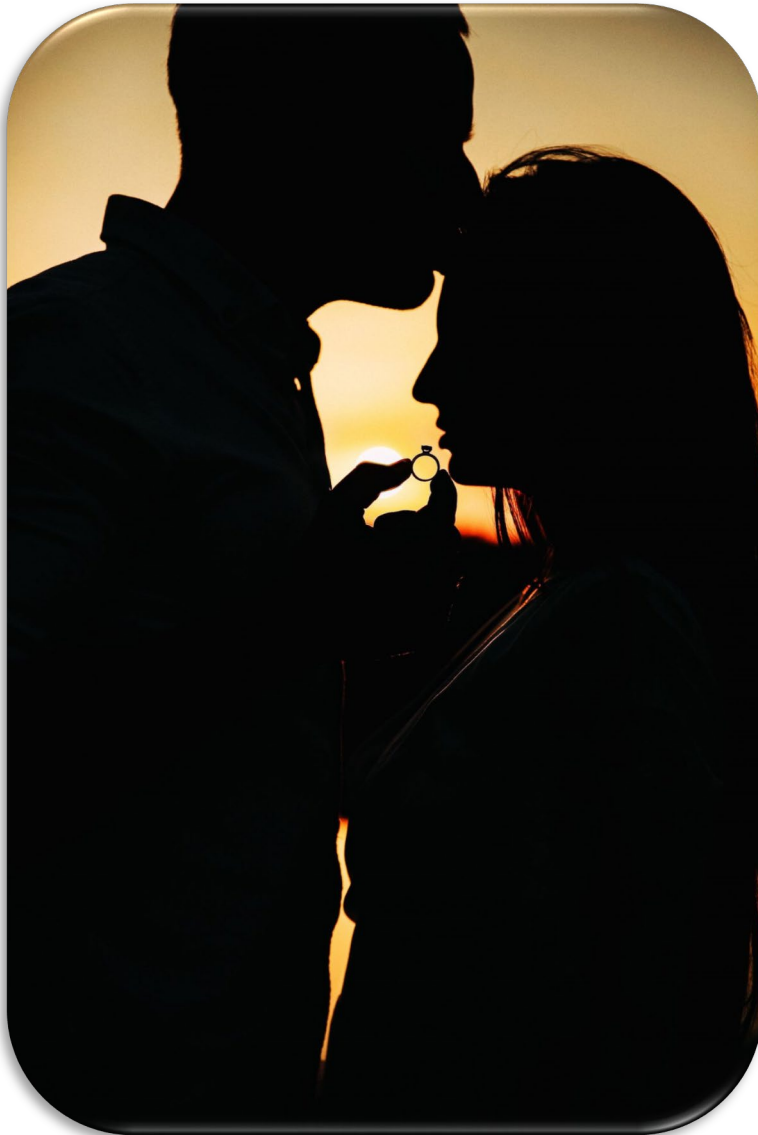
A deepening of the relationship...

As the relationship grew and we approached the second year the topic of marriage was being discussed by both of us. This was a conversation that emerged naturally,

not as something either one of us was interested in and waiting for the other to come around to the idea. It wasn't something that should or ought to happen.

I said, "I also need to get you a ring ..." pausing to let her register it. The next memory I have is of us in a jewelry store.

Chapter 20: Lynn and Bruce Get Engaged and...



It's amazing how much this silhouette in the photo above looks just like Lynn.

I had always valued above all else connections. That's what this book is about – connections and relationships. Obviously, this is one particular type of connection unique from others in my life.

Before I continue with the story about how we got engaged, I want to share another story.

I wrote love poems. I said I was a poet. Is this a surprise that I was inspired to write love poems?

There was one time when I had written a love poem inspired by my love for Lynn. I decided to share it at the poetry reading. It would be a surprise for Lynn. We went to the Coastline Convention Center together like we almost always did.

It was a Sunday in late May of 1994, nearly two years after we started seeing each other. The sun was sinking low, and the room was getting slightly dark. Dusty had turned on a slightly dim light up front near the podium. The poem was inspired by a story from the old testament and a song by the Electric Prunes called “I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night).”

I was still a Christian back then. I am an atheist now. Lynn had a belief in supernatural things, but she was not Christian. I laughingly say that I “want to believe” but I am not now an agnostic. This might be hard to understand for some people – someone who dreams like me only believing in objective things that I know from science and objective reality provided by my five senses.

Anyway, I thought the title was somewhat unoriginal. “Dream-like Visions from the Song of Songs.” “The Song of Songs” is called “The Song of Solomon” by Protestants. I heard the song “I Had Too Much to Dream” when I was watching a movie called “The Believers.” Let me share a YouTube link to the song and then I will share the lyrics below.



The lyrics go like this:

Last night your shadow fell upon my lonely room
I touched your golden hair and tasted your perfume
Your eyes were filled with love the way they used to be
Your gentle hand reached out to comfort me
Then came the dawn
And you were gone
You were gone, gone, gone

I had too much to dream last night
Too much to dream
I'm not ready to face the light
I had too much to dream
Last night
Last night

The room was empty as I staggered from my bed
I could not bear the image racing through my head
You were so real that I could feel your eagerness
And when you raised your lips for me to kiss

Came the dawn
And you were gone
You were gone, gone, gone

I had too much to dream last night
Too much to dream
I'm not ready to face the light
I had too much to dream
Last night
Last night

I had too much to dream last night
Too much to dream
I'm not ready to face the light
I had too much to dream
Last night
Last night

Oh, too much to dream
Oh, too much to dream
Too much to dream last night
Oh, too much to dream
Oh, too much to dream
Oh, too much to dream

Dear reader, I apologize that I don't have a version of the poem that I read back then. While it was used in a horror movie, I like the magical dream-like quality of the song.

There is little that is more magical than being able to get up in front of a room of people and declare your undying love for another person. I could feel the driving power of the song...

I loved the applause. It was so obvious what this was about! People were stopping me as I walked away from the podium.

I then sat next to Lynn at the table as someone else was about to start reading. I noticed Lynn was doodling. One of our mutual friends said how much he liked the poem. I turned to Lynn and said, “well, what are your thoughts?”

“What...” she said in the form of a question. “I’m sorry I wasn’t listening.”

I just shook my head and smiled. She added, “I thought you were only reading poems I already heard.” I could tell she was embarrassed. Her face was blushing. She added, “Oh, I’m so sorry sweetie. Let me read it.”

I handed it to her and turned to face her, moving closer, my arms rested on her chair and I leaned in, tilting my head, and slowly brought my lips to hers... she was too embarrassed to be the one to part lips, I felt aroused as she held my lips there, with her hands on both sides of my face. Just for a moment – there were others.

“It’s okay,” I said. And with a smile, I added “you know I really love you.”

“I love you too, honey.”

She then looked down and read the poem.

This would become an inside joke for us. I would kid her about this in different ways... maybe something like “If I share a poem about our love I hope Lynn is listening?”

Her way of making up for this was to read my poem on various occasions when she didn't have anything else to read. She would ask if I had the poem and then share it with the group. I can't count the number of times that happened. It demonstrated her appreciation and recognition of the value of our love.

Getting Engaged!

I said, “I also need to get you a ring ...” pausing to let her register it. The next memory I have is of us in a jewelry store.

We didn't plan a marriage at the same time when we were planning to get engaged, though this was definitely implied. Those details could be worked out later and they were complicated by factors outside our control.

We were discussing the meaning of this step for both of us. It was a lifetime commitment to live as husband and wife. It felt natural, right, and appropriate while simultaneously being amazing and wonderful.

Words like "wonderful" and "amazing" are so overused that the full impact of these words needs some elaboration. Let me tell you what happened.

We were in love. Getting engaged to be married is the natural expression of that commitment that was intended to last forever.

I remember we were at a jewelry store at the mall. We explained that we weren't rich when an employee approached. A big diamond ring wasn't a necessity. Again, Lynn was the practical one. About two hundred dollars.

I had butterflies in my stomach and my heart was racing. I was thinking to myself "this is real. I'm not dreaming. This is real." It was an almost ticklish feeling.

They measured Lynn's finger. I said, "are you sure?"

"Yes, let's get this one," she said looking at the lady.

"Your fiancé can come to pick it up next Monday," the lady said looking at Lynn.

I came and by then it felt like a routine day. We were alone at her place on Wrightsville Beach. I had not noticed if Lynn was aware that I had the ring that day.

I laid the bag on her bed and turned as she entered the room.

"I want to marry you ..." I began as I started opening the box. Then I noticed that she had tears of joy in her eyes. It took me a moment to take this in. My first thought was, "you knew I was bringing this" so I was surprised by her reaction.

She placed the ring on her finger, tears running down her face. Then she brought her arms around my neck and brought her lips to mine. My legs started to get weak. I raised her up by her waist a bit and laid back onto her bed bringing her with me, on top of me. My left arm then went around her shoulders. Her right arm dropped down by my lower back. She squeezed herself tightly around my back.

I felt her breasts pressed against my racing heart. Her heart was getting louder as she pressed her lips harder. I could feel her legs on my legs. I could feel the teardrops on my face.

I paused and said, "I am in love."

She answered, "I love you so much."

It was the most amazing thing I had ever experienced. Making Lynn this happy was a memory more intense than anything since. I have never been happier.

She was crying tears of joy and this was bliss! Serene. Then our lips met again, and she moved like she was ferociously hungry... like a wolf might devour a meal.

I remember sitting on her porch upstairs – it was half a flight upstairs to get to where the kitchen met the back porch. She was on the phone with her mother.

There's so much that I left out of this story.

The next phase of our relationship was moving into a home that Lynn's mother, Diane, bought in Wilmington.

I haven't even talked about my career that I was starting. Again, my choice of career was very significant for both of us. I was going into social work and the values that are reflected in that career choice were definitely something that was attractive to Lynn.

I actually had a very busy life during this time period but you wouldn't know that from what I wrote so far... You might think that we were just dreamers in love. But as

I noted, Lynn was very practical and that was what attracted me to her. I'll continue to demonstrate this throughout the book.

I've focused on the relationship we had found together - Lynn and I. That connection is so crucial to the overall theme of this book. Relationships matter!

My career journey was taking off as well.

It is undeniable that the joy I brought Lynn was the happiest feeling I have ever known. I say this despite the fact that I feel very passionate about the career I have chosen. I very much like helping others and knowing that I can help another person find healing from emotional or psychological pain or negative experiences.

Chapter 21: Family Life with Lynn: The Impact of Cystic Fibrosis

The title of my book indicates that I am a Clinical Social Worker, or a psychiatric social worker... a mental health professional, and a psychotherapist. So far, this might seem like a love story. It is. However, this story, everything I have written about so far and will describe later is related.

Being able to meet Lynn took a tremendous amount of effort and in a way, this was a story of success. Remember, when I was learning to overcome shyness, back in college (undergraduate college) I was interested in dating, finding a girlfriend, and ultimately having a family.

Self-actualization for me was found in the relationship I had with Lynn.

The same effort to overcome shyness would be crucial in my career including, but not limited to, my choice of career. I also had to overcome the impact of child abuse or being abused by my mother as a teenager and later. This will be an issue much later when we are living and sleeping together.

So, we got engaged to be married and our relationship grew.

We had in mind a life together forever as husband and wife. To live happily ever after. This story is a bit complicated though. Let me explain.

Like everyone else, we wanted a “normal life.”

The problem was that Lynn was born with a chronic illness called Cystic Fibrosis (CF). This is an illness or disease that may not be known and understood by everyone reading this. It might be hard to understand the impact of CF on our love story.

Cystic Fibrosis affects about 30,000 people in the US, so it's a rare disease. It causes excess mucus to build up in the lungs and digestive tract.

Because of the impact of CF on the digestive tract, Lynn had to take a bunch of pills with every meal and had to use inhalers and other medications to maintain her health. She also needed various medical equipment for health maintenance.

Cystic Fibrosis affects a person's breathing. This includes, but is not limited to, decreased oxygen saturation in the blood and scarring of the lungs. This scarring comes from infections. Because CF causes excess mucus to accumulate in the lungs, this creates a breeding ground for bacteria, and the bacteria cause infections.

Over time, the scarring due to infections grows. This scarring is permanent. Decreased lung capacity then makes it hard to breathe. Lynn had some equipment to clear out the mucus that was accumulating in her lungs. I also learned the tapping exercises to loosen the mucus.

They taught me this at the clinic where we went for Lynn's medical checkups and treatments. I would cup my hands a certain way and tap her back, the side of her chest area, and the front of her chest. Sometimes she would or could do this on the front of her body, in her chest area. However, that can be tiring and so I needed to learn to do this right.

Lynn provided feedback on where I needed to do the tapping. She could tell where the mucus was in her lungs and where it needed to be loosened and cleared out.

She had a persistent and distinctive cough, also, as a result of this buildup of mucus.

Again, this mucus was a breeding ground for bacteria. So, we had to clear it out.

As it is a genetic illness and she was born with it, it is a pre-existing condition. Maybe if I was able to get a job with a large company there might have been a way to get insurance coverage but even then, that's not guaranteed, and what if I changed jobs?

We discussed with the staff social worker(s) at the clinic when she went for treatment or for a checkup. We discussed the state health care plan that covers people with Cystic Fibrosis.

This seemed to be the only option. However, to qualify for this health care plan, her income had to be kept below a certain level. She had to live in poverty.

In addition, as husband and wife, if our combined income exceeded a certain threshold for a married couple, she might be dropped from the health care coverage that paid for her medical care.

CF is fatal, also. It used to take people's lives before they reached 18. However, people are living into their 40s and 50s, and beyond their 50s, now. Obviously, this is not enough! I would likely live so much longer than that. At the time, I told myself that they would cure it soon.

This is the tragic aspect of Cystic Fibrosis - the shortened lifespan. It's hard for the person with the disease but it's also very hard for a spouse. I mean Lynn was my source of happiness. I was totally in love with her. I could not imagine a life without her.

We had to cherish each moment and live our lives in each and every moment. Dwelling on the reality of her shortened lifespan would deprive us of the experience of a normal life - normal in the sense of falling in love, getting engaged, and living together forever as husband and wife.

Our forever would have to exist in each moment we had.

Now, consider the cost of treatment. It is estimated to be over \$6000 per year and could cost tens of thousands of dollars. This was NOT about the financial burden it would have on us. It was more serious because we had to know that she could get the treatment she required - it was a matter of life and death, literally. Even with her mother being married to Bob, which meant that they had a substantial income, they never took a chance on her losing access to the insurance plan.

Taking a chance on not having access to medical care was not an option.

Lynn was relatively healthy for a long time when we were in our 20s and 30s. Occasionally, she had problems though. She might have to go into the hospital for IV antibiotics. That would bring the costs into the tens of thousands of dollars but I'm getting ahead of the story.

As you can see, this creates a problem in terms of taking our relationship to the next level and getting married.

What does a couple like us do? Just because a woman has Cystic Fibrosis doesn't mean that she doesn't have the same desires, hopes, and dreams as any woman or any girl. **People with CF fall in love like everyone else.**

I bet, dear reader, that you haven't put that much thought into a scenario like this. Unless you are living with this as a couple, you cannot know what it is like. I mean we wanted to take our relationship to the next symbolic level - to get married. This desire should come as no surprise.

Lynn had to deal with both of these issues - having a serious and potentially fatal chronic illness and being denied the option of a normal life where a woman gets married and has a wedding.

It was so painful and infuriating!

How dare we be denied the right to marry just like everyone else!

Occasionally, I would feel guilty back then about having sex without having had a wedding. I didn't like the fact that she called me her fiancé and that I was calling her my fiancée and yet we were having sex. I really hate talking about those moments. I didn't like how it made Lynn feel.

I don't remember what I would say but it would lead to Lynn asking, "do you regret what do?"

I would always respond, "no, of course not." And I would feel such shame for making her feel like I regretted making love – expressing our love through sexual intimacy.

My sister worked for an insurance company and she may not have supported universal health care. Years later it would make me want to spit in the face of both her and my mother when Kathy (I have divorced myself from her and do not call the woman who gave birth to me my mother any longer) said "the worlds a dangerous place." It was offensive and disgusting.

Also, as I was Christian, I had been brainwashed with ideas about how you are supposed to act sexually. The teaching was that sex should occur only when two people are married. This would be problematic in our situation, obviously.

I had decided I was going to live as Lynn's husband even if we didn't officially get married. Our sacred union would not be denied based on the impossible position that the state put us in. I would say that in the eyes of God we were two that became one as it has always been... one body, one soul... one being.

Chapter 22: Sexual Intimacy and Health Issues Related to Cystic Fibrosis

Lynn's mother, Diane, was not burdened by the kind of religious dogma to which I was subjected. That was why she had no problem with buying a home, as an investment and renting the home to us. This was a decision she made after Lynn and I got engaged. This decision by Diane to buy a house coincided with her offer to allow us to rent the home. It was an investment for Diane because she only charged \$200 for rent - \$100 each from me and Lynn.

I should clarify that Diane clarified that she was doing this for us to live as husband and wife. Lynn was still working when this was done, and I was going to graduate school.

The discussion with Diane about the rent was more along the lines of what we both could afford as opposed to a conversation about two people having separate finances. Lynn and I had maintained our own bank accounts due to her need to qualify for her health care insurance. They look at resources in addition to income. That doesn't mean that either of us had kept anything a secret regarding our bank accounts and how much was in them. I always explained everything I spent with Lynn because she was very practical, and she expected me to do so.

Anyway, I knew that Diane wanted her daughter to enjoy all the benefits of marital life. That meant that she expected us to have a healthy sex life together when she bought a home for us where we could live as husband and wife.

She didn't say to us, "I expect you to have a healthy sex life together." However, there were so many little ways that I knew this. I'll expand upon this below.

That was so refreshing for me. It honestly never occurred to me that any aspect of our life should be avoided when Diane was present. We picked out a bed together. Diane bought the bed for us. She bought a home with one bedroom.

She was there to help us decorate the bedroom and the bath area – one bedroom. A bathroom right next to the bedroom and closed off from the rest of the house. One closet. Things would not have occurred the same way with my family and It's

probably why in many families a mother or parents are not present when their son or daughter is furnishing or decorating their bedroom area.

I just knew that if Diane had heard about my religious brainwashing, she would have been mad. So, Lynn protected me in that regard. Some of what we did together as we were furnishing and decorating the bedroom was interesting. I wanted to convey my love and desire for Lynn and for her mother to see this.

We shared a mischievous look, a brief kiss, as I gently pulled Lynn to me with her mother right nearby. As we looked at the shower area there was more of the same. I stopped to take in the sight of Lynn imagining seeing her naked body walking from the show, obviously looking dreamy as Lynn was talking to her mother at this point.

I didn't have to tell Diane that "I am thinking about seeing your daughter naked." We didn't have to say "this is where we will have sex" as we looked at the bed together. To me, I was thinking free to be comfortable about these matters even though Lynn's mother right there with us and it seemed more important to demonstrate my intent to make Lynn feel good as we expressed our love for one another sexually.

This was happening at some point after we got engaged. Lynn and I had slept together, including at times when her mother had been visiting – Diane still lived out of state at this point and would come and stay in the home where Lynn lived on Wrightsville Beach. When I say we slept together before we moved in together, I don't mean we had sex and so I had not seen all of Lynn, yet. We had not yet had fully nude genital contact. The only erogenous zone I had seen was her breasts.

I had a sense that Diane had a knowledge that this would be how things would work out if Lynn had fallen in love – that if the state knew that she was married she would lose her insurance which was not an option.

I know that Lynn and her mother discussed everything. Yeah, the very specific topic of how Lynn was going to make sure she didn't get pregnant was an issue that I learned about later, but it did NOT take me by surprise.

I felt like I could have stated that Lynn would protect her health but that wouldn't make sense. Diane knew that Lynn was aware of her health concerns.

That conversation about how Lynn and I would make sure she didn't get pregnant did not occur when I was present, but I knew that she wanted Lynn to be happy. This taboo around sex was my brainwashing. I was more afraid of Diane finding out that I had these doubts about making love with Lynn.

I remember a conversation I had with Lynn sometime later. It was about a conversation she had with her mother.

Lynn's health was such that she could not support another life. She had problems herself with digestion. So, I just asked her, "when you and your mother talk about our sexual relations what do you say?"

Her answer was "she just wants to know that I am not going to get pregnant."

"Okay, so what did you say?" I asked.

"I just told her not to worry we were careful," she answered.

I thought "Okay, that makes sense." My response was, "okay," and then I smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"It's great that you can talk about this and that she wants you to be happy."

When Lynn and I had this conversation, we had been having sex for a while. It was beautiful to note that Lynn did not wait for me to initiate sex on these occasions. This reflects the fact that I wanted to know that Lynn loved and desired me.

You might recall that I had been uncertain earlier when we first started seeing each other, about whether Lynn was interested in me as much as I was interested in her. That is what I mean here but in a slightly different context.

Lynn also needed and hungered for closeness. It was an expression of our relationship which this book is about – relationships and connections.

That need for closeness was complicated by the need to make sure that she doesn't get pregnant. It might sound bizarre therefore when you hear her say "oh, sweetie,

you are too close” in a voice full of the sexual passion of the moment. It just meant “I can’t get pregnant.”

I wondered “had Lynn kept the details about how we were making sure that she didn’t get pregnant to herself and not shared them with her mother to protect her from thinking about some aspect of intimacy that had to be avoided by us?”

I kept the reality of just how serious her illness was out of my mind as much as possible.

Chapter 23: Intimate Family Life and Self Discovery

The life I had with Lynn seemed ideal in many ways. I will discuss my career journey and the accomplishments in that area of my life in a bit, but I wanted to share these details about what I had achieved in the area of family life. As husband and wife, I saw myself as having achieved the greatest thing I had always wanted in life - a family.

I said that we could not have children. Nonetheless, we were a family now.

My friend Jean commented upon how much Lynn and I argued. I, therefore, feel there is value in addressing that topic.

In an earlier chapter, I discussed an incident that puts things in perspective. Jean was only partially a part of the scene. I think it is worth it to present this event again.

Lynn and I had come to a book signing by Jean Arthur Jones and a video presentation at a coffee house downtown. He had released a chapbook of poetry. Lynn and I had been arguing about something and the conversation was almost non-existent as I drove downtown with Lynn next to me.

After I had Jean sign a book for me and then one for Lynn I then brought it upstairs and of course Jean went on with signing other books and presenting a video that evening.

She let her beautiful smile wash over her face as she accepted the book and then a smile as she slightly laughed a bit frustrated because she couldn't stay mad at me.

I had answered, "well, it doesn't mean that I don't still love you." I was commenting on the things that made me mad. It also said a great deal about the fact, the truth that nothing that happened EVER changed the nature of my love for Lynn.

It was an experience that I remember as an epiphany that Lynn and I recognized. Yet it was only one such experience. I would always feel bad when we weren't talking. I couldn't stand letting that go on for hours.

Knowing that no argument was going to divide us was a profound observation that was profoundly important. It was an absolute truth that we knew! Always! I would use some version of this scenario to break the silence.

As a counselor, I heard clients talk about their relationships. I remember hearing someone say that he and his girlfriend have a "really special relationship." I was baffled as he had described a tension that had existed for days and a distance between them.

I absolutely could not stand the tension and the idea that Lynn wasn't happy or that I hurt her feelings. Maybe I blurted something out that I regretted. I didn't usually get a gift like that evening when I brought her the book – I just happened to be planning to do that already that evening. At other times I would get close to her and smile, get her to make eye contact. She almost seemed frustrated that she couldn't stay mad.

It almost felt like I was arguing with myself as I was discussing things. Old ideas that I had accepted without thought. We discussed everything so we were going to disagree from time to time.

Anyway, some of these arguments came from the influence of religious teaching/brainwashing that I had been exposed to in life. I had embraced certain absolutes as a result of that teaching.

These were not times when we demonstrated disrespect for one another. Sometimes I wonder if some couples let resentments exist and they accommodate them by ignoring the topic just like families consider "politics" to be taboo.

Our Home

We got two cats that we named Tip and Boo. Diane set up a swinging door to the garage so that the cats could get out there to the little box. We both had cars, but we kept them outside because we used the garage for other things. I started to gain some weight and Lynn bought a machine where I could run or walk on it for exercise.

I also had weights and a punching bag. Gestalt therapy encourages us to act out our anger but I'm getting ahead of myself.

We bought two ladders, stained them, as opposed to painting. Diane brought a stud finder so that we could put nails in the wall for the bookcases that we were building across the back room toward the right where we also set up a computer. Oh, we got cable internet when that was available.

The backroom to the left would be a spare room with a couch that we could offer a guest if they visited, like Lynn's cousins. We put a larger TV in that room too. It wasn't a flatscreen – this was the 90s!

In the bedroom, we had another TV. Next to the bed, Lynn had the equipment that she used to receive inhaled medications. We both liked that Star Trek. I was getting busier and busier, so I watched TV less than Lynn did. Due to Lynn's income limits, she couldn't work as much as I did.

She did sell her pottery on consignment at various places and at certain events. I forget any more details. I was very proud of her and told her that people should pay lots of money for her pottery. It was easier to not worry about her earning too much to have to declare it on her taxes.

For meals, we had been learning to cook together for some time. I wasn't as practical as she was which just meant that she would say whose turn it was to cook or if she wanted me to cook dinner for some reason. We handled cleaning the same way. She basically directed me as to how she wanted to see things cleaned.

We took turns emptying the litter which would not be possible if her health got bad. It's not good for her to breathe the dust. I do feel guilty for asking her to do that at all. It was part of my denial of her condition. Some of the cleaning I had to do for the same reason, to keep her from inhaling certain things. Her lungs were not as strong or healthy as mine.

Memories and Dreams of Abuse

Memories of the abuse I experienced growing up were never far from my mind or they were not far enough from my mind... they were not buried deep enough,

unfortunately. I was still having nightmares related to the abuse I had experienced in the past.

I had been assaulted - verbally, physically, and emotionally. Adding to that the emotional neglect from Kathy and Bruce Sr. (my ex-parents) and it's no surprise that nightmares would find their way into my nights...

In the dreams, I would sometimes be striking out at my parents. There was a point between waking and sleeping that made it seem like I was hitting the bed, punching it. So much time has passed, and I have processed it over the years. As a result, the memories have faded.

What I remember was being afraid that as my hands were flailing about in the bed that I might hit Lynn. That is what I remember! It makes my blood run cold to imagine that. I just know that I would describe the actual memory to Lynn.

Nights with Lynn in bed right next to me. Just as my hands swung in my dream in efforts at fighting back, so did my arms seem to be flailing about in the bed. Sometimes I would be hitting the bed or punching the bed.

I only remember that she had assured me that she wasn't afraid and that my hands had not moved as much as I imagined. Oh, and that I did shout loud enough for us both to wake up. This was happening until I was about 30!

Serenity and Intimacy

What I do remember is an awareness that the lack of nurturance growing up explained why I sought to cuddle so much. I also had tension headaches and some stomach problems. I would rest my head on her lap as she caressed my forehead.

Prior to when we moved in together, though, we had not had sex.

After that things were different.

She knew how attracted I was to her. For Valentine's day, I suggested that she get a sexy and revealing outfit at Victoria's Secret or some such place. I was so touched that she did this. I felt like she had not usually tried to look beautiful or attractive to

the same degree as some females do. She didn't wear much make-up or look like some females that I might otherwise think are objectively attractive.

This was my gift. She knew it aroused me. I would find myself unable to contain myself and would get up and gently say "can I take this off?" and she would laugh about the effort she had gone to and how soon it came off.

It seems strange to be talking like this... about intimacy. But it was so new a discovery... every time. I would marvel at the idea of someone desiring me - emotionally, sexually.

These days we see on TV and in the movies and I heard growing up that this was something physical. The closeness that Lynn and I had was something different, mysterious, and awesome discovery as if no one has known about these things until we found the answers. Maybe it is the creative part of me that is inclined to think these things. The poet.

What I am hinting at is the fact that unlike the notions I got from family and my other observations from our culture, men don't have to take the lead. We don't and shouldn't make the first move, expecting our wives and girlfriends to agree to what is happening.

With my parents, it seemed like sex was taboo but at one point my mother made some comment that made it seem like it was her obligation to meet her husband's desires. I cannot overstate how different things were with Lynn and me. There was not even a hint of role expectations.

As far as sex goes, Lynn didn't wait for me to bring up the topic of sex on any occasion when we were intimate. It was also not a situation where either of us was expecting the other one to know what to do. We discovered each other's bodies and what felt good. It was like exploring. I guess she didn't direct me at first and vice versa because we didn't know what the other one was comfortable doing.

Unless we were both in bed already and the lights had gone out, neither of us was "not in the mood." We could tell if one of us was busy, tired, stressed, or whatever.

I think that is rare. How often do two people find that both are "in the mood" at the same time? Or how often do two people respond to each other as if they are responding in sync? No awkward approaches and the other person turning away.

Also, I NEVER remembered a time when a loving glance or smile could be resisted by either one of us. I'm not talking about necessarily anything sexual. Just imagine a couple together and one is watching TV or distracted and the other one looks and tries to get their partner's attention, but they blow them off as if they've gotten too comfortable or some old resentment has been there. Yeah, that song by Carly Simon "Coming Around Again" has a line "I know nothing stays the same." Yeah, that didn't happen to us ever.

Returning to the matter of sexual intimacy... All of this is mysterious to me. But sensuality is a good and right thing. Our bodies are our gifts to one another.

This was about love, a connection, a relationship and that was good!

And closeness wasn't always just about sex. Lynn would choose to sleep nude just to be close to me signaling her desire to be that close to me. I would feel like if I did that, I might be implying that I expect her to do the same and I was not into any kind of coercive persuasion. Maybe it had something to do with the observations I had made in life from some TV show or something.

I was talking about serenity and passion. The former, serenity, implies peace and diminished arousal of emotions. Passion is the opposite. For a husband and wife, passion can imply sexual passion.

Yet, the most beautiful woman in the world, Lynn, could both arouse me with her body next to mine and bring me a serene sense of comfort as we fell asleep. My hands holding her bare breast.

It's important to realize that every person has different erogenous zones and responds to different forms of contact. For some females, the breasts around the nipples are not erogenous. It just doesn't create a response.

I had discovered that if I held her breasts and moved my hand ever so slightly, she would respond with arousal. So, if I started getting aroused, I might check to see if

she was awake enough for sex. If not, or if she felt like sleeping, she would gently take place her hand over mine and say "sweetie, I am sleepy."

She wasn't quiet either. During sex, I would ask at times "did I hurt you?"

She would answer as soon as she could almost desperately, "don't stop."

If you are thinking that Lynn might have been fragile, that's not it. I just wanted to be sure that what I was doing felt good.

I want to share, in the next chapter, some information about a poetry magazine that Lynn and I created on the web in 1995. This will depict another shared interest that we had and something we did together.

Chapter 24: Word Salad Poetry Magazine – A Shared Project

The worldwide web was still fairly new in the 90s. Lynn and I were both interested in poetry and I had the idea of publishing a poetry magazine on the web. This was in 1995.

I had a goal of becoming a psychiatric social worker and I was learning a great deal about psychiatric issues at this time. I will describe this in greater detail later.

Anyway, we were thinking of a title and I thought of a term that I heard in the psychiatric field – word salad. The definition from dictionary.com is as follows: incoherent speech consisting of both real and imaginary words, lacking comprehensive meaning, and occurring in advanced schizophrenic states.

I had remarked that at one time, years ago, I had struggled to make sense of poetry... like when I was growing up. I once had the impression that poetry was hard to understand. Maybe I just had bad teachers.

This seemed like a good name that we both liked. So, we called the magazine “Word Salad” or “Word Salad Poetry Magazine.” I got a domain name online and started creating a static website. This was prior to WordPress and so I had to work with Microsoft Word or perhaps WordPerfect (yeah, back then both programs were equally popular).

I would then create a list of pages for each poem with links on the main page which would serve as a table of contents.

Lynn let me do this part.

I also did what was required to try to get submissions. Back then, newsgroups were very popular, and your internet service provider included a list of newsgroups that you could subscribe to. It is similar to a forum today, but they were more open and not controlled by any particular owner... meaning there weren't strict rules about what you could post.

Consider something like this today. We might join groups on Facebook, but someone is an owner and creator of the group or there are a small group of administrators for the group. Unsolicited requests for submissions posted to a group might get you kicked off for sending spam.

Newsgroups were not like that and you could find appropriate groups where you could find creative people who are writers and poets. That's what I did.

Poetry submissions started coming into our email account for the magazine.

Keep in mind that at the time this idea of an online magazine was very new as well. That is no longer the case.

We decided to publish four times every year. Around the time when we were getting ready to publish an edition, I first asked Lynn to sit down in front of the computer and see what she thought of some of the poems we were getting – which ones did we want to publish?

She said she wanted me to print out all the poems that I got. I did that and she started creating piles for rejects, those we might want to publish and those she or we liked. She might show me ones she liked right away along with the ones that were in the “maybe” stack or I would look later... sometimes I would start off indicating which ones I liked.

This was really taking off and it was amazing.

At one point, we got an interview with Ben Steelman who is a reporter with the Wilmington Star-News. He sat down together with him outside near his office in town. It was memorable.

We got some submissions from our friends as well.

A similar process occurred when Lynn would edit/proofread my papers for graduate school. She would ask me to print out the paper and she would go about marking up typos or other stupid mistakes I would make in my writing. It's strange how easy it is to make all these errors even if I was a much better writer than might be indicated by some early drafts of my papers.

In the next chapter, we will go back in time. I will pick up the story of my career journey. That journey might have started in the 80s when I decided I was going to go into social work, but it took off in 92. That just happens to be the same time when I met Lynn.

It was the best of times, a period of great success and accomplishments.

Section Four: My Career Journey: Toward Becoming a Psychotherapist



This section of the book covers my career journey toward becoming a psychotherapist. My path toward being a psychotherapist involved working in allied fields working directly with people who have a variety of needs for support. The goal was always to help others to achieve their own goals and not the goals that someone else might have for them.

This section of the book will cover the period up to the point when I was able to call myself a **therapist** or a **psychotherapist**. The next section will cover being a therapist.

This section is about the journey, the education, the training, which in many professions like Clinical Social Work is on the job and in other settings. It's about accomplishments and success.

I wanted to be a psychiatric social worker and I took the steps necessary to achieve this goal. Those steps included but were not limited to, volunteer work, internships, graduate school, continuing education, post-graduate training, membership in professional organizations, and leadership roles in local branches of professional organizations.

There is no shortcut or substitute for hard work in pursuit of a goal. Having competent and skilled mentors also helps a great deal. All of this will be revealed in this section of the book.

We will back up a bit from where we left off with the family life that I created which was described in the last chapter. Those stories serve as the background for the work I was doing to build a successful career. I would prove those who doubted me wrong. I would demonstrate that I could build a successful private practice in a saturated market.

Those who advised me not to go into private practice had good intentions. However, I had a dream, a set of goals and aspirations. Join me and see what happens...

Chapter 25: Pursuit of Career Dreams – Psychiatric Social Work

In the last chapter, I was discussing the primary accomplishment of my life - building a family with Lynn. As husband and wife, we were a family.

Prior to that, during college, I had spent five years trying to overcome my shyness which manifested as social anxiety and a lack of social and communication skills. To even meet Lynn and to express my interest in her required skills that I did not have previously.

I was preparing to be a social worker even when I was studying engineering at a school that didn't even offer a major in social work. I just didn't know at first that I was preparing to be a clinical social worker or a psychotherapist.

As I described in earlier chapters of this book, engineering wasn't even close to being a good choice. In high school, though, they didn't give us any psychological tests, aptitude tests, nor did a guidance counselor sit down with us and help us figure out what career might be a good match for us.

Because of the benefits that psychology offered me in making radical changes for the better in my life, I wanted to bring those same benefits to others who might be struggling in life. If it could transform a guy who was paralyzed with or by shyness into a person who would choose social work, then imagine the possibilities.

Having realized just how rewarding it had been to work with the social work team at Georgia Regional Hospital, a psychiatric hospital, I was looking for a similar opportunity when I moved to Wilmington in 1992. I had arrived for a 6-month contract at Corning as a technical writer as I had indicated previously.

Wilmington had just the right opportunity at "The Oaks" which was part of "New Hanover Regional Medical Center." The Oaks was a psychiatric hospital. It was a locked unit because many people are there under involuntary commitment orders.

When I approached “The Oaks” I was introduced to Chris Hauge, DSW, LCSW. DSW is for Doctor of Social Work and LCSW is for Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Most people with an LCSW have a master’s in social work (MSW) as that is typically considered a “terminal degree” – the furthest one needs to go in in one’s education to work as a psychiatric social worker. Usually, a person will get a DSW so they can teach at the university level.

Anyway, I volunteered to work a few hours every week. I also explained to Chris my long-term goals and my journey up to this point. Chris would end up being a mentor of mine. He supervised me during my second internship about 3 years later. He also helped me get started in private practice even later in my career. In other words, he knew me quite well and he was very instrumental in my success.

His style was also very refreshing. Chris encouraged the use of self-disclosure by the staff at the Oaks when they were interacting with patients and he modeled that. This is not very common in the field. Many mental health professionals are very guarded about disclosing personal details, their own experiences. There is a risk that some clients or patients will use some personal information to make us feel bad or to get under our skin.

As another example of what I found unique about Chris was that in his groups he encouraged the staff to be very genuine and to share their own honest feelings. Imagine a client or patient is feeling very down about themselves and feeling worthless. Now imagine that with what little time you’ve spent with a person it occurs to you that you can think of at least one positive thing that you like about the person as a fellow human being. To even get to this point might seem impossible to some mental health professionals.

I actually had such an experience not long ago in 2020. I was talking to a psychiatric nurse at the University of North Carolina at one of their clinics. It was awkward for her as she stated that it would not be proper for her to tell me if she felt there was anything positive that she recognized about me or in me. The question and the interaction were rather uncomfortable for both of us. But really, does it need to be? If such a question was posed to me, I’d have offered some positive feedback before I put that much thought into the matter.

To think that you can’t offer any positive feedback to a client is strange to me.

As a social work volunteer at The Oaks, I was assigned to complete an intake assessment, not unlike the ones I had done at Georgia Regional Hospital.

There are some interesting things that I wanted to add about the intake assessment. This was the case when I was a volunteer at Georgia Regional Hospital as well. Chris encouraged me to make a diagnosis of the patients and to do so without looking at what the psychiatrist had listed as a diagnosis. I'll explain what it means to make a diagnosis later in this book.

The point is that the information that you gather is used to make a diagnosis. Patients were not given a battery of psychological tests (or any psychological test for that matter) in most cases. I could see how I was gathering more extensive information than what the psychiatrist had available previously.

I got the sense that the clinical social workers like Chris were providing crucial information that would inform the treatment plan while they are in the hospital – outpatient settings are like that as well.

Later, while I was working at a public mental health center after getting my degree, it seemed, in that particular setting, that the doctors were less receptive to considering the additional information that I offered or to read or listen to my explanation for why my diagnosis might be different. I was never chastised for offering my own diagnosis into the chart, but they seemed less receptive than the psychiatrists here (I am using doctor and psychiatrist interchangeably).

I was not even an intern yet and had not started my formal training but the information I was gathering seemed valuable to the entire staff.

Anyway, I would come in and meet Chris. We would sit down, and he had a list of new patients. He would say that we have to finish a certain number of intake assessments that day – there was a requirement to complete them within a certain period of time after admission. So, Chris would say, “I will do the assessment on these people, and could you meet with these others.”

I was given a key to an office somewhere that I could use to meet with and gather information from a patient.

It's important to note that this was not "busy work." These intake assessments had to be completed in a certain period of time, as I just said. I felt like I was doing something important.

I had an opportunity to sit in on various group sessions as well. I told Chris that I wanted to do my second internship at The Oaks, and he agreed to that plan.

I learned even more under the supervision of Chris than I had as a volunteer in a similar situation previously.

I continued to grow in my social and communication skills.

I felt the contentment that goes along with continuing knowledge that I was on the right path in life.

I had been intrigued by the ways that mental illness took a toll on the lives of others. If I could apply those same skills to help others, that would be something. To heal others afflicted with debilitating disorders or to help them cope and find joy in life would be the most appropriate career direction for me. The relationships I was forming even before I graduated from Georgia Tech were so powerful and meaningful to me!

Everyone has different preferences and things that motivate them. I had found what mattered to me and what kind of activities I wanted to perform on the job. You might say that these were activities that I NEEDED to do if life was going to be meaningful.

This was about helping others and working with others. That's what mattered to me.

I mention all this to make it clear that having made one mistake regarding my education and career direction, I didn't want to make another.

In retrospect, as I write these words decades later, I know that I had made the right decisions back then. I had been on the right path and doing everything right.

Chapter 26: Working with People With Developmental Disabilities

Prior to starting graduate school, there were limits as to what I could do in the field. I was not able to work as a mental health professional yet. However, there are jobs where one can work as a para-professional.

I found opportunities to do work with clients who have developmental disabilities as well as in some cases, mental illness and/or physical conditions/disabilities. There has been some overlap between the fields.

The Mental Health Center in New Hanover County was also the Center for Developmental Disabilities.

With my job ending at Corning, I had to find other work. I had been spending all my time with Lynn and my self-esteem had grown tremendously as a result of that relationship and as a result of the experience, my time with Celta before that, and my various experiences as a volunteer in the psychiatric field.

I'm not saying there were not struggles, worries, or uncertainty. Had my mental health not improved from where it was before I moved to Wilmington, I might have been more panicky about the job ending after six months.

Instead, I just looked for opportunities and bounced ideas off Lynn. It was very helpful to have someone who could hold me in her body... someone I could cuddle up next to whenever I was anxious or fearful. Plus, she was very practical, as I described earlier, so I felt confident that I could find answers and solutions to meet the challenges I was facing, whatever they might be.

As I was saying, I needed to find employment after the job at Corning ended. I had worked as a technical writer and had saved up a great deal of money in just six months. Since the job was contracted through an employment agency in Augusta, Georgia, the salary was paid as per diem – similar to when a company pays you for going to a conference. This way most of it was not taxed at all!

Eventually, I found a job with an agency that treats individuals with developmental disorders such as autism, and various levels of mental retardation. The latter is measured by results on IQ tests when a person scores at least two standard deviations below normal - which is an IQ of 70 or less.

I started working with a client who had autism and some degree of mental retardation. I met him at the day program that existed in Wilmington and which was affiliated with the Southeastern Center for Mental Health/Developmental Disorders/Substances Abuse Services. Adults would come for several hours to the facility where they would be taught various skills for coping in the environment.

The guy I was working with was very big, about twice my size, and he could not speak as a result of his condition or disorders – that is commonly the case for individuals with autism. He used sign language. So, I had a chance to learn sign language. It was so very important to be able to sign various words to communicate with him.

I had goals and things that I was supposed to do with him every day. One such goal might be to accompany him for walks around the area. Obviously, I had to make sure he didn't run out into traffic so I mainly walked on the sidewalk closest to the street to ensure that this would not happen.

He also had a problem with repetitive behaviors where he would swing his arms and risk injuring himself. This is troublesome because I was afraid that he would hurt himself. No one spelled out what exactly I should do when this happened.

There was at least one other individual there who was a client of the same company and I worked with him as well.

I knew that case managers had developed the goals which were put into a treatment plan that I was responsible for implementing. I also knew that case managers are usually social workers – not typically social workers with an MSW (master's in social work).

I wondered if I was helping these people. I knew I was helping their families, but I wasn't getting direct feedback from the clients I was serving.

Jumping Ahead To When Lynn And I Were Living Together...

The relationship with Lynn was growing, I was beginning graduate school and working several jobs.

In late 1994, Lynn and I moved into a nice neighborhood in northern Wilmington, and one of the clients with whom I was assigned to work lived in that neighborhood. I worked with him through the Southeastern Center for Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services and with a company with whom they contracted.

This client's name was James.

I worked with James both in the community and at his home. James lived in a home that was staffed 24/7 – all the time every day. Unlike a “group home,” he lived in a home where the rent was paid by the state as were the staff and other services that he received.

I had been “networking” with employees of the Southeastern Center for Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities/Substance Abuse Services as well as agencies with which they contracted for direct-care services to clients. I worked at group homes and in the community including at the Day treatment center as I described earlier in this chapter.

While James had his own residential placement, I was also working at other residential locations where individuals with a mental illness and/or developmental disability were staffed 24/7 365 days per year. A “shift” at these residential locations was 8 hours straight and you had to bring a meal with you or eat food that was available for staff because sometimes you were alone on duty.

James was unique and that's why he had to be placed by himself instead of with others at a “group” home. He had Cerebral Palsy, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, and an Intellectual Disability. I can't give his last name for confidentiality purposes.

"Intermittent explosive disorder" is just what it sounds like.

I had to learn how professionals in the field restrain a client who might get combative. In all my years of experience that only has been an issue in cases in which a person has a developmental disability like autism or some form of mental retardation and a mental illness.

Unfortunately, when you combine intellectual disabilities, problematic or limited social skills, and certain psychiatric conditions, there is a potential for aggression.

A foreshadowing of things to come...

As an aside, it is possible to be hurt by someone with a mental illness without the mental illness causing a person to hurt you. I would learn that many years later, when things happened.

I started working with James shortly after Lynn and I moved into our home on Brucemont Dr. **This would be OUR home for years after this.**

Getting back to working with James...

Our goals with James were to help him to fit into the community and to go places within the community. This could include the library, restaurants, the park, the beach, shopping, and maybe the movies among other things.

At least, I knew that these were goals that James desired. The challenge was to teach him socially appropriate behaviors, so we didn't get thrown out of places where we went.

Indeed, that was a challenge. He was the opposite of shy. He would approach anyone and everyone and start talking to them as well as a great deal of touching – potentially sexually inappropriate, hugging and putting his arm around people. Everyone. And he was loud. So, everywhere we went he knew people and he would hug them or otherwise touch them.

James loved to see Lynn when I took him by the house where we were living. As it turned out his residence was less than a quarter-mile from where we lived.

I didn't leave James alone with Lynn because he might get inappropriate. I am sure he saw me as more than just a staff person giving him directions about how to act appropriately in a particular setting. He saw me as someone who would protect Lynn from ANYTHING that bothered her.

I did get approval from Lynn and confirmation that she was comfortable with me bringing James there.

I didn't disabuse James of the notion that I would treat him the same way I would treat anyone who dared to do anything Lynn didn't want them to do. He would struggle to keep his urges in check... moving to touch Lynn on the shoulder and then start to invade her personal space. Lynn would put up her arms and say "James!"

I wasn't far away, obviously. Instantly, I looked up and James would look at me. Then James would say "uh, oh, he's mad now" with an uncomfortable, low rumbling laugh.

I'd say, "Okay, we are leaving now."

Lynn would say "he's okay, right James?"

"Well, we need to go anyway," would be my response because he had to learn. I was a bit uncomfortable whenever he did these things but not everyone was as forthcoming and understanding as Lynn.

Then Lynn would say "when will you be home, honey?" and Lynn would give me a kiss, unaware of what kind of reaction this was eliciting in James. I knew from his low rumbling laughter.

He wanted another hug or something. So, I would turn and guide him out the door before he or Lynn knew what was happening.

Chapter 27: Working with People with Mental Illness

There was one other job that was very rewarding and fun. I worked the weekend shift at Sherwood Village, an Independent Supportive Living Apartment Complex. There were about roughly 30 apartments that housed 30 individuals.

I was on-call with a beeper for a 48-hour shift from Friday at 6 PM until Sunday at 6 PM. It was a supportive independent living facility in the sense that everyone lived independently but someone was on staff 24 hours per day 7 days per week. This was a place for persons with severe and persistent mental illness. It was called Sherwood Village.

By now I was a graduate student with so many other responsibilities and things going on in my life – a life with Lynn.

I was responsible for transporting the residents to the movies or other similar events. They had a van for me to transport the tenants. I didn't go with them to the movies most times because tenants that chose not to go on an outing might need my services.

I was allowed to go home with the pager that any of the residents could call if they needed me.

It was a great job, and I was well-liked by everyone. I stayed on with this position until I got my master's degree and could move up into a more professional level position.

It was fun to get to know all the residents. They said they liked me better than the staff member who worked from Sunday at 6 PM through Friday at 6 PM. So, that felt good to know.

The only activity that I had to do as someone who is "in charge" was to do some inspections of the apartment - mainly that was inspecting the A/C filters and other things like that. Obviously, there were some things that are important to promote a person's overall health that I had to oversee.

They knew I had a job to do for the landlord and the managers that maintain the apartments. I obviously had to make sure people were okay, but it wasn't like in a hospital unit where someone might come by every few hours. Most tenants were relatively high functioning, so they weren't going to wander away and disappear.

They had their own cars in some cases and there was no curfew or anything like that.

It was extremely rewarding because I NEVER had an issue with any of the tenants not liking me.

This would be a common theme in my career overall where the greatest challenge was with paperwork/charting, bureaucracies, staff expectations, and in my role as a member of the staff.

During this entire decade and into 2000, I NEVER had negative feedback or opinions expressed by anyone I served or helped – with clients, patients, or tenants everything went so smoothly.

The job was awesome overall. I mean I was getting to know these people and feel like I was part of a family. I considered them part of my family in a way. I mean I liked everyone there. One or two residents were distant and didn't talk much but most everyone was great to know.

I didn't think the staff for whom I was working had too many rules. I was on my own for most of the entire weekend and for most weekends. The only people contacting me were tenants/residents.

I could visit them inside their apartments. Obviously, that could be problematic with female tenants, but it never became an issue. If there was more than one person in the apartment, I didn't feel too concerned about spending some time in any of the tenant's apartments. Sometimes there were emergencies and that required spending extended time with a particular tenant who was in a crisis situation.

These crises rarely happened. I do remember one woman having a seizure and I was on the phone with EMS. I had to return to Sherwood Village because I had gone home with the pager when I got the message to call the tenant's phone number.

Residents of Sherwood Village had disorders such as schizophrenia, Major Depression, Bipolar Disorders, and so on. These disorders were characterized as severe and persistent mental illnesses. That is likely a designation that is necessary to obtain funding.

I obviously was made aware of the diagnoses of each resident. I also had to know what medications they were taking, physical problems, and other important information. This was all on file in the office. I was given a couch in the dayroom or I could sleep on the couch in the office if I needed more privacy at night.

I ran the tenant meetings which were held about once a month. Most of the tenants came for the meeting that was held in the dayroom which was a place where people could visit during most hours such as 9 AM to 9 PM. I could certainly spend additional time with tenants in that room if they needed to talk to someone.

Hopefully, you can imagine why this job was awesome for me. And why they all felt like my family.

It also is important to note how comfortable I felt running the tenant/resident meetings. Unlike reading my poetry to a group, this was more like directing a group event.

Yes, I felt so comfortable interacting with everyone as the person that everyone turned to for help whatever their problems were. I was starting my graduate studies during this time period, so I had been learning other skills in college (graduate school) to help me in counseling individuals in need and how to run group sessions.

I wasn't actually doing therapy yet but some of what we do as therapists is to listen to others with empathy. To help people feel safe. To be someone who others turn to for help and support.

We also had a Christmas party on the weekend when I was there. It was so nice. I felt needed and important.

It felt so right. I mean I was doing a great job and I could tell that I was. I could tell that I was someone that people felt very comfortable talking to.

I also know that I was more liked than the young woman who worked there during the week.

I also have no doubt that both the men and the women felt more comfortable talking to me about anything than they did talking to Donita, who worked during the weekdays. I knew that people there were glad to see me arrive on Friday - they told me.

What people most want and I can speak from experience is someone who truly listens and demonstrates empathy. Notice that I said, "demonstrates empathy." You cannot just feel comfortable believing you have empathy for another person and their situation. People will let you know how they feel when you are working with them or they will be distant, closed off, or reserved as they had been with Donita.

It seems like common sense that people won't be coming to you or repeatedly seeking your help and support if you are not demonstrating empathy. People here were coming to me to discuss everything that concerned them.

I felt a powerful connection.

Donita seemed to be held out as a role model for me by my supervisor at least until he started talking to the tenants about me.

The tenants on the other hand did complain to me about Donita's "attitude." She wasn't approachable, I was told. It wasn't anything that was serious enough for them to complain, for the most part.

It's important to note that some people in a situation like this do not feel empowered to complain. Having a chronic and persistent mental illness carries with it some stigma and it doesn't lend itself to creating feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence. Low self-esteem can go hand-in-hand with various psychiatric illnesses.

That being said, I know I made a difference and the tenants at Sherwood Village didn't want me to leave when I had to move on with my career and take on more

professional opportunities. That was happening as I completed my graduate training.

Unfortunately, due to confidentiality, I could not ask them for letters of recommendation for any job outside the mental health center/clinic. I did have complete confidence that each of the tenants, when and if asked about my performance had nothing but good things to say.

In the next chapter, I will begin to discuss the next stages in my education. More specifically, I am going to discuss my graduate studies at the University of South Carolina in the Department of Social Work.

Chapter 28: First-Year Graduate Studies in the Social Work Department

I began graduate studies at the University of South Carolina in September of 1993 as a part-time student for the first year. This was prior to Lynn and I getting engaged and then moving in with each other.

With my past experience mainly as a volunteer working with the social work team at a psychiatric hospital in Georgia, I was able to get letters of recommendation that were necessary to get into graduate school.

As I think of this, I worry about how I am portraying Lynn. She wasn't a housewife, homemaker, or anything like that. I didn't come home and say "honey, I worked all day can you cook me dinner?" She wasn't living through me and my successes.

As I mentioned previously, she had to keep her income below a certain level to qualify for health insurance to maintain her health and stay alive. That meant limiting her work hours. She did some office-type work and used her proofreading skills. Of course, she had her pottery as well.

She wasn't sitting at home watching TV while I worked, went to school, and did my internships.

Anyway, after gaining admission to the school in the fall of 1993, I found out that there were a few classes I could take part-time through distance learning. Instead of traveling over three hours to Columbia, South Carolina, I only had to travel to the campus in Conway, South Carolina which was about an hour and a half away.

This allowed me to continue to get experience working directly with people in the human services field.

Going part-time wasn't a "real" college experience. I sat in a room by myself in the evenings. Sure, we could pick up a phone and interact a bit, but it was nowhere near as rewarding as full-time studies with other students in the same room.

Full-Time Graduate Studies in Social Work

I began full-time graduate studies in the fall semester of 1994.

This was still, obviously, at the University of South Carolina but now I was going to Columbia, South Carolina. This was a three-hour drive from Wilmington, North Carolina. I would drive down on Wednesday and stay in one of the dorm rooms. I would then check out the next day and go to class on Thursday.

Three back-to-back classes, that were just under three hours long. Hardly a break between classes.

On Monday and Tuesday, I had my internship. An internship isn't paid work. So, I had to borrow money to cover living expenses, books, travel, and other expenses.

The Stafford Loans are designed to cover a scenario just like this. During the summer between what would be the first year of my studies and the second, I was able to pick up extra hours working as a paraprofessional.

Anyway, this was like night and day from my earlier days in college when I had been so shy and quiet. I suppose I was anxious to share my thoughts, speak in class, participate, ask questions and learn as much as possible. That is what I was doing.

I was psyched. This was happening for real! My dreams, my goals, were coming true.

During the first year, you study both macro and micro-level social work practices. Some colleges call this direct and indirect services.

Macro-level social work addresses issues that can be looked at from the level of a community, an organization, an agency, or government. So, we learned about the history of social welfare in the United States. Of key importance among the programs that stand out or the periods in history are the FDR years and the "New Deal."

In terms of macro-level work, we were expected to do a "needs assessment" for a community where you are living. Through my work, I had identified a low-income community that was partially in the historic district of Wilmington not far from the

Cape Fear River. I had also been going to a gym in that area. It was a boxing gym, but I wasn't a boxer. I just went to work out. It wasn't far from one of my internship placements.

That area contained a great deal of public housing which is by definition set aside for the poorest individuals and families. Demographically, it was also predominately populated by African Americans.

While this was macro-level social work, I did get a chance to develop relationships with "community leaders" and similar folks who knew the area and could share information with me.

With this information, we were tasked with writing a paper that describes the area and the needs that exist in the community. We were also encouraged to present photographs that illustrate important aspects of the community and their needs.

During the second year, we focus on our choice of either micro-level or macro-level social work. Micro-level social work is about providing direct services to individuals, couples, families, and groups.

I remember the theories that guided micro-level (direct) social work practice more than those ideas or principles that define macro-level social work because my specialization was in direct (micro-level) social work. This is what therapists/psychotherapists may do. We provide direct services (treatment/therapy) to individuals, couples, families, and groups.

There is a range of different pioneers, psychologists, and psychiatrists that have provided the therapies, theories, and techniques that professionals use. I will describe this later in the book.

First Year Internships

Finally, in considering this first year, I want to talk about my internships.

During the first year, we are expected to work in a setting that is distinct from the setting where we would like to work during our second and final year internship. The

second-year internship is intended to be a reflection of the setting where we would like to work primarily in our career upon graduation.

For me, as indicated previously, I intended to work at The Oaks with Chris Hauge, DSW (my mentor). This kind of psychiatric setting has been the kind of setting where things have been the most rewarding and interesting to me.

During the first semester of my first-year internship, I worked on the children's unit at the mental health center for New Hanover County in Wilmington.

Things didn't go as well as I would have liked. It was discouraging. This was the first time when I felt like I didn't have the necessary direction and guidance to be successful. I didn't want to be in a setting where I was uncertain about what to do and feeling lost.

I was a bit hard on myself and expected that I should have figured out what to do. Often, work with children will involve "play therapy" which is harder than it seems. I had no training yet in working with children and I wasn't getting guidance from my supervisor or others.

I was torn between unreasonable expectations and doubts that I couldn't just figure things out. I didn't think they wanted me to come in and just "play" with kids. I suppose it took me some time to get comfortable with the realization that this wasn't a good match for me. If this wasn't a job or an internship, it would be great spending time with kids.

You might recall that I had been like a big brother to a girl who was the child of a couple that was friends with my parents. That was so much fun, with laughter, and just hanging out with her. I was the same way with my relatives who had younger children when I was growing up. Often, I was the one who entertained the kids while the grownups socialized.

Doing an internship working with children felt so different to me than spending time with children outside a treatment setting. So far.

During the second semester, I was placed at the same organization but in two different departments. In the mornings and early afternoons, I worked at a day

treatment program for individuals with chronic and persistent mental illnesses. In the afternoon, I worked with the homeless program that was staffed by the mental health center.

Some of the time I was able to participate and get to know those who came to the day shelter for the homeless. It was interesting because there were classes that covered mental health issues and the format was something like a support group/therapy group.

I remember seeing in the morning at the day program for individuals with chronic and persistent mental illnesses, some of the same folks that were residents at Sherwood Village where I worked on the weekends.

Anyway, that need to prove myself didn't go over so well in one instance. I somehow spoke out of turn and corrected someone accidentally about something from the DSM – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. I was trying to demonstrate my knowledge, but I was not in a classroom setting. So, my supervisor corrected me after that.

It was disturbing to me that I was having some troubles during the internship placements that I had. Only occasionally did I feel like I was doing something useful and important. I guess I also still had things to learn in terms of social skills.

Mainly, I felt discouraged. I had switched out of the children's unit/department and given two placements with two other departments. The reason for me to be placed in two departments was to allow me to get the hours required. I don't remember all the little criticisms my supervisor had done to correct me, but it made me feel discouraged and sad. I had so wanted everything to go right.

My supervisor during that second semester once asked me if I was really had the potential to work in social work. That was the first and only time I have heard that in my career/life. If a job didn't go well in the future, it was not for reasons related to my skills as a social worker.

The afternoon placement went okay in terms of my interactions with the staff and my responsibilities. It just seemed that I wasn't needed as much as I wanted to be needed. There seemed to be limited opportunities for me to do things.

I did develop a "street sheet" that would be useful for the homeless in Wilmington. I used our computer at home and the bus maps. Various resources were marked on the map on one side and on the other side there were descriptions of the various resources and services.

An Unrecognized Foreshadowing...

Years later when my life had become a living nightmare, I would be given that same "street sheet" I had developed... a time when I was homeless and alone.

However, at this time, I had no knowledge of what was coming years later.

Anyway, during this first year, and similarly during the second year, as you can see, I had a very busy schedule.

Monday and Tuesday I did my internship, then I slept late on Wednesday and drove down to Columbia South Carolina, stayed overnight in the dorms, and went to class on Thursday. Then on Friday evening through Sunday evening, I worked at Sherwood Village.

On top of that, I had papers and homework, of course. I was extremely motivated to prove myself. Part of me was trying to prove my competency to myself. Self-doubt is very troublesome.

Despite some challenges and doubts, this was a very rewarding experience and overall, I loved where I was in my journey. I especially loved what I was learning in my classes and I loved the work that I did at Sherwood Village.

That job didn't require my attention during the entire 48-hour shift. So, I was able to bring my books from classes with me and read. Sundays were especially slow days so I could catch up on my reading.

Chapter 29: Second Year Graduate Studies – Direct Services

My second internship would prove to be the most rewarding. All in all, during my second year of full-time graduate studies, I was feeling good about every aspect of my life. I was doing great in classes, in my internship, and at work.

A Master's in Social Work is a two-year program and so the second year is our final year. As I was saying, during our second year, we take classes and work in a setting that closely matches our primary interest area for where we want to work upon graduation.

An Epiphany - An Answer to a Question

I wanted to start with an insight that I had gained during a class that was titled "Abnormal Psychology." I touched on this a bit earlier, but I wanted to add a few things. Anyway, in this class, we studied and learned about the entire range of psychiatric disorders as they are described in the DSM-IV (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders, fourth edition).

We used a big book that is used by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to make a diagnosis.

Anyway, when we started covering personality disorders, that's when I had an epiphany.

We were considering public figures as examples of people who may have a particular personality disorder. Some people on YouTube seem to walk on eggshells when it comes to speculating about the disorders of public figures. I don't think our professor was quite so worried about making an error in diagnosing someone. I suppose our professor wasn't speaking to a large audience nor was he making a definitive diagnosis.

I remember we discussed OJ Simpson as an example of someone with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. We were also encouraged to consider people we might know

who might have a variety of different personality disorders. The thinking was that this would make things more clear and easier to understand.

There are some rules in the US that discourage diagnosing public figures. Those “rules” do not seem to be hard absolute rules.

With regard to personality disorders, it’s not rocket science nor is it necessary that you sit down with someone to make a diagnosis. Another argument is that the person being diagnosed should be seeking treatment. Sometimes people are involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital and so they didn’t seek treatment or a diagnosis.

Mental health professionals make observations, gather information from people other than the person being diagnosed.

Anyway, it was in this class when it hit me!

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is the problem that my mother had. The questions that had racked my brain for decades finally had an answer or an explanation. I don't know if this diagnosis of the problems that Kathy Whealton had would have been helpful earlier but at least I had a sense of clarity as to what was wrong.

In many ways my father, Bruce Sr. seemed to have the same condition. It wasn't so obvious with him though.

It was obvious that my mother could not see things from a different point of view.

That is the difference that I noticed with my mother. She NEVER could come forward and say, "I am sorry for the way I acted... that was wrong."

There is more to it than these observations. Both parents had a condescending and judgmental attitude toward others. Only certain "special" people could meet their high standards for being worthy of their attention.

These are symptoms of NPD or characteristics of a narcissistic family.

Anyway, I do not say these things with an angry heart. Nor is this an effort to make my parents look bad. This epiphany was an answer to a question I have been asking for the past 15 years or so.

Getting back to the topic of second year graduate studies.

We had courses that covered a variety of techniques for group, individual, family, and couples therapy/counseling. I won't give you an education here into a typical second-year graduate program in social work. While learning the "basics" we were also encouraged to learn more about certain theories, therapies, and techniques. This is not unlike the way that psychotherapists will specialize in the use of certain types of therapy that they do best. No one can know everything about every form of therapy.

In graduate school, during our second year, we take classes that ask us to research different treatment techniques and therapies. For example, in one class I did a long paper on treatment options for people with dual diagnoses like a mental illness and a substance use disorder. I felt that the 12-step programs of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) had some limits and potential flaws.

My concern with NA/AA is that people get advice from others who have no specialized training. On top of that, I had noticed from the literature that these people will tell a person that the main and primary consideration is to avoid the addictive substance. That discounts a person's overall suffering and pain.

So, I looked for recent scientific journal articles that presented research findings that might be relevant to this topic. I remember my paper was 30 pages long.

I was learning about a variety of treatment techniques and theories.

My Internship at The Oaks

During this second year of my education, I did my internship at "The Oaks" psychiatric hospital under the guidance and supervision of Chris Hauge. Yes, he is the same Dr. Chris Hauge that I mentioned when speaking of my volunteer work at "The Oaks" in an earlier chapter.

The doubts that I had during my first year, however infrequent they were, now were non-existent. I had no doubt that I had made all the right choices to get me here finally. Chris had worked in the field for decades, longer than anyone I ever knew, and he was very well respected.

Chris was happy to have me do my internship there at "The Oaks" as we discussed previously. He saw my passion and drive to help others who were hurting, in distress, or having problems in life. He nurtured that hunger and drive giving me opportunities to do the things that I wanted to do... For example, it wasn't long before I had a chance to do some therapy with patients in the hospital.

I was participating in groups led by Chris - therapy groups.

What I loved about the way Chris did the groups is that the "staff," psychiatric nurses, other interns, medical students, and others were expected to participate in the group. What I mean is that they were not there to just observe what others were doing.

I'm going to have to be more specific to describe what I mean. Patients were in the hospital in most cases for no more than about two weeks. So, we had to figure out what could be accomplished in a brief period of time. Chris happened to be skilled in the use of experiential therapy techniques, which I will describe below.

Let's consider some examples. In a relaxation group, we might talk about natural ways to relax and deal with anxiety. In a survivor's group, we would start with deep breathing for relaxation and then Chris would guide us into a guided visualization exercise with our eyes closed. As an example, we might visualize a younger version of ourselves sitting in a chair in front of us.

It was really powerful and amazing. As the name implies, a survivors' group was for those who experienced abuse and/or trauma. This younger version of ourselves was our wounded inner child... or it could be a younger version of ourselves when we were younger adults.

Technically, it's important to note that we were younger a month ago and if something traumatic happened at that time, we would say that we were psychologically wounded. We could also call this wounded inner part of ourselves an

“ego state.” It’s almost as if a part of our “self” is frozen in time. Our task is to help a person move past the experience and find closure.

The use of self-disclosure was also encouraged by Chris. That means that the staff or a group leader will share personal details about themselves. To me, it seemed that this would encourage or make it easier for patients to open up as well.

Think about it. You are a patient in the hospital, maybe there against your will if you were committed involuntarily. For whatever reason, you decide to go to the group to see what is happening, and maybe in the back of your mind, you are thinking that you were hurt at some time in the past and it still bothers you.

As long as you don't have to talk about it, you will come. You enter the room with chairs that are in a circular formation with an opening in the middle. You are invited to close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Everyone closes their eyes including those wearing a staff badge/id. So, you feel safe, and something happens.

What happens? Well, this is called experiential therapy and experiential is a word that is easy enough for the patients to understand because it means what the name says. This is about creating an experience. It's non-directive in the sense that no one is telling you what to focus on or making suggestions about what did or did not happen that was meaningful to you.

I was able to observe that the therapy did have positive effects on patients during the sessions. This was evidence from the direct feedback from patients during the group therapy sessions and by observing their facial “affect” – displayed emotions.

What was intriguing for me was that people who were in the hospital with a wide range of different diagnoses seemed to be coming to the survivors’ groups and working through past trauma and abuse. The idea that mental illness is only caused by chemical imbalances that occur just because of some genetic predisposition alone must be questioned.

At the very least, some stressors in life seem to be able to create symptoms that one finds in various disorders.

Chapter 30: Doing Therapy During My Internship

My tasks allowed me the opportunity to get to know others in a therapeutic setting. Recall that when a person is admitted to the hospital there is a short period of time during which the intake assessment for each department must be completed.

Unlike during my first year when it seemed like they were making work for me to learn as a requirement for an internship, this was a setting where I was being asked to do something that was required by and for the hospital.

This wasn't busywork. If I was asked to complete this, I was being counted on to do this. It was necessary and required. This made me feel so much more useful than during my first year where it was hard to see that I was making a difference. Also, as I said, Chris knew what I was learning from him and through my studies.

Instead of feeling bad about volunteering my knowledge, wisdom, and insights, I saw that what I was offering was valuable information to consider when evaluating what a patient was experiencing and perhaps how they could be helped.

I had mentioned that during my first internship I had some doubts about my competency. I chalked up every "mistake" as a learning experience.

Okay, so during the intake assessments we try to get a lot of information from a patient. Why they are in the hospital as they understand it... what has been going on in their lives... are they married? Do they have children? Can they describe their symptoms and problems? And so on.

The ability to gather information from a person requires building rapport, creating trust, demonstrating empathy and compassion. The quality and nature of what you learn, what information you are able to gather, are a reflection of your skills and talents in this area. It's also important to ask very open-ended questions as much as possible because the patient knows things that we don't.

As you can see, I have come a long way from the young man who needed counseling to learn social skills, communication skills, and how to control my anxiety - social anxiety.

I constantly reflected upon how good I felt about having accomplished so much. Over a decade of hard work had been invested in getting me here where I am in my late 20s.

It also seemed that when you do demonstrate respect for others, empathy, and concern, they want to talk about their experiences. That was my observation time and again. Chris recognized my growing talent and eagerness and let me start doing some brief therapy with patients. Because the patients were not in the hospital very long, the therapy had to be brief.

Chris gave me some pointers as to what I might want to do when I sat down with a patient - what kinds of interventions might be helpful. I discussed what I had been learning in my classes and other studies.

What might I do in a session with a patient? Well, if they are dealing with major depression, we could try Cognitive Behavioral techniques where we learn to challenge automatic thoughts that create negative emotions.

With trauma issues, deep relaxation techniques are very helpful in talking about a disturbing event. I would demonstrate or guide a person in the use of guided imagery and deep breathing to create relaxation.

By that time, I was clearly demonstrating empathy and powerful listening skills. I received that kind of feedback from Chris when I turned in notes about my activities, but I also had that impression from the feedback that I received from the patients. I'm not saying they gave me a score on empathy and listening skills but there were so many times when I noticed how much people wanted to share their stories and feelings with me.

There were various opportunities when I was on the unit where patients had a chance to approach me and ask to talk about an issue that had come up in a group or from our earlier conversation when I did the intake assessment for example.

Sometimes all I did was just listen with empathy. The experience of being in the hospital is not likely to be a pleasant experience.

This kind of listening may not sound like a technique but in the psychological theories that were developed by Carl Rogers, unconditional positive regard and empathy are valuable tools.

I would tell them when I met with them for therapy that I was going to write up notes about what we discussed in therapy to see if it could be helpful to others who might be offering treatment for them. I instinctually felt that I could and would offer to let them tell me something and ask that it not be recorded in the notes.

Gender issues were never relevant. I mean the fact that I was male was not a factor in a patient choosing to disclose any details about what they had experienced. Sometimes you might think that a woman might only talk to another woman about something traumatic, especially if they were victimized by a man.

What probably intrigued me the most was the experiences that people with schizophrenia or psychotic disorders might be having. I thought that if I could demonstrate empathy, understanding, and compassion, and be able to help people struggling with these issues that would be something amazing.

In seeking to help someone with a psychotic disorder, treatment might include active listening which means summarizing or rephrasing what someone just said to see if we can understand one another. That connection is so important. It's sad but some people with schizophrenia will develop serious problems with communication and what they say might not make any sense. I believed I was making a difference by listening and trying to understand.

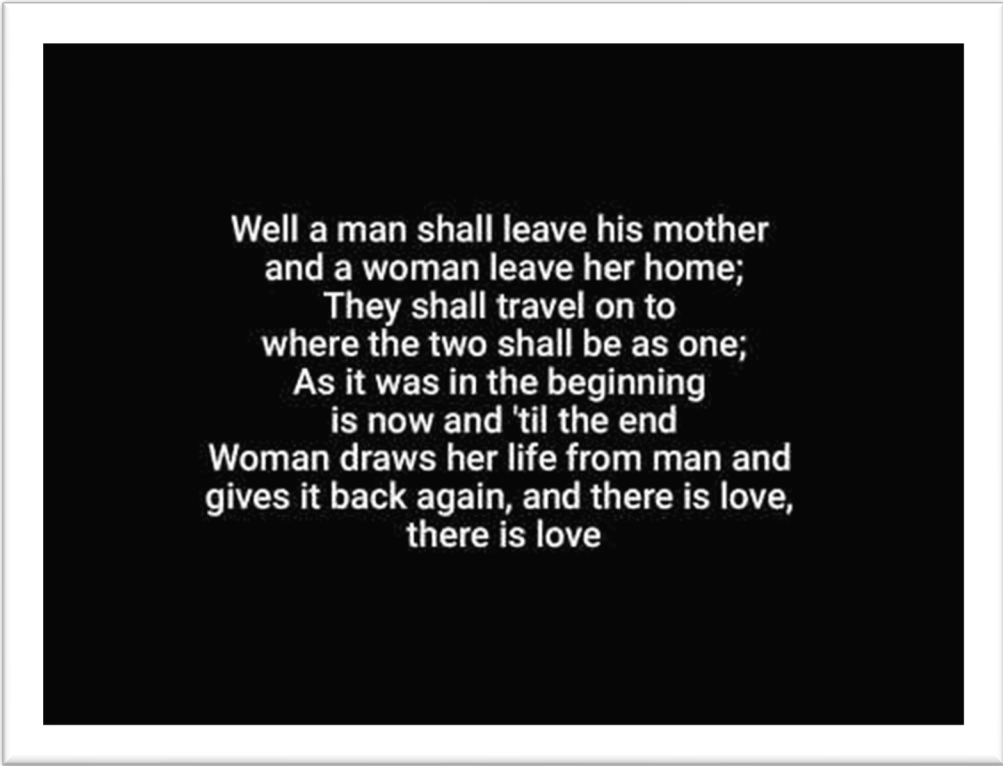
There is a great deal of research that demonstrates a genetic predisposition for various psychiatric disorders. However, it seems from my own experience that being confronted with major life stressors, even stressors that might not seem like traumatic events, and any person can develop a range of different symptoms – hopefully, that is temporary.

I did file away the observation that so many people were coming to the survivor groups, even though trauma was not an issue that necessarily had an impact on why they were admitted to the hospital.

Often Chris was present in the group sessions even when he allowed me to lead the group. I would talk about relaxation techniques as Chris had done. I would employ the kinds of guided imagery exercises that were used in the groups that Chris led, meaning, I invited them to follow along with my suggestions or guidance.

I know that I have covered a great deal here and may not have been overly specific when describing theories and techniques or what I specifically did. I'm not trying to give psychology or psychotherapy lessons, per se... but I will go into greater detail later in the book.

Chapter 31: Living as Husband And Wife without Marriage But With Cystic Fibrosis



Well a man shall leave his mother
and a woman leave her home;
They shall travel on to
where the two shall be as one;
As it was in the beginning
is now and 'til the end
Woman draws her life from man and
gives it back again, and there is love,
there is love

As I mentioned, Lynn and I couldn't have a wedding because our combined income might make her ineligible for the insurance that would cover her treatment.

Okay, so this speaks to just how madly in love with Lynn I was. Anything happening to her was terrifying. I had asked her to marry me, given her a ring, and committed myself to her forever. But without a wedding or a "legal" marriage.

We even tried going to the Catholic church to get married but without a marriage certificate and they would not allow that. The fact that we didn't have a wedding didn't change anything.

If you are thinking that I imagined getting married to someone else someday, the answer is NO! I had found the one for me! Lynn. So, my commitment to Lynn was forever.

Let this all sink in for a moment. We were in a rush with time hoping that they find a cure for Cystic Fibrosis - a genetic illness - so that she would live past her fifties. That's what I needed!

Treatment can cost several thousand dollars per year during good years. Even her mother could not afford that.

What do I mean by a “bad year?” And what was it like in general, even during good years?

Occasionally, she would use an inhaler but that didn't seem to happen very frequently.

I drove her or we drove together to her clinic appointments in Chapel Hill. From Wilmington, that was a drive of over two hours. It happened for the most part only once a year.

They would check her oxygen saturation... take X-rays to see the scarring and the buildup of mucus in her chest.

Lynn was good about letting me sit in on every meeting, such as when she was taken to a room to be examined by first a nurse and then a doctor.

Most of the time we were very lucky because she was so very healthy for someone with this very serious and debilitating disease.

I might have turned away or left a room when they wanted to collect a mucus sample. Lynn understood that I had a weak stomach.

Anyway, so much of this was becoming routine. Most of the time.

I asked so many questions all the time. “What is that dark spot in her chest area that you described in the X-Ray? Is that mucus or scarring?”

The doctor would answer, “well, here is some excess mucus that needs to be cleared, and here is some scarring?”

“Wait how do we clear that mucus?” I asked.

“Have you learned how to do the tapping?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, we learned about that from the physical therapist.” I answered, adding a question “but it’s still worrisome?”

Then I asked, “What about that device that she is supposed to wear, is that better?”

“Not necessarily,” the doctor answered.

Then Lynn said, “it doesn’t clear it out for me, I can tell it’s still there.” Then she turned to me and said, “I told you about the problems and asked for your help the other day.”

I felt so guilty. “Oh, my God, Lynn, I am so sorry.” Adding, “it’s scary for me. I know you need me and I’m trying. I’m scared when you are not well. That makes me feel guilty because I should be there for you... but I get sad and scared about the meaning of these problems.”

I paused and added with tears running down my face, “I want a ‘normal life’ ... and if anything happens to you... I just love you so much, you make me feel good and happy. I can’t imagine not having you with me.”

“I know sweetie, I have had more time to deal with this,” she said.

“Okay, so I still have a lot of questions,” I said.

“Okay, ask away,” answered Lynn with a smile that said she knew I really cared.

Then turning to the doctor, I said, “so, how often and for how long should I do the tapping to clear up the mucus as it builds up?”

“Well, about 15 to 30 minutes at a time in the evening would be good,” answered the doctor.

“And the scarring, that looks big, what...” I could barely get my words out I was so full of anxiety and sadness... trying hard to be strong for Lynn.

It is SO MUCH easier to do this with clients or patients at a psych hospital.

Dear reader, I hope that is somewhat intuitive but maybe I shouldn't assume. I wasn't in love with my clients or the patients I served. We weren't sharing our lives together. They were not in love with me either. At least I hope not – that's another issue for later.

Also, the big secret that I have been avoiding is that Cystic Fibrosis is a deadly disease! I could lose Lynn forever!

My blood runs cold when I think of this as it did at the time. It's interesting how similar sensations can feel so different. When we were at the clinic discussing these matters, I could feel chills running through me... not the kind that I felt at the touch of Lynn's hand or her lips on mine.

I was, for the most part, able to push these issues out of my mind and not think about the reality of it. But on these visits, we had to look at this darkness in our life. Scarring and mucus appeared as dark patches on the X-Ray of her lungs.

In answer to the question I posed about the scarring, the doctor said, “her lungs still have a capacity to breathe and get enough oxygen to function in many normal activities.”

During the visits, I would learn about how the scarring makes the lungs less elastic and that makes it harder for them to expand and get enough air to engage in certain activities that we take for granted... running, hiking, or walking long distances. And scars don't heal.

So, even if they had a cure that doesn't mean that everything would be fine.

When her health got worse...

There was a time in late 1996 when Lynn had to go into the hospital. Her lung functioning had gotten poorer or weaker and they wanted to put her on IV antibiotics in the hospital.

The doctor had explained that they wanted to go after the infections in her lungs. They had to try some of the latest antibiotics that were thought to be more effective in people with Cystic Fibrosis (CF). They were always learning new things about the disease and people were living longer.

It was scary for both of us. Waiting there in the lobby of the hospital I tried to stay positive and tell myself that things would be okay.

Then she was brought to an inpatient unit that was used for treating individuals with CF.

When Lynn asked me to get her something from downstairs – a drink and a candy bar – I was somewhat glad to have that opportunity. I was struggling to stay still. That’s how anxious I was. I had a strong urge to walk. I couldn’t sit still hardly. I was also sick to my stomach. That’s what happens when I am anxious or scared. I felt queasy or nauseous.

I held her hand as they inserted the IV. I asked the nurse “what is that?” referring to the fluid that was being introduced into her IV.

“This is just saline solution,” she answered... adding, “the doctor will give us an order to tell us which medications to give her.”

I was sitting on the bed looking at Lynn. No words were spoken for a few moments.

“Do you want a book, or to play cards?” I asked, “or how can we pass the time?”

Lynn asked for a book by Anne McCaffery, one of her newest books that she had not read.

“I want to stay with you,” I said.

“I understand,” she answered. “I am glad you are with me.”

“Me too.”

I added, “I can just be reading something too with you.”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

“You can go meet my friend Carolyn,” she said. This was a friend who also had CF and she lived in Chapel Hill.

“Yes, we will see her when you get out too,” I said. “Before we go home.

Visiting hours don’t usually allow people to stay all night. That night I was in bed next to Lynn, on her left. She was asleep with my arm resting on her stomach or her chest. I just wanted to feel her breathing. We made sure the IV was out of the way.

I heard the door open, and I looked up to see a nurse checking in. She didn’t say anything.

This finally ended and she came home. Our life went back to normal.

Chapter 32: My Other Family and Sexual Discovery with Lynn

My Other Family

I was still maintaining a relationship with my parents and siblings. But I only saw them for part of a day most of the time when they did visit.

I think that when my brother and/or sister came they came for part of the day only, as well. I guess they were too good for us.

While I had sought their advice regarding the moral dilemma of living with Lynn and how we couldn't get married, it seemed clear that they understood I had no other options available to me. And it seemed infinitely clear that we were living as husband and wife and that we made love routinely (almost every day).

Then we went to visit for Christmas, and Lynn suggested that we sleep in different beds because we were under their roof. Symbolically, this felt so uncomfortable. It cheapened the relationship, made it seem less than the union of two becoming one body and one soul.

In my mind, we had been married in the eyes of God. When Lynn said that we should sleep in different beds at my parent's house around Christmas, that seemed to only confuse me.

In retrospect, if I had said that they must see us as two people who are committed to one another like any husband and wife, she would have been open to my reasoning. I should have said, "well, if they dishonor our union, I am not going there!"

I should have said to them that if they want me to visit for the holidays, we will be sleeping together like any married couple.

To be honest, our union seemed more holy or special than anything I saw in my grandparents, cousins, parents, or even with my brother and his wife.

I would be so affectionate with Lynn everywhere and all the time. I had seen my parents kiss, but it was so perfunctory. I am not saying that a couple should make out in front of others, but they should look like the kiss says something like Lynn and I did. We took the time to meet each other's gaze and slowly moved toward one another, letting our lips meet and pause for just a moment.

I don't remember my brother ever showing that kind of affection when he brought his wife for the holidays.

With Lynn and me, it was inescapable and unavoidable... for us to hold one another, hold hands. I also loved this because it was a declaration that said, "I love Lynn!"

Actually, I NEEDED to be close to her and feel her body when I was visiting my parents. I had never felt completely comfortable with them.

Despite knowing that what we shared was so right, so blessed, so holy, somehow, I sometimes couldn't shake the religious brainwashing I had experienced.

I don't know what I said but it gave Lynn the impression that I had doubts about what we should be doing.

Then Lynn would ask, "do you regret what we did?"

I would answer, "no, of course not."

I don't think she understood what I was saying because I didn't quite understand what I was saying.

In my mind, this was not any less holy than the union of my parents, or grandparents, or less holy than any union of any husband and wife. If anything, this was more special than what I had seen. In my extended family, I never saw anything that said, "I can tell they are in love."

Intimacy Issues as a Form of Discovery

I do know some things about how couples make love. As a psychotherapist that is something that is discussed. I learned about the male and female sexual responses. I studied master's and Johnson's research on activities that are practiced by couples.

What was unique about our relationship, the one Lynn and I had was that neither one of us expected the other person to have any experience in this area or to be sexually compatible. It was more of an area of discovery for both of us.

Some though not all gay men do enjoy anal sex. Often among heterosexual couples, this is more pleasurable to the male because they think the anal passage is tighter. While some females may want this, it is more common for males to ask for this.

This was not something I was seeking in my relationship with Lynn nor was she.

Speaking of same-sex relationships, oral sex is another way that people express love and is commonly practiced by gay men. I would learn this from my clients in the future.

I knew that this fluid is made up largely of the same components as mucus. That fact made oral sex seem unappealing. Previously, I mentioned when Lynn was in the hospital or at the clinic and she was asked to provide a mucus sample, I noted that I had a weak stomach, meaning it made me queasy.

These observations about mucus meant that I did not expect, nor did Lynn expect oral sex despite the fact that this is "normal" and commonly enjoyed by the recipient.

No part of our bodies was "taboo" though. We both endeavored to explore anything that would increase the pleasure of one another in bringing about an orgasm. So, we did everything short of activities that would involve tasting each other's bodily fluids.

I felt such incredible love for Lynn that I wanted to demonstrate that in every way possible. I knew she wanted to do the same for me and with me.

But it was more of a case of exploration and discovering what brought us the greatest pleasure and what we were both comfortable doing.

I felt so lucky that this was happening. I felt lucky to know that I wasn't expected to do anything with some level of competency as I had heard discussed later in couples therapy or with my individual clients.

I felt lucky also that we weren't talking about sexual competency.

Sex was for us a way of expressing our love and it was intense and intensely pleasurable as a result of the love that we felt for each other.

After we knew what activities, we were comfortable doing we could offer or ask for certain things. I was still a believer (a Christian), and so I saw this as a blessing, a miracle, and a true sense that we were one body. Our bodies were our gifts to one another. And that was holy! More holy than I could have imagined.

As an atheist, I still see things in the same way, but I use different words to describe things. I know some atheists, such as Sam Harris, describe spiritual experiences, but I still associate that with the supernatural and I do not believe in such things.

I'm a romantic and I believe in the concept of the two become one and are united forever, which is as long as we exist.

Section Five: Being a Therapist/Psychotherapist

In this section, I will describe the years of my career after I finally reached my career and professional goals, dreams, and aspirations. This was twelve years of hard work, never giving up, never letting any obstacle remain too much of a challenge for me to overcome. I was passionate, motivated, a very hard worker – working over 40 hours per week, and relentless in pursuit of my goals.

It's also important to understand that for people like myself, we feel good when we are able to help another person. It's rewarding. That being said, what we do is NOT about us. It's about the client or in an inpatient setting, it's about the patients.

I suppose that is a feature of empathy - you feel with another person. So, if they find relief, you feel it with them. If they are happy, you rejoice with them.

Of course, if a client is depressed, manic, fearful, or traumatized, you empathize, which is like feeling with them but you have to stay grounded so you can help them. You have to resonate with a person and act in sync with them so that you can guide them toward a better more positive mental state or mindset.

The relationship between a counselor and a client is also very important in the healing process. There must be some connection... a situation where a therapist/counselor feels and experiences things with the client.

Anyway, this section will pick up at my graduation from the University of South Carolina in the School of Social Work and my entrance into the field that I had been pursuing since I was 18, twelve years ago.

Chapter 33: Graduation and Being a Therapist

I graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Master's in Social Work in May of 1996, but the education of a therapist/psychotherapist never ends.

By the time I graduated of my graduation with a Master's in Social Worker (MSW), I had a job to start in an inpatient psychiatric hospital named Brynn Marr Psychiatric Hospital in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

This seemed like a perfect opportunity because I had worked at "The Oaks" - psychiatric hospital - as an intern which I mentioned previously in earlier chapters. The Oaks like Brynn Marr were somewhat similar.

I was hired with the title of "Therapist" on the adult unit. I was one of two therapists on the unit. Half the patients were assigned to me and the other half were assigned to the other therapist on the unit.

What I mean by saying that I was assigned half the patients, was that I was responsible for all aspects of their care while they were in the hospital, and I was responsible for discharge planning, also known as case management. That doesn't mean that I did the kinds of things that nurses, and psychiatrists do. I just meant that I was the primary point of contact.

The other therapist on the unit, Leslie, had a master's in social work (MSW) like me and she was a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW).

I had taken the clinical exam right away after graduation and applied for the certification/credentials/license of Licensed Clinical Social Worker – Provisional (LCSW-P). I did this at about the same time I was starting work at Brynn Marr as I had to first graduate from college with my master's degree if I remember correctly.

There was a substance abuse counselor as well, but he only offered group therapy sessions. It's interesting how lived experience as an addict allows people to work as a counselor without the same educational requirements, i.e., a master's degree.

Our supervisor was more of an administrator than a therapist or counselor.

There were several group therapy sessions every week that had to be run by either myself or the other therapist. We could provide individual therapy as well for each of the patients according to their needs, problems, interests, and diagnosis. I like the idea of a psychotherapist doing most of the therapy groups.

I found that the patients loved to have the opportunity to receive individual therapy sessions with me. This was incredibly good for my self-esteem and my sense of competency. You know that you are doing something right if you are finding that patients want to spend time with you for therapy sessions.

I did have a great deal of flexibility and freedom in offering or being available for therapy with patients.

In terms of group therapy, I had learned techniques in my second year of graduate school. I had observed the skills and talents of Chris Hauge at *The Oaks* who I mentioned previously.

I had picked up a workbook that had a number of ideas and techniques for running therapy groups – some ice breakers – to supplement what I had already learned.

The only problem that I noticed was that the hospital wasn't able to provide therapy services to those who didn't have good insurance. This was a for-profit hospital, and I didn't like the profit motive.

As a social worker, I had been motivated by a desire to help those who are most financially vulnerable within society. So, the idea of not being able to treat those who don't have good insurance didn't sit so well with me.

Later in my career I would provide psychotherapy to individuals pro-bono. I NEVER wanted someone's ability to pay to be a barrier to my services.

You see this in so many settings. The only people who "get it" when you are needy and need help are those who have struggled and dealt with poverty or homelessness themselves. We feel an obligation to share whatever fortune comes our way or whatever might be helpful.

Let me give an example of what I mean about my own values. There was a patient named Victoria - whose real identity I cannot reveal. She was there for anorexia and complications related to that. It became clear that she did not qualify for any more Medicare inpatient hospital days and I was asked by my supervisor to just focus on a referral for her to get treatment elsewhere.

This was my first job after graduation and so I didn't think of myself as necessarily an expert on eating disorders. However, if she wanted individual therapy with me, I wasn't going to deny her that.

My supervisor also wanted her to attend group sessions every day while she was there. I guess the staff started to think she was "difficult." Whatever challenges she might present, that wasn't a factor in how a patient should be treated.

She had said she felt that this was a hostile environment for her as a result of this. She had specifically asked that I be her therapist and not the woman therapist on the unit who was about my age but may have had a few more years experience than I did.

At one point, this topic of the hostile environment on the unit came up when I was sitting down with my supervisor. I was sitting alone with my supervisor when he asked me, "do you think this is a hostile environment for Victoria?"

I answered, "Yes, I think this is a hostile and non-therapeutic environment for her."

There was a point in the middle of the day when they were going to speak to her - the other therapist, perhaps the substance abuse counselor, the administrator (my supervisor). It seemed like they were ganging up on her. I made sure to be there to support her.

I remember her listening and she seemed uncomfortable, and I felt it too. I had positioned myself so that I was at her side with her while the others spoke in a way that was confrontational, I felt.

To make clear where I stood, I said "I have discussed how I agree that this has become a hostile and non-therapeutic environment for you, Victoria."

She was told that she needed to attend groups every day. She said, "fine, I'll go to Bruce's groups and that's it!"

This may not have endeared me with the staff.

Of course, that made me feel good. I'm not saying that Victoria wasn't a challenge. It just felt good to hear that I had made such a positive impression on a patient. This wasn't the only such experience.

In addition, it bothered me that my supervisor was seemingly implying that I could not provide therapy for Victoria because she needed to go to a place that specialized in eating disorders. It was clear that it was about the hospital getting paid and that disgusted me!

She wanted therapy and would come by my office or I would walk around the unit and she would approach me asking to meet with me.

They seemed to want to just get rid of her since they weren't going to get a great deal of money from her. The Master's level social worker that was also working on the unit seemed to have lost the passion that had inspired her to go into social work - that's how it seemed to me. That was confusing to me.

There were some patients like Victoria who had Borderline Personality Disorder, which can be challenging for therapists. I know my co-worker, Leslie, used this term pejoratively and as their excuse for not being able to connect with and make progress with some patients.

There is a great book that gives the reader a great way to understand borderline personality disorder - it's called "I Hate You, Don't Leave Me." Some people will vacillate between idealizing and hating a person.

I believe this is a result of certain parenting styles.

At times I felt like I was walking on eggshells with Victoria. I felt challenged to demonstrate that I cared about her and was concerned for her welfare. Sometimes she would walk away angry and then come back or get up to go but then sit back down.

I remember her storming out of the office saying "you are just like everyone else, you don't care... I can't stand you."

Then the next day I saw her, and she approached me in the morning as if nothing happened. She just said, "can you meet with me for therapy?"

I answered, "yes, after group."

She smiled and said, "I'll be there for your group, I'm not going to Leslie's groups."

"I know," I answered with a smile of amusement, adding, "I'll see you in a few minutes."

You just have to be thick-skinned and not take things like this personally.

As a sign of my dedication to helping others and my enjoyment, I want to describe an experience when I was working as hurricane Fran was about to come ashore.

Lynn was much more afraid of hurricanes than I was. She was from California where they have earthquakes, and I would say that at least with a hurricane the earth doesn't open up like it's going to swallow you. We had debated which was worse a hurricane or an earthquake. To her, the waiting and suspense of knowing the hurricane is coming made it worse.

Anyway, Hurricane Fran was due to make landfall on the Cape Fear River in Wilmington after 8 PM.

I was sitting there talking to Victoria and the hour was a few minutes after 5:00 PM. I noticed a phone call coming in. Lynn had my direct extension.

"This is Lynn, I need to take this," I said to Victoria. I must have mentioned Lynn. Chris Hauge, my mentor, had modeled self-disclosure as I mentioned earlier.

"Hello, this is Bruce," I said not entirely sure yet who was calling.

"Hi," I heard Lynn say followed by "what are you doing?"

“I’m working,” I said.

I could hear Victoria laugh as I said this.

“You need to come home.” She said, “The roads are flooding and ...”

I listened to her concerns and said, “Okay, I will leave now.”

“Be careful, honey, I am worried,” She said adding “I have seen some of the roads. You might not be afraid of hurricanes as much as me, but you need to think about me.”

“I’m sorry,” I answered Lynn.

Victoria had been listening and she was understanding of the situation. I told her I would see her the next day if I was able to make it to work..

Success and Accomplishments

It was amazing to me that I was able to overcome the social anxiety that I had throughout most of my life. The only manifestation of this anxiety existed when I had to lead therapy groups. I needed to be able to meet the challenges and do what the job required.

This was the career I had chosen, and I was determined to succeed. The sense of accomplishment that I felt in what I was doing - in being able to lead therapy groups - was rewarding and filled me with joy.

I had come a long way in my journey over these past 12 years!

I would feel a bit of anxiety when I had to run therapy groups, but I found a way to not let it show. I knew that I was talented and had a great deal to offer. This confidence in my competency made things easier for me. I also knew that if I wasn't doing a good job, the patients would have indicated this.

All eyes were on me during the groups, and I realized they were looking at me for guidance and treatment.

People came to my therapy groups and seemed to be getting something out of it and they seemed to want to listen to me.

There was something amazing about the realization of this. Like everything else happening in my life at this time, I didn't take anything for granted. I had a sense of awe whenever I reflected upon these things... and I did reflect upon everything that was happening.

I should say something about the setting... where I was working.

Brynn Marr Psychiatric Hospital was located near the Marine base at Camp Lejeune. Many of the patients were affiliated with the Marine base but not all, obviously.

One might imagine that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was a common problem that patients were confronting when they were in the hospital since there are veterans and veteran families. Combat experience can cause PTSD, obviously.

That being said, there were not that many veterans with PTSD that I treated. It could be that most veterans are men and it's harder for men to talk about traumatic experiences.

I saw a large number of women who were patients at the hospital and most of them had no military or combat experience.

I did work with one patient who reported that he thought he might have PTSD due to past combat experience and his fears and concerns were related to events that might have a basis in traumatic events and experiences during combat.

As I listened to him, it became more and more obvious that he was actually suffering from a psychotic disorder.

You have to keep your mind open and listen to others. You can't have pre-conceived notions such as assuming that a story that sounds like a traumatic combat memory is that. The location where Brynn Marr was located did not dictate how I thought about the experiences or patients. In other words, I didn't look for trauma disorders.

Anyway, as I was saying above, I knew that I was good at what I do. I knew I was competent and talented. That's an amazing feeling. I had a tremendous amount of passion for helping others and I had a tremendous amount of compassion and empathy.

Empathy is not something you tell yourself that you have, though. It is something that you have to demonstrate to others. I'm going to talk more about this in the next chapter.

Chapter 34: Empathy, Education, and Treatment Techniques

One of the great experiences I had as a therapist, including during my role at Brynn Marr Psychiatric Hospital, was supervising an intern. I mean imagine the situation and everything that has come before in my life. I started college as someone lacking social skills and lacking communication skills. Yet here I was working in the field successfully where those specific skills are required, and I am supervising someone else who is looking to me for guidance.

This is a testament to the passion and dedication that I had. I felt a sense of amazement at these many accomplishments and my success. Not only did patients look to me for guidance, insight, **treatment**, and direction but I had a student in the same field as me looking to me for education, guidance, and insights in a manner not so different than the way I looked to Chris Hauge, my mentor.

Granted Chris had many more years of experience than I did, but this was still amazing. Mary was her name. She could have asked to work under the supervision of my colleague, Leslie, the other therapist on the unit but she observed us both and asked to work with me.

There wasn't anything wrong with Leslie. The situation described in the last chapter about how a hostile environment existed for Victoria was not something Leslie had done herself.

Mary sat in on group sessions, met with new patients to gather information for the intake assessments, and sat in on individual therapy sessions with patients sometimes. This was helpful because I was finding that occasionally some patients would ask me to be their therapist instead of Leslie - I can't say that happened many times, but occasionally someone asked to switch.

I do not know why anyone was asking for me as their therapist.

For what it's worth, and to me, it was worth a lot, no one had asked to switch therapists to work with Leslie instead of working with me. I may have had greater

eagerness because I was new, but I've never lost that passion for trying to be the best I can be... to earn the respect and admiration of those I was serving.

As I was saying in the last chapter, I did think that empathy is a quality that must be demonstrated. You can't just tell yourself that you are doing a good job and that you care about the welfare of others. You have to observe how people respond to you.

So, did the patients continue to meet with me after an initial session? Yes. I mean, if you didn't accomplish anything with the patient, why would they return and/or ask to see you whenever they can? I could tell as I walked around the unit that people looked up and to me for my attention.

Consider this, some people might be there involuntarily and waiting to get out as soon as possible. So, they would be going to group sessions to demonstrate that they are participating and to earn points with the staff who would decide they are ready to be discharged as soon as possible.

In addition, while there are differences in the roles and there are boundary issues that differentiate patients and staff, there are still ways in which those boundaries and differences do not have to be so great that a patient doesn't feel comfortable wanting to interact with you and seek your help.

Empathy as a Treatment Technique

Carl Rogers was a psychologist who pioneered the humanistic approach to psychology or psychotherapy which was also called client-centered therapy. He is known for his ideas about unconditional positive regard that a therapist should convey to a client or patient. This to me seemed like a basis for all other techniques.

In a way, empathy develops by conveying the idea that the person is accepted and acceptable as they are and not based on some conditions about what they must be.

As in previous chapters, the quality of the information gathered from a client or in this case a patient is directly related to the nature of the relationship and the sense of empathy that exists. As a therapist, we see things from the point of view of the other and experience with the other person. This increases the insights that can be

gained for each person. For myself, as a therapist, I was looking for insights that would be useful in understanding the patients and helping them.

Here is another example of how natural things seemed for me and how empathy, therapeutic technique, and skills were useful in helping a patient named Karen.

I had noticed Karen in my group session one day and she seemed barely alive. Karen was a medium complexion African American young woman in her mid-20s. She was somewhat thin and was about five foot five or six.

Mary brought her in to see me in the afternoon and said that she had interviewed Karen to gather information for the routine intake assessment that we were required to complete for the chart and to create a treatment plan.

We sat down in my office and Mary tried to help Karen talk about some of the things that had happened to her. I was concerned and said, "You have been hurt."

In a very soft voice, she answered "yes."... adding "it wasn't the first time. My father and my brother did things to me when I was younger."

"I'm so sorry," I answered. "It's so sad that something like that should happen to someone so special."

Some professionals worry about being authentic or genuine and complimenting others, but I had learned from Chris that there was a more natural way to be. Chris had been in the field for decades and was well respected so when he had introduced the idea of offering positive feedback to others because you can think of something to say even after only a brief encounter with a person that resonated with me.

Karen looked so fragile, thin, sweet, and gentle. I was aware of counter-transference issues, so I kept some of those thoughts to myself but overall, it seemed hard to imagine not seeing her as a special person, so it just seemed so natural to say.

It seemed like a look of sorrow came over her face which actually looked like it was a relief for her to be able to talk about what happened.

She added, "I was raped" in a very feeble voice that was just barely audible and seemed to convey with it both a sense of relief in saying the words and a sense of shame as she looked away.

"I am so sorry that happened to you. That is such a horrifying thing to happen to a woman," I said.

I then added, "there are ways to process or work through the memory of the experience so that you can find some relief. I can help you to do this in a way that is safe while you are here... with me... with us."

I wanted to do something. This was the setting for that. I had a sense that this didn't just happen last week. If she was shut down like this now, that meant that it must have been a weight that she had been unable to share with anyone... she must have felt a need to keep it to herself. Mary had been providing some insights from her earlier conversation.

Karen seemed a bit curious and maybe confused about what we were going to do. I said, "there are experiential therapy techniques that are helpful in creating an experience of mastery over a traumatic event. Our imagination holds memories like this as snapshots that we are afraid to see. You won't be alone."

"You are safe now, right?"

"Yes," she answered looking at me. I had studied some information about hypnosis and I was using only enough of those insights to try to resonate with her and to meet her experience - her breathing rate and such.

While I was learning about experiential techniques with Chris, I had studied Fritz Perls and Milton Erickson as well as Bandler and Grinder, who developed Neuro-Linguistic Programming, where they drew upon the skills and techniques of geniuses in the field like Fritz Perls and Milton Erickson to model what the essence of what they were doing was.

It seemed to me that this technique of matching the breathing rate, pulse, and vocal patterns was helpful in developing and demonstrating empathy because we had to tune into what the other person is experiencing.

"I can stay with you too," said Mary.

"No, I don't want you to see," answered Karen.

I had registered this as a need that I could understand because of the sense of shame that we sometimes feel at inappropriate times. I also recognized the need to be aware of transference and countertransference issues. Even if one doesn't specialize in Freudian or post-Freudian psychoanalysis, it is valuable to be aware of how a client or patient is reacting to us, how they are projecting their feelings onto us, and how we are reacting to them.

Mary left and I said, "I am going to sit next to you and we can imagine a screen in front of you. This will allow you to review what happened like it was a movie instead of being overwhelmed by the pain and other negative emotions."

She asked, "you will be with me?"

"My voice will go with you."

"You don't have to say out loud everything that is happening... and you can stop any moment you want."

"I want to say what happened - it was bad," she said.

"Yes, it was bad what happened to you... but it's not happening now."

I knew that later we would also need to address the fact that what happened to her had nothing to do with her but I didn't want to give her too much information to think about until it was necessary to add more insights to help her.

I suggested she take few deep breaths, close her eyes and picture a screen in front of her. I had been thinking about the gestalt therapy techniques that Chris used in the therapy groups. I had also been to individual therapy to work on some of my own past traumatic experiences to get a feel for how to do certain gestalt techniques. Chris and I briefly discussed the Neuro-Linguistic Programming Technique that I had read about as well...

I also had taken a post-graduate continuing education course on related treatment techniques and ideas that relate to these experiential therapy approaches.

Anyway, Karen was well-grounded with appropriate reality testing to benefit from this technique. Some visualization techniques can be problematic for someone who is having a psychotic break.

I continued, "let's go back to when it happened. Imagine the scene in front of you if you can."

I added, "You can squeeze my hand to know you are not alone and to help with your feelings when it gets scary or when you get mad..." placing my hand near hers on the arm of the chair.

She grabbed and squeezed, and I said, "It's okay, that doesn't hurt me and you are okay."

"Let your body do what it wants to do, like kicking your feet in front or whatever."

I knew from the techniques of Fritz Perls that to find the closure needed for relief we have to stop stifling our reactions and working to keep everything inside.

She began to relax a bit as if the scene had faded from her.

She opened her eyes and her face brightened and her posture looked different. She had a slight smile on her face.

"Thank you," she said.

"No, thank you," I answered. "I mean for trusting me and for having a chance to see this look of relief on your face."

"I feel... different," she said.

I didn't say that I thought that more work would need to be done. Other things had happened to her and the impact of the rape was going to take more therapy to overcome.

It seemed that what matters is that some sense of mastery can be found, and this can change a person's mindset and create a sense of possibilities... possibilities for healing from trauma.

As always, I reflected upon the actions taken in the therapy session. It's always important to be aware of what is happening especially when you are close to another person - within the distance of human contact.

I've had contact with a therapist myself though in a different way than squeezing someone's hand. Boundary issues are important. At the end of my counseling time in college, after five years working with the same psychologist, we hugged as guys do.

During hypnosis with Chris and another hypnotherapist, I have had them tap my hand or knee first announcing that they are going to do that. There is even a technique where a hypnotherapist tries to verify with the client the phenomena of hypnotic trance by gently raising the hand and letting it hang in mid-air without awareness until attention returns to the arm and hand to allow it to slowly drop down to the person's lap.

The point is that we do need to be aware of boundary issues, but it is possible to remain aware of what is happening. I had a wife at home, and I knew that nothing I had done was shameful in any way that I would hide it from Lynn.

We were working on keeping her grounded in the here and now and in a safe place, so nothing romantic was creeping into the sessions.

These were things that I considered, and much insight could be gained by going through psychoanalysis. I knew someone who was a psychoanalyst as a matter of fact. Her name was Marjorie Israel.

Regardless of what different people think about psychoanalysis, there is a great deal of insight that can be gained by spending time free-associating and reflecting upon our reactions in different situations.

The thoughts that I had when I approached her for analysis were that I wanted to find out about myself and what hidden or unrecognized motives and desires might

exist within me that could have an impact on my work in the field with clients. I believe that there is common sense to the notion of transference and countertransference.

I'll have to explain more of this in the next chapter.

Chapter 35: My Own Therapy, Treatment, And Education

I have always believed that therapists should be willing to get therapy themselves. First of all, it can be educational to understand ourselves so that we can understand others. As such, our own therapy is a part of our education.

We have all lived and been impacted by life. Some of the best therapists that I have known have been in treatment for various psychological issues and problems. Some of them also have dealt with additions... trauma, victimization, anxiety, and other problems.

Perhaps it makes us more understanding of the struggles that others might face in life. We also have seen the healing power of psychology and psychotherapy treatment techniques.

As an undergraduate student, I developed communication and social skills through the use of counseling and psychology. It included but was not limited to cognitive behavioral therapy techniques. It was something I had to do.

I was obviously very successful in my efforts or I wouldn't be doing what I have been doing all these years.

Certain skills that we learn as mental health professionals are learned through practice and experience. For example, consider hypnosis which I studied. Let me tell you about that.

I had enquired of some of my colleagues what organization provides the best most recognized training and certification. The answer I got from some hypnotherapists that I knew was the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH).

I had been meeting with a therapist who provides clinical hypnosis to help me overcome some fears, anxiety, stress, phobias, and other issues - nothing debilitating but I was intrigued ever since I had some exposure to these ideas during my internship with Chris Hauge at "The Oaks." The use of hypnosis seemed to be

somewhat similar to experiential techniques like gestalt therapy, inner child work, visualization and etc.

So, after I got my degree and while I was working in the field, I traveled to Chapel Hill from Wilmington to participate in an ASCH-certified training program taught by a professional who was certified to provide training.

It was fascinating and very useful. Somehow, I was able to get one day off from work and it was justified as required continuing education credits that all clinical social workers are required to obtain every year.

I know that I was getting more than the minimum required training for licensed clinical social workers.

Self-Discovery and My Own Personal Therapy/Treatment

I had changed jobs a few times during that time period after graduation for reasons that had to do with my values and interests as compared to the settings where I worked. I did mention that there were some issues that I had with Brynn Marr.

I had three jobs before I started my own private practice. I know that might seem bad because I had been changing jobs three times in about two years during the years 1996, 1997, and 1998. With Brynn Marr, I found that the ethics around how they operated were not consistent with my ethical values.

Lynn had heard things about them and so she wasn't surprised that this didn't work out. Then I started a job in New Bern for one month in late December and into January of 1997 and I was miserable. I couldn't make sense of why Lynn was fine with me taking this job away from her from Monday through Friday.

I had gotten my own apartment up there, which was cold, empty, and desolate. Maybe I should have waited for a better job which would have been a better match and closer to home. This was a Case Manager position, and I was just doing screenings to determine if someone needed hospitalization for psychiatric reasons.

The biggest problem for me was being away from Lynn all week. Hadn't we committed ourselves to one another to live as husband and wife? She didn't seem to

protest my choice to be away from her all week! That only made me more depressed.

It just didn't seem right to me. I don't know if she thought it was a good opportunity for me and just didn't want to stand in the way of opportunities, but I wanted her to say she was sad that I was away. I know that if it had worked out, we would have to find a better place than the apartment I was renting.

I finally told her how miserable I was up there. I still had to pay rent to her mother for our home in Wilmington.

Anyway, we were in love and I had to be with her. I could not visualize where this was going to go for me. We were much happier together. There was nothing that had happened to divide us during this time, but she understood that when it came to family and love, of course, I was driven by my passions.

The job lasted only one month before I was fired! I had been allowed to resign from Brynn Marr but not from this job. I don't even remember why I was fired but it was good that it happened that way.

Other parts of my life were dictated by rational thinking and careful decision making but love and family are what really mattered the most to me – to us!

So, I did get a job after that at Sampson County Mental Health Center.

I was also in therapy to find out why I was having some problems matching my dreams, career aspirations, plans, and goals with practical examples of success. The decision itself to go into Social Work was a decision based on my values. I was idealistic all along in terms of what motivated my choices to pursue this career.

As I mentioned earlier, there was one time when she went into the hospital when her lung functioning had fallen a bit low. Again, I, or we, had to live in each moment together without panicking about her health. Indeed, that had an impact on my mental health.

No one that I was seeing at any time said to me that I have problems that limit my abilities as a mental health professional. Every problem, i.e., job change, was a learning experience.

Of course, it's depressing and stressful when the woman you love has to be hospitalized because her lung functioning is problematic.

Anyway, I was going for psychoanalysis, with Marjorie Israel, Clinical Hypnosis with another therapist, and I was seeing a therapist at the Family Counseling Center in Wilmington. I wasn't doing all this at the same time but there was some overlap.

I took my responsibilities seriously and had a drive to be successful - more of a driving passion.

There was another problem that had to be addressed. The impact of abuse or being assaulted by my parents previously was still a factor in my life - not so much on the job but at home. I had nightmares and I was struggling to understand my own sense of self-identity.

I knew who I was, but some religious ideas had bothered me because they existed as absolutes - rules - that created fears and problems in our lives. Lynn was more open-minded and carefree. Anyway, I had ideas about right and wrong, and Lynn believed in things that didn't match those ideas.

She was such a good person and very full of Christian love without being a Christian. There were certain beliefs that I had, and they were like absolute truths and Lynn would challenge me. So, I was still growing and developing in some ways.

But we seemed to be arguing a great deal. So, we went for couples counseling at the Family Services Center in Wilmington. We saw an older guy who went on to be a Clinical Social Worker after working in a different field for a number of years. I think he was in his 60s.

We made great progress when I had something of an epiphany. Lynn wasn't worried about the nightmares, but when I got mad, I sometimes threw things. She once said "what if I was there where you threw that..." whatever it was that I threw the last time.

I thought "you weren't there, or I wouldn't have thrown it" but I didn't say that. I was deeply ashamed and shocked. "What was I thinking?" I thought. To do anything to make Lynn scared was so unacceptable and wrong. I was scared because I knew that I was lucky to have Lynn in my life. And she doesn't put up with anything like some men and women in relationships put up with disrespect or anything.

Our arguments never got to the point of either one of us disrespecting the other person.

What I mean is that if she thought I knew she was scared and did it anyway, she would have left me. She was NEVER afraid to make sure to speak her mind. I mean if we were having an argument and if I tried to walk away in anger, she would follow me.

She would say, "I'm not done talking to you."

I had a punching bag, and I would hit that if I got angry and frustrated. But every time she followed me outside, I stopped to be sure not to hurt her or anything. I could not imagine letting anything scratch or bruise her precious body and she knew that for certain.

She had seen the way I acted when she was in the hospital and had to get IV antibiotics and how much I told her I wanted to stop them from piercing her skin... but it had to be done.

Anyway, it only took the shock of hearing those words "what if I was there when you threw that" ... those words sent chills up my spine. That kind of expression of anger could NEVER happen EVER. So, I had a powerful motivation to overcome my impulsive anger.

I know it was related to the abuse I had experienced from my parents. So much pent-up anger!

It was weird because Gestalt therapy encourages screaming and hitting a chair or something to release the anger that has been stuffed down inside as a result of abuse or trauma. I just had to do that in controlled ways.

I was instantly cured of the ways I had been expressing anger when Lynn indicated that she is worried that someday I might accidentally hurt her. It took a while for me to compose myself after the shame I felt when she revealed this. Then I said, "it will NEVER happen again."

She had responded, "I know."

Obviously, she recognized the shame and conviction I had to ensure that I NEVER act in a way that is unacceptable to her. And I NEVER did repeat those behaviors. Not EVER!

It truly sucks that a person can be so in love and have such a profoundly special relationship and still feel depressed at times. I suppose things were not perfect for us - I'm not talking about personal issues between us but just our situation, her health condition.

With her limited income, she could have been the one person who might have expressed a desire for me to take jobs that paid more or for me to find employment with a large company that might provide insurance that would cover her.

Believe me, Lynn was not the type to hold back her thoughts, feelings, and desires.

Post Graduate Continuing Education

As stated above I was in training to gain the certification as a Clinical Hypnotherapist from the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH).

That wasn't the only area of expertise that I was pursuing.

As I said earlier, I was glad to have the opportunity to get any kind of training that was available. I just loved learning new ideas, techniques, and tools.

It was the mid to late 90s and there wasn't a treatment technique that didn't interest me.

I was a part of the local chapter of the Society of Clinical Social Workers in Wilmington, which was for New Hanover County, NC. This was helpful in both finding

out about training opportunities and in networking and collaborating with colleagues.

Through this involvement, I could attend regular meetings, at least once a month, and discuss challenges that exist in our professional lives providing therapy to a range of clients with various diagnoses, conditions, or disorders.

I will discuss this in greater detail in the next section of my book. First, I have a few more things to share about how I finally qualified for licensure as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

Chapter 36: Trauma Disorders, Client Rights, And Treatment

While I was working at Duplin-Sampson County Mental Health Center in Clinton, North Carolina, I had a number of different responsibilities. I was hired as a Social Worker III. That was my title. I worked as a therapist/psychotherapist and I had to do intake assessments, as well as maintain a caseload of some fifty or so clients who came for therapy and medication monitoring.

I was frustrated that they didn't let us do therapy with clients without being interrupted. Other mental health clinics in North Carolina manage this but they couldn't figure this out. I would be meeting with someone and the receptionist(s) would get mad if I did not pick up the phone if I was in session with a client.

Sometimes I would pick up on the second call and they (one young woman was the most irritating) would ask me why I didn't answer, and I'd say "I was working with a client - we are doing therapy. I was distracted."

"Well, she has to see the doctor and he's ready."

I would think, and sometimes say, "I'm not ready" or "we aren't ready." I would then say "she's a real bitch!"

I didn't like the psychiatrists and some of the staff. It didn't seem that they respected the clients. I worked side by side with other therapists/social workers, mental health nurses, and case managers.

At least at this job, I was more than a case manager as I had been in my previous job that lasted all of one month. You don't have to have a Master's in Social Work to be a case manager. Plus, I was at home with Lynn every day.

The case managers would bring clients to the clinic for the day treatment program or for sessions with me. So, that was cool.

I was meeting with a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and finishing up my requirements for becoming an LCSW myself - I was still provisional.

I remember being in a staffing meeting when a psychiatrist remarked that he works with "chronic crazies all day." It infuriated me. Plus, why did he think that he was free to speak like this in the clinic? Was this okay here? Did people have such little respect for clients with mental illness?

It's a good thing I was going to get all the hours I needed for my LCSW before leaving. I had in mind working in private practice once I was licensed. Can you blame me?

I reasoned that I could still work with vulnerable people who didn't have lots of money. I had been told that there are ways to be accommodating to people with a limited income when you work in private practice. For one, you can work pro-bono – for free – if people can't afford to pay or if they cannot afford the flat rate.

Anyway, one of my duties was to visit the local hospital to do evaluations at the local hospital to determine if someone required psychiatric hospitalization, such as was the case when suicide was involved.

I would make an assessment as to what happened... how did they end up at the hospital? What method was used to end their lives if that was the case? Did they still have access to that weapon or method of suicide?

Most of the time they were indeed suicidal, and I had to go to the magistrate to request involuntary commitment orders. They would then be taken to the clinic (sometimes) to get the doctor (psychiatrist) to sign the order for commitment.

I was never over-ruled in my assessment. I mention that because not everything I observed and concluded about the treatment of a client was something that the psychiatrists and I saw eye to eye on.

Interestingly, some of these people who were committed to an inpatient hospital (I had to find a placement also) were my clients or I would offer to work with them. Here, I was sending them to a psychiatric hospital against their will for a commitment and they are happy to work with me when they get back!

I say all this to illustrate why I wanted to go into private practice. Not only would I have more control of how things are run but I knew that when it came to working directly with clients, I NEVER had any problems.

I did work with clients with psychotic disorders like schizophrenia and many people at the clinic seemed to see very little value in psychotherapy treatment for schizophrenia. So much revolved around the psychiatrists and they seemed to control the decisions about the treatment of mental illness or psychiatric disorders in the area for those who could not afford to go elsewhere.

Culturally, the area is rather rural. Pig farms were very common around the area and this created a stench, to be honest. There were a lot of trailer parks. Pockets of Spanish-speaking communities dotted the countryside, and my knowledge of Spanish was useful.

The population was over 50% white and just over 25% African American, but that being said, the ratio of clients at the clinic was about 50-50 White and Black. That reflects the role income plays in access to mental health services or being exposed to the mental health system.

The attitudes of the staff to the extent that they were somewhat disrespectful of clients and the therapy process had more to do with the attitudes toward mental illness than racism.

Towns were small. People knew one another.

For example, there had been a violent murder in one of the nearby towns which made all the newspapers. The murder and trial had been a few years ago, but the sister of the murderer was still hiding her face in public. She was my client and she had come into the clinic wearing a scarf.

The things I was learning also seemed to be met with superstition among the religious folks of the area. I was studying clinical hypnosis and I remember one client saying she was afraid that the trance state might make her vulnerable to the Devil or Satan. That was the first time I had heard something like that.

Some of the delusions that people had were obviously religious. That should come as no surprise in a rural county.

I was curious and confused a bit at times by the nature of different hallucinations that I heard described. I met with people who described hearing voices, seeing things, and tactile hallucinations. When I say I was confused, I mean I had an open mind, but I could not readily understand what a particular experience was like. So, I listened to the descriptions of various experiences being described by clients.

I wasn't judgmental or anything, but I sometimes didn't want to just take the word of the psychiatrist regarding a diagnosis and the proposed remedy.

Take for example a client who had primarily tactile hallucinations of crawling sensations on her skin and possible delusions about an unknown disease. The doctor saw her for fifteen minutes and maintained her on Zyprexa. The side effects of this anti-psychotic were not as serious as those of older anti-psychotic medications like Haldol, but it was still a major tranquilizer.

There has been certain wisdom that only psychiatrists can diagnose mental illness or psychiatric disorders. I question that. I mean, the doctors were not doing medical tests when I brought the clients in front of them, and they processed clients every fifteen minutes.

Client Rights and Treatment Results That Match a Client's Needs and Concerns

I just felt it was valid to really listen to people to understand their experiences. Was the medication making their life better? That's what I wondered.

My attitude toward at least one doctor was somewhat cautious if not suspicious - the doctor who referred to clients as "chronic crazies" and one of his colleagues.

One day, I took a particular client of mine to see the psychiatrist. My client was complaining about the side effects of the medication. The doctor acted like he was ignoring him! And he held up the microphone to the dictation machine and dictated notes while speaking to the client. It was offensive to me!

He was referred to a day treatment program, I went and looked for him. Technically I wasn't supposed to meet with him for treatment at this time, but he was on my caseload. He was still my client. I told him that he has a right to refuse to take medications and to put that in writing.

That got me in some trouble. I was told that I should address it with the team!

Another client had schizophrenia and the general sense I got was that psychotherapy for this condition isn't a high priority. This young woman wanted therapy with me. So, I just added it to the treatment plan. If that is what the client wanted, why not.

Luckily, they didn't go out of their way to over-rule the preferences I made for how I would provide treatment if there was time.

By adding therapy to her treatment plan, that also obligated the case management team to bring her into the clinic because my client didn't have her own transportation. The case managers were good about that and didn't complain.

These are just prototypical examples of my experiences.

Nancy's Curious Trauma Symptoms

I started seeing one client who had some unusual symptoms. Her name was Nancy. She had come in dealing with depression and panic attacks. Those were her diagnoses.

Nancy was 27 when I started meeting with her.

She began to describe some dissociative symptoms that one might find if a person has experienced something traumatic.

I would listen to her and ask her to clarify what she meant.

I had a few structured interview techniques that I was using to explore these experiences.

I would ask very open-ended questions like "Can you tell me what that is like?" I wanted to be sure that nothing I might feel about her experiences influenced her responses or my exploration.

Also, the interview questions that I was using as a guideline were very subjective. Asking "what's that like?" can help to increase our understanding of what life is like for a person. I use the word "our" understanding to indicate that both I and the client are working together to understand what is happening.

I asked about traumatic experiences as well, such as sexual assault. She mentioned an event in which she had been sexually assaulted a couple of years ago.

I did try to broach the topic that something more might be going on than Major Depression and Panic Disorder. The doctor hardly seemed to be listening. Nancy was right there, and I was alternating my gaze between her and the doctor.

He just asked more questions about her medications.

After meeting with the doctor, she said to me, "I was telling you that the medications are not helping with my problems."

"I know and I wish I could do something about that," I told Nancy. "I can't advise you about medications."

"He wasn't even paying attention," she said.

"I know but I am, right?" I asked.

"Yes, I appreciate that you believe me," she said.

"Do you mean some people don't believe you?" I asked.

"Well, my boyfriend doesn't understand things and before you, I stopped coming to the clinic," she said.

"What's not to believe?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

I had used a popular interview schedule that had some questions that were medical and thus outside my area of expertise but the information I gathered would be helpful.

We ruled out substance abuse or use.

It was somewhat amazing how competent and disciplined Nancy seemed. Her job and career did not indicate college plans, not yet. That's unfortunate that she had not considered this because she seemed bright and intelligent.

We discussed her experiences of child abuse and trauma. This is where it got very disturbing. It’s also amazing what she remembered. I tried to keep this clinical and to avoid pulling her into any of the memories at this time. So, we moved along in a matter-of-fact manner.

The abuse in her childhood was both physical and sexual. It was rather disturbing what had been done to her by men and women. She confirmed that she had been forced to have sex with people of different sexes, ages, and even with animals as a way to make her feel shame or as a form of punishment.

Obviously, this was all very disturbing.

She admitted and described things in such a matter-of fact-way that made her seem so believable. It wasn’t like she stopped and said “no way, that’s really disturbing.”

She would pause when I asked a question, then say "yes" or "no" to various questions. I tried not to use any suggestive phrasing or to indicate approval or disapproval for any of her answers.

Sometimes people can over-represent their problems or symptoms as a cry for help or indicate a need for help - perhaps even to indicate that one deserves the more intensive treatment that is available.

She would provide details after she answered "yes" to a question as she recalled examples of an event or an experience. She actually didn't seem overly eager to

participate all the time in therapy. So, it didn't seem like she was going out of her way to gain my sympathy.

This interview was done outside the clinic. We went outside because it seemed more accommodating to her. Her mood and interest changed at times.

She was vaguely aware of hearing voices and a feeling that she was different at different times. Her experience of amnesia suggested a dissociative disorder.

There was so much more to explore. I did present my findings with the doctor at our next session and suggested that there might be more to explore.

At some point, when speaking to me alone, the doctor indicated that he thought I was suggesting that she had Dissociative Identity Disorder and that he didn't believe in that disorder. That is a condition in which people have different personalities.

I indicated that it is too early to tell but it was frustrating and confusing that any diagnostic disorder was "not believable."

Unfortunately, my experiences at Sampson County Mental Health were ending. I was asked to resign. The chance to work more with Nancy was interrupted shortly after I had made such progress and had helped her to gain some insights and to feel like someone was listening to her.

There were a number of reasons for my departure including going outside the traditional structure of the clinical staff, being behind on paperwork/charting, and a few minor issues that reflected my unique values that may have been out of step with this clinic.

I had gained the clinical supervision hours to qualify for the certification as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and that meant I could go into private practice.

During the next section of this book, I will discuss my experiences in private practice. This was the height of my success and where I had been going with my career for as long. I had accomplished so much over the past fourteen years. So many accomplishments.

Keep reading... with the next chapter. It will be exciting. I would love to share the story and the joy of these accomplishments.

Section Six: Success, Accomplishments, Private Practice Psychotherapy Work

It seemed like anything was possible indeed if you put your mind to it and work hard. There is a career or profession for everyone; an area where one is most adept; a field where one is meant to work. I had found my career and my direction in life and everything was falling into place.

In this section of my autobiography, I will describe the success I found as a mental health professional, a therapist (a psychotherapist as opposed to a physical therapist), in private practice. Just getting to this place in life and in my career demonstrated the many accomplishments I had made in my life.

I had achieved the recognition of my colleagues and the admiration of my friends and family. I felt like my family was now very proud of me and amazed at all my accomplishments.

It would be a logical assumption to think that your family is proud of your accomplishments and happy for you. It would be years before I realized that this was not the case – that they had not cared about my happiness or success at all!

These were things that I sought after my whole life. I mean who doesn't want their parents, their brother, and sister to be proud of them? Or similarly, we want our friends to be amazed and to admire us for our accomplishments. I had friends who were interested in what I was learning and my accomplishments.

Among my colleagues, this success and these accomplishments gained me recognition in the field which is very valuable.

We want our colleagues to recognize our success because this helps us network, get new client referrals, as well as confirm our sense that we are doing things right. We can appear as an authority in our field as well. Most importantly, this confirms for us that we have what it takes and our skills, talents, character, expertise, as well as trustworthiness, are recognized.

I will describe the types of treatment techniques or modalities that I employed. You will learn about the various therapies and diagnoses, problems, or issues that my clients had for which they were seeking my treatment.

Therapists in the mental health or psychiatric field use techniques that they choose to specialize in employing. It's not the same as treating a medical problem where there is a very specific treatment that exists for a specific problem. Instead, the skills of a therapist are employed and adapted to the needs of a client.

I had always wanted to help others regardless of their income, i.e., the most financially vulnerable and well as those who are vulnerable due to other factors such as having a mental illness.

I could see clients on a pro-bono basis (for free) if they could not afford to pay for treatment.

My life with Lynn was something that sustained me, brought me so much joy, peace, support, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Sometimes it is said that we shouldn't rely on others to feel good about ourselves or to maintain self-confidence. That might be true but if there is someone who gives us these positive feelings then that is very helpful and valuable.

In this section, I will describe all these things.

Chapter 37: Success! Building A Psychotherapy Private Practice

I was able to complete all the requirements for licensure as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) within the state of North Carolina before I left my employment at Sampson County Mental Health Center.

It was clear that whatever problems I had on the job had nothing to do with how I performed with clients or patients.

As I explained, I had sought feedback, counseling, support, and guidance from my colleagues. I had joined the local chapter of the Society for Clinical Social Workers which had regular meetings where I could interact with colleagues in a congenial setting where we got to share our ideas, request feedback on casework, and learn from one another.

It is through these meetings that I kept in touch with Chris Hauge who was a mentor of mine as I have mentioned.

I had approached Chris seeking advice on entering private practice because I looked up to him... I had known that he had kept a private practice for some time. He had been very supportive of my goals as they related to making a positive difference in the lives of others.

The Keys to Success and Accomplishments

As it turned out, Chris said that he was considering retirement and that he was cutting back his office hours. He offered to let me rent his office space at a certain rate per hour if I used the office. This was a very affordable way for me to find success.

I believe it was about \$15 per hour - Chris wasn't using the office anyway during these hours. He told me the hours in which he used the office and when the office would be available. He shared an office with a partner - they had the main waiting room and reception area and two private office rooms where providers, like myself, could meet with clients.

If I had to build a private practice on my own, it could be challenging to get started. I would need to build a base of clients that would be paying every week for treatment with me. If you rent an office full time you have access to the building any time, day or night, but you pay a monthly rate to do this.

The cost to rent an office every month would be higher than the costs that Lynn and I were paying to rent our home - though her mother had been renting it to us and therefore we had gotten a great deal, a cheap rate for rent.

Chris gave me a key, introduced me to his partner and we discussed how I would record the hours in which I was going to use the office. He had a schedule I could consult to find out when the office was available.

There are so many things to consider when you are pursuing a career in this field and when you are seeking to work in private practice. As noted, I had to consider Professional Liability Insurance or malpractice insurance, which are different names for the same thing. Chris needed to know that I had this coverage.

Billing is another issue. I had to file insurance claims for treatment with a client's insurance company or agency. So, I had to get registered with various insurance companies including Medicare.

I had contracted with someone to do the medical billing as well and I got a post office box (PO Box) for non-personal mail.

Having all my mail go to Chris' office didn't seem like something that I wanted to do yet. If I did not go to the office because I didn't have a client that day, then I might miss my mail that day. There was a place where I could get a PO Box close to our home.

It's great to have someone with whom you can consult when you are doing all these things and Chris was helpful in this regard as well.

Then I had to advertise in the newspaper and online. The internet was still a bit new in the late 90s, but I was able to create a website.

Other Advice That I Received from Colleagues

It's important to reflect upon the support I got from colleagues as well as the therapy or treatment that I had been receiving.

I became interested or curious to learn something about psychoanalysis and I began to study this formally from an organization that provides certification in psychodynamic/psychoanalytic therapy. The organization provided learning objectives, credits, coursework, as well as certifications for mental health and psychological professionals.

I would go and see Marjorie Israel, who worked out of her home. She was a clinical social worker like myself and I met her at those meetings.

Marjorie invited me to her home office. It was an interesting and scenic location. She had a nice yard with flowers and plants in a beautiful and serene garden with a curving sidewalk.

I would lay back on her couch and do free association or recount my dreams. It was reminiscent of Freudian psychoanalysis with the psychoanalyst and the couch. Marjorie said that she had to modify her approach since psychoanalysis traditionally had been done with a client coming four or five days a week for years.

She also engaged in more talking than traditional psychoanalysis.

While so much of psychoanalytic theory is hard to prove with research, I was interested in a technique where I would not be censoring anything at all. I was interested in making sure that I covered everything going through my mind – my motivations and hidden desires. I didn't want any issues from my past to interfere in my role as a therapist for clients.

Clinical Hypnosis Training

As I was studying Clinical Hypnosis, I saw some of the ways this can be used to help others deal with various problems and challenges. Some of those challenges and problems that people turn to a hypnotherapist to overcome are well known, like smoking cessation, weight loss, and phobias.

Anxiety and phobias can be overcome through behavioral techniques like systematic desensitization. In this technique, a person breaks down their phobia into progressively more challenging and/or frightening scenarios or steps while pairing that with relaxation.

So, for example, if one has a fear of flying, they might break things down so as to cover planning for the flight... driving to the airport... waiting to board the plane... getting onto the plane. They would visualize this during hypnosis.

Hypnosis can be used to create a feeling of peace, relaxation, and serenity. Then when the person is in this relaxed state of mind, they can visualize the anxiety-provoking situation. This now pairs a relaxation response with the stimuli or phobic situation, experience, or trigger.

Starting My Practice

One of my counselors cautioned me that Wilmington was a saturated market, meaning there probably isn't a market for another psychotherapist in the Wilmington area.

I was going to prove him wrong, which would make him happy actually. I mean, he had my best interests in mind. He was speaking only about the market for therapists.

I did start to pick up clients rather fast. I had selected a few words to use in the advertisements that I hoped would be problems that people in the area had and/or things that interested me. So, initially, I thought of advertising that I could help individuals who are dealing with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, relationships. I added that I could use hypnosis to help with quitting smoking, weight loss, or other problems.

This seemed to work out well for me. I used a second phone number that rang at my home, but the location of where I was living was not revealed.

One guy started paying me out of pocket for weight loss.

Then I picked up a client who had relationship issues. He said that he was gay and asked if I could help. I reported that I could help. To me, relationships require active listening. So, I would demonstrate that in the sessions with the client and help him to learn how to increase his communication skills in the same way.

It's interesting that people in relationships that are non-traditional relationships will understandably want to know if we are comfortable listening to details about their intimate relationships.

Returning to the topic of psychoanalysis, we get terms like transference and countertransference from this field.

Transference is about how the client reacts to or responds to the therapist. It can relate to projection where a client projects onto the therapist ideas and feelings that exist in another relationship.

Countertransference is how therapists respond to the client and the client's behaviors. I was working on my own "issues" to ensure that none of my past was carried into the therapy sessions with others and would cloud my judgment. This was part of why I went for analysis with Marjorie.

Anyway, I also picked up a client who was dealing with major depression. Another issue that I was treating was anorexia. I had taken on a client who was in college and had come home with her family hoping to return to college later.

Eating disorders are particularly challenging, and so I will devote further time to this topic later.

My client base was growing, and it was getting to the point that I needed more access to the office than what was available while renting from Chris. I also found that by paying a flat rate every month, I could save money.

Recognizing these accomplishments was amazing and a cause for celebration. So, Lynn and I went out to dinner at one of our favorite restaurants. Everything was amazing and a celebration was called for!

This has been an overview of the various types of clients I was seeing and the problems or issues I was treating. Later chapters will go into more detail so I will ask you to keep reading with me.

First, let's talk about family life so that you, dear reader, will know that I had another life outside the office.

Chapter 38: The Joys of Family Life - Support and Success

Family life is what makes life meaningful and joyful. Being able to pay attention to maintaining a balanced life is crucial when you're working in the field of mental health. Some psychiatric disorders impact us as therapists who witness the pain of others.

You might think I am only talking about the traumatic experiences of clients who have been hurt but anytime one is dealing with negative emotions all day can find that it puts a strain on us as therapists. We listen to the despair, sadness, and negativity of others and it can have an impact on us.

The responsibility that we bear for the well-being of others requires us to have a life full of joy and peace outside the workweek. We need balance in life.

Wrong Impressions Regarding My Family

Of course, we want those who are part of our family to be proud of us. I was certain that I had the admiration of my brother and sister and that I had made my parents proud. As far as I could tell at the time, it had seemed that they would have been proud of me, finally. Their investment in my education had paid off. I had used it to get another degree, a graduate degree, then to get credentialed/licensed in my field.

They had to be proud. I had not been questioning this at the time. I just assumed they were happy for me as well. I had found love! That would make anyone feel good to know this about a family member. Anyone in any "normal family."

I was the only one of my siblings who had gone this far in my education.

While I am not saying I was better than my sister or my brother, but for Carrie, her career landed in her lap somewhat. She had moved back to Connecticut and found a job at Aetna. She learned that by furthering her education she could advance within the company. She shaped herself according to the company's demands and expectations instead of finding the right career for herself.

Yes, I did it differently than Carrie. I wasn't letting any single company, organization, or agency have a say in where I went in life. I first found the best match for me in terms of a career path and then pursued that goal, overcoming any challenges along the way.

I used the words "organization" and "agency" as opposed to just using the word "company" because, for my career, people work for agencies and companies.

Anyway, my career path was carefully and deliberately chosen with the aid of psychology and a psychologist/counselor when I was in college. Then in the many years after that, I pursued employment opportunities based on my aptitudes, interests, and values. While I got advice and support from others, I made all the decisions myself with the insights I was gaining.

My brother had not excelled in school either nor had he mapped out a specific career direction with ideas about what would be his best career direction. He went into the Marines for a while. He got married and found a job.

I thought that I was the family star and that everyone was proud of me. I have alluded to the fact that sometime later I would learn that this was not the case. To this day, I am baffled by the distance between what I assumed and what was going through their minds... I was shocked to discover just how messed up their thinking had been.

I had told my siblings and my parents why we couldn't have children and why we couldn't have a church wedding or a marriage license - Lynn's medical care could be cut off if she lost health care coverage.

The fact that my sister worked for a company that sold health insurance was a topic we had to avoid. Lynn had a genetic illness and that disqualified her from insurance coverage. While it is reasonable for private companies to be unable to cover situations like this, I got no sense that Carrie cared at all about this, so the topic was taboo.

I had been trying to keep the peace and stay cordial with my family of origin.

Career Success and Friends

My friends were proud of me, as was my wife, Lynn. I had a social circle of like-minded poets who were part of the poetry scene in Wilmington. These friendships continued to grow.

Sometimes when I was learning experiential therapy techniques that were part of the human potential's movement, I was able to persuade my friends to participate in encounter sessions. This would be like using these techniques for those of us who are not coming together to work on a psychiatric problem. You don't do therapy with your friends or your wife for that matter.

I might invite my friends to try something like psychodrama – a fancy word for role playing. Alternatively, I demonstrated guided imagery and visualization techniques.

It was nice to see that my friends were interested in what I was learning and wanted to try things out with my guidance.

I also demonstrated clinical hypnosis with Lynn. She was receptive to the idea of visualizing her body fighting the symptoms of Cystic Fibrosis... maybe visualizing where the congestion was and directing her body to try to loosen it up.

Anything to bring healing was worthy of trying.

Most of the time she kept falling asleep when I did this. This was a bit frustrating to me but amusing.

I guess it *reflected the trust and serenity Lynn found when she was with me.*

Chapter 39: More About the Joys of Extended Family Life

Lynn's Extended Family Visits

Lynn had a cousin who came to visit a few times and we went to Scranton, Pennsylvania to see her cousins.

One of those occasions, when they came to visit us, was in the summer of 1997. This was so much fun because the kids loved me. They had two girls. One of them Becca (short for Rebecca), was maybe five years old when she met me, and her sister, Tammy was 12.

We gave her cousin, Mary and her husband Frank, the spare room that had a couch that opened into a bed. Their daughters Becca and Tammy slept in the other room where we had the bookcase and the computer.

Unlike visiting my parents during this time, it never crossed my mind that there would be an issue with the fact that Lynn and I had not had a wedding. We certainly didn't pretend to sleep in different rooms or in a separate bed.

It's worth noting that when we went to visit them in Pennsylvania, it never occurred to Lynn to bring up the topic of sleeping arrangements. Of course, we were going to sleep in the same bed or bedroom when we were visiting.

Getting back to her cousin's visit in 97...

On the first day of their visit, we went to the beach at Carolina Beach. This wasn't far from where Lynn and I had gone on our first date all those years earlier.

I loved spending time with both Becca and Tammy.

We found a spot on the beach where the waves came from the open ocean. And after the grown-ups, not including me, got comfortable, I was being called upon by Becca and Tammy to go into the water.

As we started walking into the ocean, Becca reached up with her hands to me and said, "pick me up."

So, I held her in my arms and the three of us -Tammy, Becca, and I - went into the deeper water as they requested.

We were riding the waves.

I was drinking saltwater and asked for a break to wash out the nasty taste in my mouth.

Becca was soon asking to go back into the water.

I looked at her mother, Mary, and asked, "how far can she go?"

Mary said, "as far as you want to go."

I thought, "of course, it's not like I'm going to let anything happen to Becca. Plus, she can swim."

I knew there wasn't a rip current that can pull you under very easily so I felt confident that we could keep going as far as they wanted to go.

We went far enough that when we were riding the waves, my feet were barely able to touch the bottom without being in over my head. I would try to jump up at times and Becca would stand on my legs pushing me down at that moment when I was about to jump up and over the waves.

It was so amazing and so much fun. I felt like a big brother or a father figure. It didn't seem that her father had any problem with the fact that the kids wanted to spend more time with me than with him... Lynn's cousin didn't mind this either.

The "grown-ups" stayed on the shore talking. What I mean is that Lynn, her cousin Mary, and her husband Frank were deep in conversation while we - Becca and her sister Tammy - played in the ocean.

Yeah, this was so exciting. I think that I was meant for this.

They spent a few days with us, and I became the one that was responsible for entertaining the kids. I didn't mind and in fact, I loved it.

I noticed my heart was racing the entire time. I couldn't sit still. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, though. I just was full of energy and excitement. I couldn't even slow down enough to use the bathroom; I was so full of energy.

I took both the girls to the nearby grocery store and a few other places because they wanted to spend time with me. I let myself be carefree and child-like. Yes, I was a responsible adult, but I still had the ability to be playful.

This might be useful when I do play therapy if I get clients who have children.

Then the girls, Tammy and Becca wanted to go roller skating. So, I went outside in our neighborhood and let them skate there. It was a quiet street without much traffic so that was ideal for this.

During the visit, the grown-ups wanted to go roller skating too. That was the only thing I could not do. The little girls were completely able to do this.

Lynn and her cousin, Mary and Frank could roller skate, along with the girls but I could not do that.

We drove to the University of North Carolina, Wilmington campus. They had a network of sidewalks where they could go roller skating. We rented roller skates for the adults. The girls had brought their own skates.

Lynn encouraged me to try to skate. I could not get moving. It was frustrating. Everyone else could do this and I could not. I gave Lynn my hands and let her pull me around on the skates for a little while. This was one of the times, other than at bedtime when Lynn and I were alone together. We let the others go ahead and skate while Lynn tried to teach me how to skate.

Her cousin or the girls would approach us, say a few words and it seemed that they could sense that I felt uncomfortable and frustrated. I wasn't being rude but I said I felt embarrassed.

Finally, I just took off the roller skates and walked a bit next to Lynn. The girls were roller skating still.

We later drove up to Scranton, Pennsylvania, and stayed with her cousins for a few days.

Welcome and Unwelcome Touching

What I am about to describe is important to note because not all sexual touching is welcome, and gender has nothing to do with that. I have been touched in my genital area when I did not want that to happen and had said so. That would be sexual assault.

No, means no! No matter what!

Lynn was a bit mischievous on the drive up there. While I was driving, she unzipped my pants and started stimulating me. I said, “what if someone comes up on the right?”

She knew what made me feel pleasure and how I liked to be touched. It had to be gentle and there are places where I do NOT want to be touched down there. But Lynn knew how and where to touch me and where not to touch me.

This was different than the impression I got from my parents. My mother would describe sex as something she owed to her husband. She had said when I was a young adult that “even if she might not be in the mood, she understood that a man has needs.”

Yuck, that seemed so cold, unromantic, and just plain disturbing. I also had rejected all those traditional ideas such as the man being the head of the household.

I felt lucky to know that she wasn't the one in the relationship who had to wait to initiate sexual contact, which was something I had been noticing for a few years now. I liked that a great deal.

I wanted a more egalitarian relationship, and I definitely did not want to be the person within the relationship that had the greater sexual appetite or interests.

Like the highway we were traveling, the relationship was a journey that we both were on together.

Spending Time in Pennsylvania with Lynn's Cousin

When we were staying with her cousin, Lynn and I slept on an inflatable mattress on the floor in their living room, but Lynn's cousin gave us their bedroom to get dressed and shower.

There's a contrast that stands with my own family and Lynn suggesting that we sleep in separate beds when we are in their home. Elsewhere I make clear that if I had been more assertive and just said to my parents that is not acceptable and we either won't visit for Christmas or we will get a motel, Lynn would have gone along with that.

With her cousins like with her mother, that was the last thing that ever crossed my mind! I felt a need to make that clear.

Again, I was like the big brother or babysitter. I suppose that word is a misnomer when it comes to spending time with a girl who is in her early teens. Baby just doesn't apply at this point. The point is that I was the one who spent time with the kids while the "grownups" did their thing together.

It was exciting for me. Lynn was happy to see her cousin.

The girls loved to show me places, where we could walk to have fun - the park, a nearby school with swings... or they would show me things in their rooms. We played games in the yard or on the driveway outside. They weren't tomboys. They just liked having fun and showing off.

Many people have noticed how much I enjoy and relate well to kids. Lynn's cousin clearly enjoyed, and Lynn appreciated, the freedom that they had while I occupied the kids.

They could just forget about their kids for a few days!

It was a perfect arrangement!

Does this imply that I wanted to have kids? Yes, of course. Lynn felt bad about this. She knew that I understood the situation and she knew that I was in love with her.

I might love my job. I might love the kids but being in love with your wife is obviously different. Neither the job nor the kids in my life when they were around could meet the deeper and more profound needs that exist for a person or a couple.

Lynn was mine, chose me, wanted to live with me, and that, more than anything else, brought me the deepest and most profound joy and serenity.

I haven't known anything more profoundly important than this love that we shared. Nothing else has meant as much to me as Lynn.

Some parents have described the bond they have with their children to be even more important than that of a couple. I can't imagine a more intimate bond than Lynn and I had.

Chapter 40: Preparing an Office for Providing Therapy

A few chapters earlier, I mentioned that my private practice had grown so very fast. It was amazing. There were many different clients that I was seeing with different problems or issues.

Some of my skills opened up some opportunities for me. For example, I was curious and inspired by the effectiveness of hypnosis and the possible opportunities to use it to help people deal with "normal" experiences and problems, as well as more complex and debilitating problems.

Let me give an example. I had a couple of clients come in to see me for help quitting smoking. There are scripts that exist and established protocols that I had learned during my training that were approved by the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH).

Anyway, hypnosis can help with Major Depression and Anxiety as well.

Getting My Own Office

With the support and help of Lynn, I selected a location in downtown Wilmington, on Chestnut Street.

The rent was about \$400 per month. Since I had been paying Chris \$15 per hour when I used his office, every hour after 26 per month cost me more than \$400 in the month. So, it was clearly more cost-effective to have my own office since I was easily needing the office for more than 26 hours.

Everything was amazing and wonderful beyond my wildest dreams. This was real. I was feeling so proud of everything I had accomplished. I knew I had finally reached the height of my success - everything that I had been dreaming of for so long.

Lynn and I met with the receptionist at the location, and she was really nice. She said that she would meet and greet clients when they come in and ask for me. Of course, she knew about confidentiality.

They had a nice waiting room that was never full. A lawyer had been renting the office next to mine. It was a long building with about 10 different offices down the hallway. There were a few other therapists like me and others in different businesses.

Next to my office, there was a conference room that any of us could use. There was a calendar behind the counter where the receptionist sits that is used to book the conference room when you expect that you will need it.

I now had two phone numbers to give my clients. One of them went to the receptionist and she would ring my office if I was in and not in session. I had a way to indicate that I am with a client and should not be interrupted.

It was late in 1998 when I made this transition... from a small private practice and renting an office for a few hours per week from Chris Hauge to having my own office with a receptionist, a waiting room of my own, full ownership of the single office room, and access to a conference room.

Lynn and I started looking for deals at yard sales to decorate the office. We went to Office Depot and bought a desk and a nice comfortable chair for me to sit in next to the desk. We had to act quickly because everything was happening fast.

We picked up a nice or fairly decent couch for a great price at a yard sale. I obviously cannot remember now decades later what things looked like. We also picked up a few nice pillows to make the couch comfortable. No one was going to sleep here but they could be helped to feel more comfortable.

We also picked up a whiteboard for notes and illustrations with clients. Obviously, I needed to put my degree up on the wall along with my license and certifications, i.e., the certification as a Clinical Hypnotherapist with ASCH as well as other certificates I received at various training workshops.

Lynn was a great help in picking out and decorating the office. I am not someone who cares how things look, so I needed help to feel comfortable that I had an office that looked inviting, comfortable, and professional. I am sure I would have been self-conscious if I didn't have Lynn's help.

I knew we needed - I needed - a couple more chairs in case I wanted to do group therapy. I figured I would need to do more of this than the availability of the conference room might allow.

The conference room had a big table that filled most of the room. There was a phone in there and a large whiteboard at one end of the room.

I also picked up some toys, a toy box, dolls, and a few other things. There was a couple that came to me to get help with their children. So, I needed a way to work with them. It is easier to work with children by letting them play if they are under the age of ten or twelve.

I had studied play therapy since that time when I was a first-year intern at the New Hanover County Mental Health Center in 94. While I wasn't thinking I would have lots of kids come to see me, I thought I should have something for kids if necessary or if it would be helpful.

The receptionist could call clients if necessary, she could help with typing, make copies, perhaps help with billing, as well as accepting payments from clients as they come in or after a session. I had a billing person who would help with billing clients for their sessions, so I didn't ask the receptionist to do any of that.

We discussed the ideas about what she might want to do for me. I thought that due to the need for confidentiality that I would make calls to clients, but she could certainly pick up calls if they called into the office to cancel, reschedule, or to state that they were running late. She would announce to me when someone showed up and I would come down the hall and greet them.

I didn't like having to collect payments myself, but I still felt that it would make sense for me to arrange payment agreements and accept payments personally rather than have the clients pay the receptionist, most of the time. Sometimes clients would leave a check upfront with the receptionist.

Sometimes, I would get anxious if someone was running late and I would walk down to the waiting room to see if I had missed the announcement. Plus, the receptionist only worked nine to five, Monday through Friday.

After those hours, I had a key to enter the building, a key code to enter into the alarm, and I was expected to lock the door, obviously.

So, I was ready to get to work.

This was amazing! It was a time for celebration! I wanted to tell everyone I knew just how thrilled I was. I wanted to celebrate!

It was so wonderful to have someone to share this with - Lynn. So, we marked it with dinner and marked the occasion as it was so important ... I wanted to mark the importance of this accomplishment through a metaphorical plaque of honor to be remembered as an important marker in the history of my life and *I want it told for generations to come!*

I did it!

In the next chapter, I will pick up this story and begin to discuss the wide variety of clients, problems, and conditions I was treating as well as the types of interventions used.

Chapter 41: Treatment - From Schizophrenia to Eating Disorders

I now had a growing client base and an office of my own. I was accepting insurance payments and/or checks for services.

I was set up to be able to bill Blue Cross/Blue Shield among others... and Medicare. Clinical Social Workers can't bill Medicaid in North Carolina for some reason. We can bill Medicare, though.

Treating Schizophrenia with Psychotherapy

I was trying to find out if a colleague in the field, named Mary Ellen, who was working with some individuals who had schizophrenia, could find out if some of them wanted a therapy group. She was a volunteer/intern and through her contacts, she had been given the opportunity to work with a few clients in the community.

They were staying at a nursing home not far away. I decided to offer the conference room as a meeting place for a support group for people with schizophrenia. Mary Ellen and I decided that there was a need for a support group that would be of interest to the people she was serving.

She started bringing her clients to my office building. Depending on how many people showed up we would either use my office or the conference room.

This was a great learning experience for me. I really wanted to offer something for people who were battling such a debilitating and disturbing form of mental illness. It was sad that these individuals ranging in age from the late 20s to the 50s were all staying in a nursing home.

I suppose that is better than being homeless. But usually, you think of nursing homes as being there for the elderly who cannot care for themselves.

I had asked if any of them wanted to meet with me one-on-one for therapy. I was sensitive to the fact that some people might see this as a way for me to pad my

income to enrich myself, especially if I met them at their residence, the nursing home.

These individuals had Medicare and I could bill Medicare. While it's true that this would increase my income and bring in money for me that doesn't mean I wasn't genuinely interested in helping them. They wanted to have someone listen to them and to try and understand what they were experiencing.

They had a doctor that they were seeing. I knew that much and that they weren't seeing a therapist, though they had someone at the clinic who could provide psychotherapy if the staff person was so inclined to do so.

It had been my observation that some people in my profession thought that the only remedy for schizophrenia was medication. I had noticed this when I was working at Sampson County Mental Health Center. I also remembered that when I was working there some of my clients, if not most of them, if asked, or if it was offered wanted to meet with me for psychotherapy.

In my heart, I knew that I was trying to offer something good for people who might benefit from talking to someone who is grounded in reality but also very empathetic.

In addition to just listening and trying to understand their experiences, I used a few psychological techniques to help them build their self-esteem. I also talked about some skills that would be useful in communicating and coping.

This wasn't something that went on for a long time but I did have a chance to work with some clients for a few weeks.

The Treatment of Eating Disorders

I did have a client named Anne Marie who had anorexia which was particularly challenging because starvation can cause a variety of serious physical problems. There are also serious challenges in getting accurate information about bingeing and purging.

It would become clear over time that a medical doctor needed to be the one who is primarily in charge of the care of someone with this serious problem. The empathy and rapport that I had developed with Anne Marie were great, but I still had concerns.

What seemed like a great challenge for me became something that was more serious and needed to be overseen by someone with an MD after their name, with admitting privileges at a hospital.

Anne Marie had returned from college for health reasons and was living with her parents. We were able to have some family sessions as well. I felt it was important to find out about her health when I listened to the concerns that her parents had expressed.

Anne Marie's parents became increasingly concerned that I wasn't doing enough and that her physical health was in danger. I was not in a position to assess her physical health. I didn't know why or how I was being expected to act as a central contact person for all of Anne Marie's physical health and well-being. That was something that I had to make clear.

I had taken some training on the treatment of eating disorders, but it could not cover the physical/medical issues.

The last thing I wanted was to be responsible for someone's medical care or assessing a person's physical health. So, I explained this in-depth.

I didn't want Anne Marie to feel like I was abandoning her or not on her side. I just needed to be sure that there was someone else that she was seeing for those issues related to her physical health. I couldn't be the one that asked if she had kept an appointment with her doctor or the one that weighed her and took other vital signs.

Like so many others with eating disorders, Anne Marie had symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). There is a sense that you are walking on eggshells with a person who has BPD, where you are challenged repeatedly to demonstrate that you care about your client.

Sometimes a person with BPD will cycle between idealizing someone like a therapist to hating them. In other words, we are talking about intense and unstable interpersonal relationships... chronic feelings of emptiness. Another symptom that is readily obvious as overlapping with anorexia nervosa is changing perceptions of self-identity and self-perception.

For a person with anorexia, they might see themselves as overweight even when others see them as emaciated - grossly underweight. The feeling of food in them can trigger feelings of anxiety and lead to purging to vomit the food out of their stomachs after they eat.

Obviously, this is very dangerous.

I ended up transitioning to offering mainly group therapy for those who had anorexia. Bulimia was a disorder I felt comfortable treating. With Bulimia people have body image issues and they might binge and purge but they maintain a normal healthy weight.

A couple of other girls/young women found me listed on the web, in the yellow pages, or through word of mouth.

Out of this arrangement, I picked up a client who had been diagnosed with Bulimia. Her name was Jennifer.

Jennifer's condition did not require the attention of a medical doctor as would be the case with Anne Marie who had anorexia.

Jennifer didn't have this problem. She did put a tremendous amount of focus on her appearance and her sense of feminine beauty. Sadly, this need can make a person feel like their worth is tied to their body image.

It was hard not to recognize the focus that she put on her body. She had undergone breast enhancement surgery. It would be naïve for us to avoid discussing details like this. These issues were precisely the kind of things that a person with bulimia needs to discuss with their therapist.

Obviously, a healthy male therapist has to be aware of his reactions when he is meeting with an extremely attractive woman, which did describe Jennifer. A male therapist who acts like he doesn't recognize things like this is lying or he is gay.

Our natural human reaction does NOT mean we are going to cheat on our wives, nor does it mean that we are objectifying a woman! Human evolution has programmed us to react in certain ways.

The point is that we were going to explore these issues in therapy - issues related to her sense of worth as a person as well as her as a woman. While it's true that professional boundaries were going to be maintained, it is valid to explore transference and countertransference issues.

I had studied psychodynamic and psychoanalytic theories, concepts, and ideas. Jennifer was interested in gaining some insights into herself and so this seemed like a good framework for some of our discussions.

We brought out into the open the thoughts she might have about the reactions she might want from men/guys in her life including her therapist. How did it make her feel that she was noticed in this way, based on her attractiveness?

Her understanding of these ideas grew over time. She talked about her experiences growing up. She was open to exploring dreams and their possible interpretations. She was intrigued by the ideas of Carl Jung, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud.

Any approach that was aimed at insight and seeking to make connections between events in her life up until now was valuable for her to explore, she indicated. With the insights, she felt she was improving, and the binging and purging was happening less frequently. I thought that knowing why this was happening was less important than her interest in discussing seemingly unconnected events in her life.

She did want to discuss the fact that she had agreed to be photographed nude by a friend of her boyfriend. I wondered when she told me this if she felt that she was seeking to see how I would react to her discussion of this fact. Did she want me to react with interest or excitement?

I asked her, "do you want to show me this?" I was curious as to her reaction.

"I don't know," she said.

I was concerned that she might feel like I was expecting her to show me the photograph(s).

Now, I am supposed to lie to you and tell you that I didn't want to see the photographs. Right! A beautiful woman is sitting in front of you, and she brings up the topic of being photographed nude and you want me to tell you that I didn't for a second want to see the photographs?

At the time, I was still very young and naïve. So, I felt guilty and discussed this with Marjorie who I was seeing for psychoanalysis. She wasn't young and naïve. She was about 70.

She said, "Of course, you wanted to see the photographs."

I said, "but I didn't think that she was more beautiful than Lynn."

"That's okay, it would be worse if you were dishonest with yourself," she said, adding "then you might fall victim to temptation."

I settled back down into the couch – remember I was lying on a couch when I saw Marjorie. I said, "yeah, I wasn't tempted to do anything."

Anyway, getting back to therapy with Jennifer...

Jennifer said that she also was having some problems with a situation with her boyfriend. The way he spoke to her during foreplay seemed to be degrading to her.

That incident with her boyfriend inspired her to ask if I could see them both for couples counseling. Indeed, I had studied this, and I described some tools that I could bring to the sessions that might be helpful in achieving certain goals for both her and her boyfriend.

We agreed that he could meet with me alone as well - before or after we met for couples counseling.

This went on for a while. It was very rewarding for me because she was paying out of her pocket for my services, as opposed to having insurance that would cover the cost of therapy. If either one of them or both had been dissatisfied with my competency, they would not keep coming and paying for ongoing therapy or treatment.

I only saw her boyfriend about three times alone and that was on the same days when we had couples counseling. I did continue to see Jennifer alone. We would examine her interests, desires, and expectations for her future, for her career, and what increased her sense of self-esteem and her feelings of self-worth.

It was great to see how empathy and respect for her had paid off with positive results as per her feedback. Again, she was paying by check out of her pocket and so if things were not working out for her, she had many other therapists she could consult in the area.

In the next chapter, I will present some more challenging issues that I had to confront as a therapist.

Chapter 42: Understanding Trauma and Related Disorders & Treatment

[Disclaimer: I have used aliases to protect the confidentiality and identity of clients.]

Throughout this section of the book, I will present my experiences working with people who had various disorders, problems, or conditions. So, in case you are wondering, no, I didn't stop focusing on one condition and move to the next. I am merely describing different treatments or issues in different chapters.

Keep in mind that all this was happening at the same time. It's not like I stopped treating the clients who had problems or issues that were described previously and moved onto other things.

In addition, while it is true that psychotherapists do specialize in treating certain conditions, issues, or problems and they specialize in using certain techniques we also need to be eclectic – skilled in using various techniques depending on the problems that a client is facing. Actually, not every therapist is eclectic but many of us are.

I was keeping my options open, but I did have my own toolset that I brought to the treatment of various issues or problems.

Ever since I first got started in the psychiatric field, I was using the DSM-IV to make diagnoses that describe the problems that clients or patients were confronting when they sought treatment or were required to receive psychiatric care, i.e., they were involuntarily committed to a psychiatric facility.

The DSM-IV is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders Volume IV (four).

One particular class of disorders seemed to be particularly mysterious and controversial. Those are dissociative disorders. The most extreme of these disorders was Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) which used to be called Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). To me, these disorders did not seem any more unusual or perplexing than many other disorders.

If someone were to state that they are seeing or hearing things that are not there, we would not say they are just making that up.

In addition, for me, hypnosis offered me some valuable insights into these mysterious conditions. During a hypnotic trance, we seek to alter a person's consciousness and help them to focus on a particular stimulus, idea, or to visualize something.

At this time, I was interested in learning about dissociative disorders, and I will describe this below. As a point of reference, the condition DID is only one of a variety of dissociative disorders. The understanding was that these were trauma disorders. If you are wondering what the heck a dissociative disorder is, I will be getting to that.

Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Before I discuss the treatment of or understanding of dissociative disorders, I wanted to talk about trauma disorders more broadly. In particular, I am describing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

We can organize the symptoms of PTSD into an outline. This will be important in understanding what my own experiences were later in the book. I also noticed later that some of the symptoms of PTSD and/or dissociative symptoms can occur in response to events that do not seem to be "traumatic" from an objective standpoint.

So, to describe PTSD let's consider the following points.

First, we have exposure to or learning about events that could cause death, or that involve serious injury or sexual violence.

Then we have intrusive symptoms. This can include involuntary and intrusive memories of the event, nightmares, flashbacks, heightened reactivity to stimuli that are similar to the traumatic event, and things such as a heightened startle response.

Third, we have avoidance symptoms that involve efforts to avoid triggers that remind us of the traumatic event.

Forth, we have negative emotions and thoughts about the event and things related to the event.

Fifth, we have marked changes in arousal and reactivity. This can include a heightened startle response, heightened vigilance, irritability, trouble sleeping, and problems with concentration.

I could go on, but this is good enough to create an understanding of the problem or condition.

Treatment for The Traumatic Impact of Rape

When describing the impact of a traumatic rape on one particular client, let's call her Tina, I will be touching on a few of the many shifting symptoms (over time) that she had described to me. Now, due to confidentiality and the nature of this trauma, I am not going to get into the details.

I can say that it was not at all remarkable to me that she chose to tell this to me as a male therapist. The feedback I have received over the years has been such that I knew how I came across as someone gentle, caring, easy to talk to, safe, accepting, and someone who had unconditional positive regard for everyone with whom I worked.

Tina had stated that she had not gone to the police to report the rape. I wasn't there to encourage or discourage taking legal action because I happened to be focused on her reactions to the trauma.

Clients do not come to their therapist asking for you to help them get justice, for the most part. We are asked to help as a witness though with them.

I noted that for Tina her memories of the event were fragmented. She had not integrated everything as a narrative from start to finish. So, her memories of what she saw, heard, and felt were not integrated together.

There was a technique that I learned from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) that I felt would help with this processing of the memories.

Tina was not the only client that I had in private practice who had been victimized but the recent nature of her rape stands out.

Using this technique, which I adapted with the benefit of my training in hypnosis we reviewed the event as if it was being projected onto a screen in front of her. The theory was to see if we could do this without her becoming overwhelmed and unable to face it.

My training in hypnosis would help with this. I had gained certification from the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH) and had continued that training after that.

I used the words of Milton Erickson used "And my voice will go with you." It made sense to ground her in the here and now. We (she and I in agreement) wanted her to remain aware that she is currently safe while she reviews what happened.

The theory is that traumatic memories are so disturbing that we have trouble watching them from start to finish and they become intrusive memories that flood our minds when something triggers the memories to return...

In other words, some parts of the event and how they made Tina feel were causing the flashbacks and out-of-order snapshots of what happened.

What we do as a therapist is to resonate with the client as they go through this process. We demonstrate empathy in this way.

In working with Tina, I matched her breathing with my own, and the pacing of my words with her breathing.

"You know you are safe now, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you ready?"

"Okay," she answered.

The following is an account of what I said to her as I guided her.

"Let's take some deep breaths... breathing in ... and out."

"That's right."

"I'm right here with you."

"You are safe."

"Can you slide your chair to the side so that I hear you beside me instead of in front of me, coming at me?" she asked.

"Okay," I said as I did this.

"Breathing in... that's right... and out... calm and relaxed... calm and relaxed..."

"If you would like you can close your eyes now ... that's right... good."

"Imagine a safe place - someplace that is peaceful and safe for you."

"There is a place by a stream that I like," she said.

Then I continued with the following:

"Good. Let us go there. Now, if you need to you can come here at any time to feel safe and serene. This is your safe place."

"Now imagine a large screen, like a movie screen in front of you."

"You can project the images of what happened to you onto the screen, and you will be safe as you see what happened."

"You are not alone, and you are not being hurt now."

So, this continued for a little while. The therapist tries to match the intensity of the feelings when they rise by speeding up their breathing together with the idea that

we will be heading in the direction of safety and relaxation and to remove the association between these images and the fear that they cause at the moment.

The goal is to remove the triggers so that the event is remembered in full but there is no emotional reaction to the recollection of the event. The steadiness of the therapist is for anchoring to the present and to feelings of safety.

I won't dishonor her by describing the fear she felt, her need to cry... her feelings of shame.

She did need someone who was strongly grounded in the here and now, anchoring her - metaphorically. However, she didn't need me to be crying as well.

There is a balance between empathy, compassion, and the solid support that a person needs.

We made progress and she began the process of healing over time.

One of the things that a therapist must do is to make sure that they do not become traumatized themselves. There are ways to do this. It is somewhat amazing that it is possible to be so strongly connected and in tune with a person's feelings and experiences without becoming traumatized.

This is how empathy is managed. I knew that a balanced life was important and that is why I described the life that I had when I was not on the job helping others with depression, PTSD, eating disorders, or other problems.

Understanding and Treating Dissociative Disorders

Through my work with trauma survivors like Tina, I began to wonder what could or would happen to a person who was hurt as a child. I had experienced abuse growing up and it had made a big impact on my life - including my decision of what career to pursue.

You hear horror stories about children being victimized by parents, guardians, and other trusted people who should help us form healthy attachments, feel safe in the world, and help us to learn and explore our world.

The coping strategies employed by adults are probably less creative than those employed by children. That seems to stand to reason. A child might try to mentally escape from something painful, shameful, or traumatic.

I decided to join the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD). My study of clinical hypnosis opened up a window into the world of dissociative disorders as ways to deal with trauma.

In my role as a mental health professional, I was always looking for ways to advance and grow... to learn new skills. I mentioned that I was a member of the local chapter of the Society of Clinical Social Workers.

At about this time, when I was still new with my private practice, I was granted the role of president of the New Hanover County, Wilmington, NC chapter of the Society of Clinical Social Workers.

Where that leads will be described in the next chapter.

Chapter 43: Learning About Trauma and Dissociation

In the last chapter, I described Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Previous chapters highlighted a few other disorders that I was treating as well as problems and conditions for which clients sought my aid.

These chapters are not sequential in nature. I didn't have just one focus in my practice. I was constantly involved in providing services to clients based on a wide range of issues that they brought to me seeking my aid, treatment, or support.

I didn't describe treating Major Depression but that is a common disorder for which people seek treatment and I had clients with that problem. I was still treating eating disorders other than providing individual therapy to persons with anorexia.

People were coming to me for couples counseling, group therapy, and family therapy in addition to individual therapy. For example, I had a therapy group for persons with eating disorders.

Continuing Education into Trauma

As I was saying at the end of the last chapter, I was the president of the local chapter of the Society of Clinical Social Workers. It is in this role that we both network with other professionals, share our struggles or challenges as professionals, and learn about continuing education opportunities.

As president, I was looking to organize some training workshops that would provide continuing education credits. I had speculated about what happens when extreme trauma occurs early in life because I had heard of some relatively rare disorders, the most extreme of these is called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). This is in the DSM-IV – the diagnostic manual used by mental health professionals to diagnose disorders.

As an intern at the Oaks, I met someone that my mentor and supervisor Chris Hauge, DSW, LCSW, stated had DID. When I was working at Sampson County Mental Health

Center, I had suspected that Nancy might have a dissociative disorder and possibly DID.

My understanding based on all these experiences and others that I had not specifically described that dissociative disorders are trauma disorders and that the phenomena seen in a hypnotic trance are similar to the symptoms of dissociation.

The amount of other material to which I was exposed about stress, trauma, hypnosis/trance, and dissociation, is so extensive that I could write an entire book about that. DID seems to be the furthest end of a continuum of dissociative disorders in terms of severity and symptoms.

Some of these phenomena of trance and/or dissociation are commonly experienced by all people. Forgetfulness happens to us all and it seems that it can be associated with something stressful, though at other times memory is much clearer during times of stress or fear. Another common trance-like symptom is zoning out even while driving and not remembering any part of the trip.

The important point I want to make here is that at this point, nothing at all about dissociation or DID, to me, seemed any more unusual than several other disorders that everyone believes are real, including almost every psychiatrist and psychologist.

I once heard a psychologist say she doesn't believe in the unconscious, but I didn't get a chance to get her to expand upon what she meant. Interestingly awareness of these conditions and the ideas about the unconscious seemed to develop around the same time around the turn of the twentieth century. Freud had started using hypnosis and then turned to other techniques. Many of his theories are hard to prove.

So, we have DID as an extreme example among dissociative disorders and it is something that is rare. I wanted to learn more and see what other professionals in the field know. It made sense to kill two birds with one stone and set up a workshop so that other Clinical Social Workers could gain continuing education credits.

A Sinister Foreshadowing...

My own experiences in the future will be explained in part by what I was learning at this time in 1998. I would find out that extreme stress even if it doesn't seem like trauma can cause some trance-like or dissociative symptoms – obviously not anything as extreme as DID. Note, I am saying that part of my future experiences could be explained by extreme stress!

A Continuing Education Workshop

I had been a member of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) and through that, I met Louise Coggins, who was a Licensed Clinical Social Worker as I was. I asked if she would provide training for Clinical Social Workers at a location in Wilmington.

It was late 1998 and into early 1999 when this was coming together. I don't remember the details about how this came about because over two decades have passed since then. I recall traveling to Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina campus for meetings that were part of a local chapter of ISSTD if I am not mistaken. Louise was someone I met up there.

DID was being discussed in ways that I was not aware of at the time – on the web and elsewhere. I'll get to that later.

Naturally, I would want to announce this workshop in the newspaper so that other professionals would know about this chance to get additional continuing education credits. I could have just put it in a calendar section of the paper that would only be read by people looking for such things, but I thought I would see if I could get some exposure as a mental health professional. I definitely wasn't looking to hold myself out as an expert on dissociative disorders or DID.

With that in mind, I approached the Wilmington Star-News, the major newspaper in Wilmington asking if they would do a story on this. Indeed, they were curious to write a story about a condition that is hard for people to understand but which simultaneously makes them curious. Schizophrenia is hard to understand for many people, but few are curious to learn more about it like they do with DID.

Louise told me that she was going to bring a client of hers named Grace. I assumed that Grace had DID. Indeed, Grace had multiple different personalities or alters with different names.

It seemed very brave of Grace to come forward and offer to do this - to share her own experiences with others who might be skeptical. DID has been met with skepticism, as I just noted.

Louise and Grace would discuss many different aspects of treatment and many different topics that are important to understand when seeking to understand a mysterious disorder.

I had not appreciated the meaning or implications of the term that Louise used in describing the abuse that Grace had experienced growing up. She said she had experienced ritual abuse. From a psychological perspective, the word 'ritual' can be used to mean routine or habit. It need not imply something religious or sacred.

I knew that my mainstream Catholic/Christian religious experiences had created stress, distress, shame, and other problems for me and Lynn. I suppose that is abuse. No little boy should feel shame for the pleasure he feels stimulating his penis!

I don't remember the details about the interview with the journalist with the Star-News or the details of the article. It's been so long that I don't even remember the details of the workshop.

It was good to see my name in a newspaper. I felt like I had gained recognition. As a shy person, I had not expected to appear in the paper one day as president of a local chapter of Clinical Social Workers.

In the next chapter, I will expand upon the topic of DID and therapy.

Chapter 44: Identifying Dissociative Identity Disorder & Treatment

[Disclaimer: I have used aliases to describe experiences with clients to protect their confidentiality.]

I did get a few new clients because of what they read in the newspaper. Two individuals said they saw the article and they wanted to see if I could work with them. Their names were Patricia and Sadie who said they believed they had DID – Dissociative Identity Disorder – meaning they had different personalities and other dissociative experiences.

It was brave of them to approach me knowing that they had little means to pay for therapy. I mean, speaking from personal experience, I am very hesitant to ask for help for myself when I cannot pay for something.

I then met with Patricia and Sadie who were to become my clients. I agreed to see them pro-bono (for free). Neither of them had insurance that I could bill nor did they have a decent income.

I had explained to the best of my ability the extent of my experience and expertise in the field. I didn't want anyone to think that I was an expert with years of experience in the field.

Just like I had felt when I noticed that I could help people with schizophrenia without having been an expert in that area. The fact that people with certain disorders might have trouble getting psychotherapy was a key motivator for me.

I couldn't help but want to donate some of my time to be there for those individuals who had been harmed so profoundly early in life. After I met with them, it was clear that they had been abused, betrayed, and hurt by people who should have provided for them and protected them.

My dedication to providing the best possible services and availability to them was not diminished by their inability to pay for services.

I spent a great deal of time learning from them. Asking open-ended questions. Listening.

I cannot remember the exact questions that I asked them but they would have been the standard questions that relate to dissociative experiences, which I describe in more detail below.

Patricia and Sadie had said that they already knew that they had different personalities and that that they could relate to the description of DID from the newspaper article. As mental health professionals, we have to start where the client is. So, if they say that there are other personalities that are “out” at different times and go by different names, one would accept and respect their “experience” or their “reality.”

An Unusual Referral

Another referral that I received was a bit unusual. I was at the office when the receptionist called me and said that a John Freifeld was on the phone.

I picked up and John began to speak to me. He said he found the article online about Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and had found my website where I announced my private practice.

He said that he had been meeting online with a woman named Jessica who might have DID and she lives in my area, but he is not local.

He said that he has a chat room that he operates.

Okay. He explained that he wasn't a therapist just a “support person” who runs a recovery forum and chatroom online for alcoholics and people with other addictions.

The fact that there is no relationship between alcoholism/addictions and dissociative disorders didn't register as important to me at that moment. How would a layperson know this?

John asked if I could see Jessica for therapy. I agreed. I was eager to see if I could help. At the time it seemed like a great opportunity to help someone who seemed confused.

I then waited for her phone call.

John sent me transcripts of the chat sessions he had with Jessica. It was clear, as I read, that he not only thought she might have DID but he had been interacting with different personalities that had different names.

Jessica called me and we agreed to meet at my office the next day.

She was in her late thirties, slightly heavy, with dark hair.

I said that I read the transcripts from John and noted that she had been talking to him as if she was a different person at different times.

“Have you been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder?” I asked.

“No, my doctor has me on medication for depression and anxiety,” she answered.

“How did you discover that you have different personalities?” I asked.

She said, “John has helped me to understand different things about myself,” she said.

I started to get some information about her experiences. "Do you lose track of time... do you have amnesia?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"How often?"

"A lot."

“Okay,” I began holding the transcripts that I had. “There are these other personalities that spoke to John, can you describe what that is like? Do they come out on their own and do you lose track of time when that happens?”

“Usually, John asks to talk to some of my alters,” she answered, adding, “sometimes I don’t know what happened when someone else is out.”

I was trying to find out when and how she first figured out that she had different personalities, but she couldn’t seem to remember.

"I understand that this can be confusing." I said, "or hard to talk about. Do you talk to your husband about this?"

"He knows that I have different parts," she answered, "and that I have been talking to John about this."

"Okay." I then asked, "so, other than your doctor, have you seen another therapist or psychiatrist about these problems?"

"No, we weren't sure if anyone will believe us."

"We?" I asked.

"Yes, there are others... inside."

"What's that like?" I asked.

"Sometimes the others are talking, and I can hear them or see them... but it's not me."

"Where are they now? Or where do they go?" I asked.

"There are rooms inside," she answered adding “and places.”

"Rooms?" I asked.

I had heard of this technique being used by therapists to talk about or to think about different ego states, as parts of us and how different rooms or locations where they might exist or live could be used as a metaphor. I had hypnotic scripts from the “Handbook of Hypnotic Suggestions and Metaphors” which is published by the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH).

I have heard about this in other settings as well. I did not expect a layperson to be using techniques like this nor did I know how John had learned to do these things.

Jessica continued by saying, "It's like a big house with different bedrooms where different people live," she explained.

"Did you create the house on your own?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

I was thinking that while a formal diagnosis had not been made, we have to meet the client where they are. If Jessica related to the world as if she was a different person at different times, that is how I would have to proceed.

So, I asked, “Is there someone else that might want to talk and might have more information to share?”

"Do you want to talk to them?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

After a brief pause, she said "Hi, Bruce." Her voice sounded younger and the "u" in Bruce sounded longer and accentuated like "oo".

"Hi," I answered.

"I'm Cindy. I'm six."

"Hi, Cindy. Are there others?" I asked since I had read the transcripts of chat conversations with John.

"Yes, there are other girls like me. There's Amanda, she's eight."

"How long have you been with Jessica?" I asked.

"A long time, but she didn't know us for a long time."

She had seemed like a child, indeed. While I was concerned that a proper diagnosis had not been made, I had to keep relating to Jessica through the others that would come out.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how I understood I could help clients understand the nature of dissociation and dissociative disorders. It helps to understand these things so that the client knows that they are not alone and that others have had similar experiences.

Chapter 45: Understanding Dissociation and Trance - How We Learn to Cope

[Disclaimer note the names and identifying information about clients have been changed to protect confidentiality.]

In the last chapter, I mentioned the interaction that I had with Jessica and her alters. I also mentioned that there were two other clients that I had who might have Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

I want to help you, dear reader, to understand dissociative disorders because it can be confusing and seem more complex than it is. Also, we all have experiences that are trance-like or dissociative in nature that would be problematic if these experiences were happening very frequently or for long periods of time.

Consider zoning out or driving to work and realizing that you made the entire trip on autopilot and you cannot remember anything from your drive. If someone was in the car with you that might be problematic or if this happened frequently.

Distress and lack of control are other key factors that concern us – whether I am speaking as a mental health professional or speaking from personal experience. People come for help when things are happening that bother them or cause them problems.

My own experience with hypnosis has been very valuable in understanding dissociative disorders and how the mind and body respond to stress and trauma.

Derealization is a symptom in more than one dissociative disorder. It's a subjective feeling or sense that things are not real... that they are more like a dream. Some people report a sensation in which they are looking at the world as if through a fog – perhaps it's no surprise that in movies and TV shows this device is used to indicate a dream sequence.

Sometimes you might recall being aware that you were dreaming, or you are unsure if you have awakened. This subjective experience can be disturbing for us, or it has been for me. Eventually, I wake up and all is fine. The frequency and the severity of

things like this are what differentiates normal experiences from those that cause a person to seek therapy.

Depersonalization describes another class of symptoms that are found in more than one dissociative disorder. This is a sense that part of our bodies is far away or distorted. They might feel like they are standing next to themselves.

I can recall experiences like this from my hypnosis training or sessions. The hypnotherapist might refer to the hand instead of your hand. This might help with creating numbness to eliminate a sensation of pain. I have had experiences in a trance where I could get rid of tension or other headaches.

People who experience panic attacks have described alterations in their perceptions of parts of their bodies, almost like they are growing or floating up off the ground. These would be similar to depersonalization-derealization as found in dissociative disorders.

This should begin to make these mysterious disorders seem less so. Even if you haven't had a panic attack what I just described might not seem all that hard to imagine.

LCD and psilocybin (magic mushrooms) are said to create similar alterations in perceptions – with objections and colors moving in a kaleidoscopic swirl-like looking through some cylindrical object with an eyehole at one end.

Personally, I have never knowingly ingested any of these mind-altering substances. I say knowingly because later I had some unusual experiences on a few days in 2000.

Identity disturbances are also found in dissociative disorders as well as in anorexia. In the latter case, a sufferer may perceive her body to be much heavier than it actually is. With dissociative disorders, a person might report that at times they do not recognize themselves.

Again, some of these phenomena (experiences) might seem like natural things that happen to us all from time to time. Other experiences might seem very unusual if this is not part of your own experiences.

If these phenomena happen a large percent of the time for a person, they might be experiencing a dissociative disorder of some type. The distress that they feel is what brings them in for therapy.

People with DID will report hearing voices of people having conversations inside their heads. This is common in schizophrenia as well.

Diagnosing DID and Dissociative Disorders

As stated elsewhere, dissociative identity disorder (DID) has been considered the most extreme form of dissociative disorder, and it includes many of the symptoms of other dissociative disorders, such as dissociative amnesia, and derealization-depersonalization disorder.

One has to rule out various other explanations for a person's problems.

I had found the Dissociative Experiences Scale to be helpful in talking to clients about these things. As the name implies, it deals with experiences. These are subjective experiences. It helps the client realize that their own experiences are not so unusual as they imagined and they are not alone.

This scale is developed and copyrighted by Eve Bernstein Carlson, Ph.D. & Frank W. Putnam, M.D. In this discussion, I am taking examples from the DES-II. Here is a link to the website where you can view the DES-II, as well as get a score: <http://traumadissociation.com/des>

This is more of a screening instrument. It helps the client and the therapist to understand the symptoms and experiences of the client.

After a client completes one of these questionnaires, I would ask them "what is that like?" – a very open-ended question to get them to elaborate. This is a process of exploration that usually goes on for some time.

Sadie and Patricia, who I mentioned previously, had been aware of these experiences for some time and could identify with what was being described in the newspaper article about the workshop.

Jessica and another two women were referred to me by John Freifeld. He had told me that he was running an online community for people who are dealing with addictions. When he referred Jessica to me and I read the transcripts of her conversations with John, I was concerned that she had not seen a more qualified mental health professional before she “discovered” she had these other personalities.

When I spoke to him, he began to act as he knew more and more about these disorders with each conversation. He had gone out of his way to say that he was “just a support person” in a way that sounded defensive.

I asked whether he had any training in the field and he said that he had not. He had not even had college courses in psychology as I had at Georgia Tech when I was studying engineering. John said he only had some technical coursework from a community college.

I am summarizing different conversations, but it was clear from his own admission that he didn’t have any credentials that would qualify him to provide treatment or make diagnoses.

I became increasingly bothered about what he did with Jessica and others. Jessica was talking about how John was helping her every day and she said he was helping others who had the same problems.

I don’t remember the exact moment that I heard all these things. I am summarizing my observations.

The idea that he happened to run into more than one person, Jessica, with this rare disorder while he was running an online community for alcohol and drug addictions is bizarre and disturbing. He was running a 12-step based treatment program online. They were using the model of AA – Alcoholics Anonymous – and NA – Narcotics Anonymous.”

Jessica described him as “the leader” of the online community.

To which I said, “but there are no leaders in AA or NA.”

She got a bit defensive and said, “no, but he runs the community.”

She then started talking about some problems he was having with some of the people he was helping. I cannot recall the details of this discussion other than the fact that he had admitted to her and others online that he wasn’t a therapist.

She said, “now he calls himself a support person.”

“So, people thought he was a therapist?” I asked, adding “he has been telling me from the beginning that he doesn’t have special training in the field or anything.”

I noticed a phenomenon that I learned in social psychology that we will find ways to justify our actions once we make a choice. Jessica needed his help when she wasn’t meeting with me, or so she said, and this allowed her to overlook what concerned a person like me.

She was overlooking the fact that she knew he had lied and misrepresented himself and his skills or expertise. It would seem to me to be common sense that if someone said they were a therapist that would mean they had a graduate degree in psychology or an allied field, such as social work, along with certain credentials.

He had referred two other women named Tracy and Alice for therapy with me as well and that was sometime after he referred Jessica to me for treatment/therapy for DID. I’ll discuss their situation later, but I wanted to state that it was hard for me to imagine that someone running a 12-step AA/NA program would run into one or more people with such a rare disorder.

Some of the effects of drugs can mimic dissociative symptoms but those experiences do not continue to exist when they are not under the influence of a drug or in withdrawal.

I have been focusing on dissociation that is related to stress, anxiety, and trauma because these are problems that I can treat as a mental health professional.

I cannot treat medical conditions.

There has been an open debate about who can diagnose a mental illness. Obviously, only a doctor can diagnose medical conditions, and mental illness or psychiatric disorders can be caused by medical conditions.

Another important factor about diagnosing this condition is related to the complexity of the problem. There has been some concern expressed in the literature that the condition might be iatrogenic – caused by the interventions of the therapist. So, there was a reason to be concerned about the “support” interventions of John.

Jessica was the first referral that I got from John but not the only one. Two others came to me also believing that they had DID. I wasn't John's partner, but I did want to help anyone who reached out to me, however, they found me.

I was trying to point out to my clients that what he was doing was similar to what I was doing as their therapist. I explained that he was doing things that a therapist does and that it is not good to be getting treatment from more than one person, even if the other person was trained in the field.

Things were about to get more complicated.

Chapter 46: Treatment for Dissociative Identity Disorder – A Success Story

[Disclaimer: This section continues to use aliases to conceal the actual identity of my clients due to confidentiality concerns.]

I want to describe a success story in the treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder. As I mentioned previously, I got a call from two young women who saw the article in the newspaper that featured me. Their names were Patricia and Sadie. Patricia wasn't coming very often, unfortunately. So, little progress could be made.

With Sadie, I began to meet the other personalities. It was clear that her friends and her family knew that she had been aware of having different personalities for some time.

In addition to her psychological issues, she had liver damage due to a long history of drinking. It was sad because she was so young to have a problem that caused her so much physical pain and medical problems.

Sadie was very attractive, with a nice friendly smile, long blond hair, clear complexion. She was 34. She was about my height of five foot seven. What made her attractive was not just her figure but just how cordial, friendly and kind she was to be around.

She was lesbian and she had a girlfriend that came to meet me more than once. I am not saying this to make it seem okay for me to point out that I am noticing that she was attractive. While I didn't discuss details of my clients with Lynn due to confidentiality purposes, I did discuss these kinds of observations with Lynn without giving it a second thought as to whether I was saying anything inappropriate that would bother Lynn or that would be inappropriate for a therapist to notice.

As much as I would like to assume that every reader knows that I am not shallow or unprofessional, nor do I objectify women, there will be some readers who occasionally will raise their eyebrows about something I wrote. I would hope that you are getting to know me through this book and will understand these things. Yet, I still want to clarify to be sure to remove all ambiguity.

Anyway, Sadie and her girlfriend intended to get married. It would have to be a church ceremony and there were some progressive churches in the area near where she lived. Same-sex couples in North Carolina could not legally marry at the time.

I had gone to a church that was frequented by persons who are gay or lesbian. I liked the more open-minded approach that they had.

Anyway, the therapy sessions were very much oriented toward whatever concerned her at any point in time. Sometimes that would involve issues that were most bothersome to one or more alter personalities. This could include traumatic events from her past.

I used similar approaches to treating trauma as I had with other trauma survivors as I described previously in this book. I was helping them to process the memory and to move past the trauma.

I also drew upon the ideas from the inner child work I had first begun to learn about back when I was an intern several years earlier. I used other techniques but for the purposes of this story, I'm not going to describe everything.

I helped her to nurture, parent, and comfort the other parts of her, the other personalities. I helped with this during our sessions and described things she could do on her own. I knew and used several hypnotic scripts for this kind of nurturing or reparenting.

She began to smile and said how much happier she was. She invited me to her wedding and told me to invite Lynn. She seemed fine at the wedding with others knowing about her condition and that I was her therapist. I even offered to take photographs for her as I had been getting into photography.

I gladly gave her the photographs and negatives for her to use as she pleased.

She seemed happy and thrilled with the progress we had made. She said she wanted to stop or take a break from therapy because she said she was happy with the accomplishments we had made. Obviously, I respected her wishes and her subjective feelings about this – her judgment.

Neither she nor anyone else who I met had anything but positive things to say about me, the therapy, and the therapeutic relationship.

I would later learn that her impression of me and my therapy changed after she had left therapy with me as a satisfied client. I cannot know for certain why her mind changed but I have ideas.

Things didn't go this nicely with everyone that I was treating.

Chapter 47: Bad Fraudulent Therapist Making People Sicker

I found out from Jessica that John Freifeld was moving to Wilmington. She said that he was going to move in with her and her family. She had a husband named Mike, that I met a few times, and a son.

I asked Jessica, "why is he moving in with you and your family?"

She said, "he told me he will help me deal with the flashbacks I am having... when I remember the bad things that happened. It's happening all the time. I have panic attacks and John helps me online. He will be able to help more if he is here with me.

"He is not a therapist, though?" I asked, seeking to confirm that she understood this.

"I know but he can help me get grounded or centered," she said.

Those were words we had not used in therapy; I didn't think. So, I asked, "Is that what he said he could do?"

"Yes," she answered.

This story was troubling me. A concern that I had may not be easy to understand for a layperson. Some professionals had stated in the literature that sometimes dissociative symptoms including those found in Dissociative Identity Disorder, can be iatrogenic, which means caused by the interventions of a therapist. I thought that it wasn't possible for someone to create such a complex disorder or condition just because they didn't do things correctly.

I would begin to get a sense of just how possible this was when I describe the sessions I had with Tracy.

Years later, I would speak to John's sister who shared my extreme concern about what John was doing. Yet, someone else might think that all he is doing is offering advice. It's hard for me to reconstruct memories of every single little thing that troubled me as I write this years later.

It seems like a little more information is needed before every reader feels the same hair on fire call for help reaction that I was feeling.

John indeed did move in with Jessica, her husband Mike, and their son.

In essence, John had diagnosed Jessica with her condition. He had said to me that he just suspected that she might have DID but she later told me that he told her that's what her diagnosis was.

Just as I cannot diagnose medical conditions nor can I advise people about their psychiatric conditions, a layperson shouldn't diagnose a person as having a psychiatric disorder, especially one as complex and confusing as DID.

While it is true that Sadie and Patricia already knew or believed they had different personalities – they believed they had DID – what worried me about Jessica is that she had discovered this only recently in her work with John.

Jessica said he was going to bring two other women to live with them so he could help them.

I should clarify something. Jessica had never spoken of John as one of her friends that she knew, and he was helping her specifically. He was someone who had been helping people online.

I knew from my own experience that a person should only have one therapist. That's why, for example, when I was working with people with schizophrenia during this time period as described above, I made sure they didn't already have a therapist. I told her and later others that they shouldn't have more than one therapist.

They would answer that he is “just a support person.”

I tried to explain that even if one is just doing active listening or demonstrating empathy, it's best for only one person to be doing this because of the nature of their condition and how confusing it is to them. They all stated directly or indirectly that they were confused and looking for answers... What had caused their problems? Why did they have these problems now?

In my conversations with John, he never struck me as curious about how other people are coping or what would make them happy. He talked about himself. I wish I could remember exactly what made me think he was narcissistic, lacking in empathy and compassion but it's been so long and sometimes things like this are subtle. I'm not diagnosing him just describing his impact on others.

When he came with Jessica, he took charge even if her husband Mike was there. He was directing her to tell me certain things. I wanted to hear from her when she was ready and to learn about how she felt or experienced events, her flashbacks, or her panic attacks.

Sometimes we get certain feelings that are the type of feelings that lead people to believe in psychic phenomena. Let me give an example.

I had been offering a support/therapy group for people with dissociative disorders and I had some attendees who were seeing other therapists in the community. I had been networking through my various roles and affiliations.

In one session, we talked about inviting a significant other to join them for the group.

In one session, John showed up as Jessica's support person. Others brought someone to the group who was more of a significant other - a wife, girlfriend, or a husband.

Amy was one attendee who was seeing another therapist. I had heard that she believed she was psychic and could sense things about a person, like they gave off an aura, I guess.

I could tell that Amy was not comfortable with John being there. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that stood out for her that John did. He was talking like he knew a great deal more than he did and in general trying to "teach" people what he knew. He spoke like this was about him as he shared a story. Eventually the story got around to making a point of advice or guidance.

While I had said this was a support group and I was not going to be a leader as I would in a "therapy" group, it was clear to me that Sadie was a bit troubled by how

John was directing things or instructing them. This was before she had completed her therapy with me.

Anyway, Sadie turned to me and said, “what do you think about that, Bruce?”

I had said that some of these things should be discussed in individual therapy sessions and that we should do some creative activities like scrapbooking.

After the session ended, Alice approached me after John and some others walked down the hall and said, “He’s evil! I’m not coming again if he is.”

I just wanted to assure her to come back so I said I would tell Jessica that the group should be for family or significant others.

I would later read about studies involving psychopaths that might explain what Amy sensed. Psychologists have noticed that people can describe certain sensations when they are observing a psychopath doing something rather neutral, like just walking by.

For more information, please start with a book like “The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success” by Kevin Dutton. In his book, he also presents research demonstrating how psychopaths can spot good victims better than the average person. They pick up on vulnerabilities. I suppose.

I had not been in the same room with John more than about three times. So, I cannot tell you more about what I was sensing other than that I had sensed that John lacked empathy and compassion. It was a realization that grew over time, so I cannot tell you one jaw-dropping example of this other than what I am about to describe.

At some gut level, I had a feeling that made me uncomfortable when I was in the same room with him. It wasn’t anything so clear as what some people have described in the research to which I am referring. I just had a feeling or impression.

When John moved down from Virginia, he came down with two woman who had come to believe they had DID. One of them had just picked up and moved for

reasons I never understood, her name was Alice. The other was Tracy. I mentioned them above.

Alice hardly ever came for therapy and so I never got to know her very well at all. She wasn't forthcoming.

Tracy had moved because she was leaving a domestic violence relationship. Both Tracy and Alice had moved in, along with John with the family of Jessica and Mike.

Tracy and I talked, and she seemed very confused about her diagnosis that she had gotten from John. She didn't state that he diagnosed her but that was the gist of what she was describing.

Tracy seemed embarrassed that she might have been pretending to have different personalities. She said, defensively, "John was demanding to talk to one of my child personalities and I felt like I had to do what he was directing."

She added, "I wasn't sure that I was faking the other personality, it just happened."

We went through the different dissociative experiences from the Dissociative Experiences Scale and where Sadie or Jessica was indicating that most of the experiences happen 60% of the time or higher, Tracy had indicated 20% to 40% on most questions.

When I asked her an open-ended question like "what is that like?" she just said, "I don't know." So, I suggested we could talk more next time.

On our next and last session, she said that she was not feeling safe in the house where she was. She had turned John down when he asked her out for a romantic outing or date. She didn't want to go out with him. She was afraid now.

Indeed, I could tell that she had reasons to be afraid. Her hands were shaking as she spoke. She was shaking like a leaf. Her voice sounded scared to me. I was used to hearing people scared so there are little things that you notice.

"John must have done something because Jessica thinks I am flirting with Mike and she is mad," she said. She continued, "She has a temper and I'm afraid she is going

to hit me, throw something at me or something else. I left this kind of situation with my husband to find safety.”

I helped her relax with some guided imagery and deep breathing. We talked about her leaving and whether she could she afford an apartment.

This session lasted more than the normal hour. It was over an hour and a half. After helping her to relax, we were planning her escape. That's what would go through my mind later.

I thought that there might be some misunderstanding and I asked if I could talk to John and someone at the house on her behalf. She agreed.

Maybe there was something I had sensed myself about John that seriously concerned me at this point, and which told me things would not work out well for Tracy, but I had to try. She was going back there for now.

As I was driving home from the office, I grabbed a payphone before going too far. Something told me that I should try to resolve things before she gets back. She felt scared and she had enough issues to deal with without this additional stress or this fear.

I was also frustrated that her mind was so jumbled and confused. I couldn't figure out what her diagnosis really was. She had started out as someone who believed she had DID and different personalities but now neither of us knew what to think about that.

At the same time, it never seemed to me that she was being deceptive with me. She seemed genuinely confused and a bit disoriented. I would have needed more time to better describe that feeling that she was “disoriented.”

We had uncovered some more dissociative symptoms but there was so much confusion that she had about what was meant by a particular question about an experience and/or how often it happens.

I got John on the phone when I dialed the number and he picked up. He talked about how difficult things were because she wouldn't do what was expected of her. I asked, "well, what about her problems, she is scared and confused?"

I added, "this is why I called, I wanted to help because of how scared she was. She said she is scared more than she was in her home up in New Jersey and she said that every day she feels more and more uncomfortable. I saw myself how scared she was today."

"I was just hoping that we could help her feel comfortable now, when she comes to her new home," I added.

Then I heard him say, "well, she disrespected me!"

I squeezed the phone with my right hand, taking a deep breath to keep from saying anything rash. My face felt flush. I felt my jaw muscles were clenched. My left hand had formed a solid fist. My whole body went stiff, each muscle ready for fight or flight.

I was livid! This was the fight or flight response in me.

I can safely say that in over five decades of my life no other person or incident has caused such a reaction in me.

What more can I add to put this into perspective. It had been a year and a half since I first spoke to John. I can assure you, dear reader, that I do not jump to conclusions about people.

I have honestly portrayed myself as feminine and a pacifist who deplores violence. Yet, at that moment, I felt a different set of feelings that were utterly foreign to me.

In retrospect, looking back at the over five decades of my life, this and the unthinkable idea of someone hurting Lynn or Celta would be possible to transform me from a butterfly into something different. And if truth be known, hurting or threatening Lynn or Celta would be more likely to cause me to act differently. Even if I was attacked, I would be less likely to respond with aggression.

What I am saying is that I would try to protect someone I loved in my personal life. I was concerned for Tracy and angry at that moment that he was hurting her and/or making her life hell. However, I wasn't as emotionally invested in the lives of my clients as I was with people I loved. I was angry, though.

Previously, I had stumbled upon some things that were said about him online when I first heard those things from Jessica, about him misrepresenting himself as a therapist. I had read something about some people who claimed to have traveled to his "treatment facility" in Virginia and how they alleged to being drugged and sexually assaulted and when they wanted to leave after one day, they were not given their return plane tickets.

While I didn't have proof about that what I read was true, he had written a response online that showed him attacking these individuals and their character. I had not believed those things because it seemed that no one could or would be able to get away with everything that was alleged if it was true. I mean you can't just invite people to your home telling them it is a treatment facility. Right?

There was something about the callousness of his reactions and responses to my concerns that made me believe he was capable of anything and indeed, he did not care about anyone. I suppose it is my job to make those assessments.

The problem was that most of what I was learning was from clients and was therefore confidential. I couldn't reveal anything that was said during a session even if I knew who might want to look into these matters.

Later, I would learn that some people had gone to the police and that the Virginia Bureau of Investigation had opened up an investigation into his activities.

I later found out from Tracy that she had caught a train back to where she had been living and she moved into a shelter for women who are victims of domestic violence.

That was the last time I had direct contact with John.

Chapter 48: Conspiracy Theories, Satanic Ritual Abuse and Unusual Beliefs

[As in other chapters, the names of people are aliases to protect the anonymity or confidentiality of clients.]

Toward the end of the last chapter, I had mentioned that I was speculating on the impact that words and ideas can have on a person's mental health. I was referring to the situation in which Tracy had been confused about her diagnosis or her mental health condition.

I noticed a theme that was developing in the "memories" and flashbacks or "triggers" that were being presented to me. Triggers are things in our environment – something we see, hear, or feel (a tactile sensation) that trigger certain images, thoughts, and feelings.

Sadie had finished her therapy and Patricia, who had started therapy at the same time as Sadie, was not coming very often. But she had believed for a long time that she had Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) because she had been aware of different personalities.

I had two other clients that had DID and they both were coming from the Myrtle Beach area named Vanessa and Michelle. They had not previously known each other. Vanessa had been in therapy before with different therapists and she had a psychiatrist that had agreed that her diagnosis was DID. She had been the only client of mine who had been in the hospital for her condition before she started working with me.

I felt bad that others had failed her, and I had a release to speak to her psychiatrist as well. Michelle had not started working with me until some time in 2000, whereas Vanessa had started working with me in 1999.

At that same support/therapy group they had all met one another, and I would learn from them that they exchanged telephone numbers.

Patricia was the only one who had DID or a dissociative disorder who never came to the group sessions. That would turn out to be good for her. She didn't know any of my other clients and they didn't know about her.

I mentioned that there was a theme to what they were beginning to report. I don't have all the facts to prove how this happened or who is to blame. I can only speculate on what was happening at the time.

What Jessica and Vanessa were describing had a religious nature to it. They were both very religious. Jessica was a member of the Pentecostal religious denomination – a protestant Christian denomination. She described how in church services people would speak in tongues – a language that God would understand.

Jessica also spoke of a baptism of the spirit where one has a spiritual experience that sounded to me like a hypnotic trance. Both she and Vanessa were very religious in their sessions. They both described healing services where the movement of God or “the spirit” through them would heal them of certain problems. They might see people fall to the ground as if in a trance and something miraculous was happening as they believed.

They brought in drawings they made. It seemed like a child had drawn these. I had no idea if they were talking about these matters outside of therapy. But I saw that both were presenting images of upside-down crosses and what they described as “the people in the cult who wore robes.”

Like me, you're probably wondering “what cult?” and “what does this mean?”

I started looking online for more information. The words of Louise Coggins came back to me. “Ritual Abuse.” Louise had offered the workshop on DID in January of 1999 for clinical social workers.

I had some keywords to use in my searches. DID, ritual abuse, cult(s), child abuse, and trauma. It was sometime in mid-2000 when I ventured down the proverbial rabbit hole. With the internet so much a part of our lives in the 21st century it's hard to imagine a moment's delay between hearing something unusual and doing a Google search on it.

Google wasn't even the major search engine back then. YouTube wasn't as popular then as it is now because not even half the population in America had internet access that was fast enough to stream video like it is now. Lynn and I were using dialup until 1995, a time after I had started graduate school.

One of the most intriguing discoveries was an article called "The Greenbaum Speech." The article was by D. Cory Hammond, Ph.D. I knew that name because he was the editor of the big book entitled "Handbook of Hypnotic Scripts and Metaphors" which was an American Society of Clinical Hypnosis book. He was a prestigious psychologist in Utah, but I had known of him.

I am jumping ahead in my narrative. The following two chapters describe events that happened earlier, in April of 2000.

In this speech, called "The Greenbaum Speech", Dr. Hammond details a set of programming that is based on the Greek letters of the alphabet. It was all very vague and strange. According to him, this was widespread.

I noticed that the speech had been given in 1992, more than eight years earlier but I had never heard anything about this.

The idea that he put forth was that alter personalities were deliberately created that could be accessed or identified by letters of the Greek alphabet. Using hypnosis, you would ask if any alters were known as or who understood about personalities that knew about "Alpha," "Beta," "Gamma," or "Theta."

I would learn years later that he was giving this presentation to rooms of 50 or more psychotherapists. He was far more senior as a psychotherapist than I was at the time that I discovered this.

Dr. Hammond didn't try to explain how this was done. He implied that there was a shared set of practices that existed across America and Canada. The sense that the meaning of "Alpha," "Beta," "Gamma" and "Theta" was shared across parts of America and elsewhere and had the same bizarre meaning was sufficiently vague and disturbing.

It was implied from this and other research that I found online that this was part of a shared conspiracy among certain groups of people – a cabal – that had deliberately harmed children to create these personalities. And the process of creating the different personalities was called “programming” – as in programming the human mind.

Flashback Terrors

I started getting more frequent calls from Jessica, Vanessa, and then Michelle. Jessica was the only one of them that I knew had been receiving what I would call “therapy” from John.

I knew that John had helped Jessica, Tracy, and Alice create their “inner worlds.” It was more than a home with different rooms. Most of my knowledge of this came from Jessica because Tracy had left the area after two sessions and Alice had not been very forthcoming at all.

Alice was the most ardent defender of John and his treatment approach. I also had no clear sense that she was living within the world that John had created for her or that she even had DID.

I’ll offer just one example of the bizarre “triggers” of flashbacks that I heard about from Vanessa and Michelle. Neither of them had been referred to me by John but since they both came from the Myrtle Beach area of South Carolina, about 90 miles from Wilmington, they started staying together on the extended weekends around their therapy sessions with me.

Somehow, they had connected with another client of mine who had been waiting in the lobby around the same time that they had their appointments with me. That other client, Rebecca was seeing me for an entirely different problem. Anyway, they were renting the apartment that Rebecca had because she was trying to get back with her husband after a period of separation.

I got a call from Vanessa in late July of 2000. She and Michelle were watching the movie “Conspiracy Theory” and it had triggered some flashbacks. I had a second phone line that rang at my home with a distinctive ring. Vanessa said that something

about the blinking lights in a dark scene had triggered a memory of something that had been happened to them or was done to them.

“But you are safe, now, right?” I asked her.

Vanessa answered “yes” but then she added, “but Michelle needs you, now?”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know, she is just rocking back and forth and acting like she is freaking out,” she said.

“Can you put her on the phone?” I asked.

I heard her say “Bruce wants to talk to you.” And then Michelle said “Okay.”

“Hello,” I said then I asked, “are you okay?”

“Yes, I’ll be okay, Bruce,” she answered. She seemed okay to me and normal.

After a pause, I said, “so, I’ll see you Monday, right?” It was Saturday night.

“Yes, Monday at 2 PM,” she answered.

“Okay, bye,” I said and hung up the phone.

With that, we will back up a bit in time and talk about events that happened about two and a half to three months earlier.

Chapter 49: When Two Become One Body - Love, Beauty & Serenity

I was reading a number of different books when she came to me. I had a few books stacked near the bed. It was April 15, 2000. A normal day in the life of a psychotherapist who felt on top of the world.

Yes, I'm talking about me.

Two of the books were somewhat related to one another. One was from the study material that I had on psychodynamic/psychoanalytic therapy. I had been pursuing credentials in this area though I was aware that the theories were hard to prove.

I suppose there are a number of concepts from psychodynamic/psychoanalytic theory that is useful to know as a therapist. Defense mechanisms, like projection and transference, rationalization, and repression.

Then there was a book on ego state theory. This did seem like a valuable framework for understanding the different states of mind that describe the normal processes of life. Making love is a state of mind altogether different than other states of mind - I certainly am not in that same state of mind when I am at work.

The other book was called "Paperclip Dolls." This was peculiar. It was written by a woman who had different alter personalities put this book together. She said she used pictures from magazines to create a scrapbook that depicted parts of herself. Hmm.

Was she one of the dolls? That seemed to be what she was suggesting. She seemed to have discovered aspects of herself from the work she had done using these pictures that she cut out of the magazines.

I had only recently stumbled upon this book.

I had been searching for information about DID, treatment, abuse, trauma, and other terms. Those were keywords I used in my searches. This was before I had

discovered some of the more bizarre conspiracy theories described in the previous chapter.

I had found forums, chat rooms, directories, and web sites that I had bookmarked to explore later. Some of these online materials and forums were directed perhaps to therapists and other mental health professionals. However, even those were available to the public.

Many confused people could end up believing in things that never happened. Delusions. Some people seemed to have become certain about what happened to them, and yet if it were true, it would be an explosive conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories.

What had happened to these people? So many curious ideas were running through my mind. My mindset was somewhat philosophical. Curious. Inquisitive.

I let that go. I looked up and Lynn was at the bedroom door.

She had a mischievous smile on her face. "I want sex," she said.

"Me too," I said, my face lit up with a smile. I took off my shirt as she was unbuttoning her shirt.

She dropped her shirt on the floor and removed her bra. Seeing her breasts, I felt aroused and excited. My heart was racing with excitement. I was aroused as I removed my pants. I paused captivated by the sight of her as if I was seeing her for the first time.

She dropped her pants and underwear and I paused for a moment to take in the sight of her and she let me look. Lynn knew how much pleasure I found in looking at her. No doubt, it felt good for her to know she was so beautiful to me.

"Perfect," I said. She smiled. Looking down she noticed I was excited, but she let me look for a moment as I paused taking in the sight of her... adding the words "Amazing! Beautiful!"

I started to move toward her but before I got very far, she was getting onto the bed.

She was on top of me, her tongue inside my mouth, mine inside hers. We were moving. She was on top.

I could feel both of our hearts as she pressed her lips against mine. Her arms around me squeezed tighter and tighter. I could feel her breasts against my chest.

She said, "I feel like I can't get close enough."

"I know," I said, returning to kissing her.

She was supporting herself somehow, just slightly elevated near our waists.

She paused for a moment as she felt me between her legs. "Oh, you're too close, sweetie," she said with a sigh of pleasure all the same.

This might be confusing but remember, Lynn can't get pregnant. She was telling me that she wanted to be a part of me when she said she can't get close enough, but despite that desire, she had to be sure that she didn't get pregnant.

She continued to move and to wrap her arms closely around me. Her kisses were so desperate and passionate. She was hungry! So was I.

Our arms and bodies moved as I caressed Lynn and she squeezed me tighter. I had a habit of letting her squeeze maybe because I was concerned about her comfort.

Those words repeated in my mind. "I feel like I can't get close enough."

"I feel like I can't get close enough."

I dropped a bit and let go with a smile. She sensed what had happened.

She just smiled. "I came already," I said.

"That's okay."

She was still above me smiling.

I asked genuinely curious, "that was good for you?"

"Yeah. I am glad you felt good."

"But you didn't."

"Yes, I did," she said.

"Not really," I said... adding "You were so hungry for sex and you didn't have an orgasm, how can that be good enough?"

"We can do that another time, she said, adding, "I'm happy."

"Wow, so am I," I said with a chuckle.

I reflected upon how amazing it was that this was happening so often, nearly every day as if we had just gotten engaged... as if this was the "honeymoon phase" that I heard described somewhere – something that exists for one year.

The passion was so incredibly intense. You would think we had just gotten engaged a few months ago... or that we had not seen each other in a few weeks or months.

She got up to start the shower for us. I lay for a moment reflecting on things.

I felt a wave of serenity wash over me.

I was in love. Because she was in love with me. We were one.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you so much" I added.

I then smiled or laughed a bit.

"What?" she asked.

"I was thinking of that song by the Moody Blues and how I would like to sing it to you, but I can't... I can't sing."

"It goes" ... and I spoke the words,

"'Cause I love you,
yes, I love you,
oh, how I love you,
oh, how I love you.'



I like the way the singer sings those words like he is overcome with a feeling that MUST be cried out the same way you cannot contain yourself when we make love. But it's not the same thing, I can and would cry out those words in public. Then it repeats... those same words.

'Cause I love you,
yes, I love you,
Oh, how I love you,
oh, how I love you.'"

Then I said, "That's how I feel! I want to tell the whole world that I love Lynn."

I then added, “and you KNOW I would do just that, over and over, no matter how many times someone has heard it!

She just smiled.

I had the thought that I would have shouted these words out to the world not just after we made love but anytime. So often and in so many ways I felt these feelings of intense love for Lynn and an intense desire to tell everyone about it.

Shortly later that evening, I was still thinking about Lynn’s happiness and what that meant for her.

I thought about how much I cared about her happiness, her dreams, and her aspirations. She wanted a master’s in fine arts (MFA) – could I help with that?

What about a kiln so that she could bake her pottery at home? Maybe I could earn more money.

Chapter 50: Success in Life and In My Career as Therapist

A General Feeling of Success and Happiness

The year was 2000, and life was going great for me. I was successful in all areas of my life. I had been living with the love of my life, Lynn, as husband and wife for several years now. This was evidence of success for me.

To be loved and to love another person was part of what I had always wanted in life.

I had the career that was meant for me as well. It was only through hard work that I had achieved this success. I never took for granted all that I had accomplished. Sixteen years ago in 1984, I would not have considered social work because I had been so shy and as a result, I lacked social skills. That was a lifetime ago.

I had come so far. Everything felt right. Now. At this moment! In the early spring of 2000. I had no idea that things were about to change.

I had a client base that was large enough to keep me busy forty, fifty, or more hours per week. That was okay, I loved the work.

It might seem surprising that someone like me who has a great deal of empathy would feel "good" when I am spending time with people who are dealing with severe depression, for example. I could resonate with others and their feelings and experiences. I felt with others what they were feeling and experiencing.

However, it does feel good to know that you are helping another person to cope with psychological problems like major depression.

So, yes, it feels "good" to spend time with people who are dealing with negative emotions... if you can help them.

The Importance of My Role

I would reflect upon my role as a mental health professional and the importance of that role in the lives of others.

If someone came for family therapy or couple's counseling, I felt like I had a solemn role in the family or in the relationships between two people. A couple was paying me to help them to live in harmony and to have a healthy relationship with one another.

That responsibility or the importance of the role I played might seem more obvious to a layperson when dealing with serious psychiatric conditions or disorders. However, it never occurred to me that one client's issues were more important than anyone else's.

Concern for Others Mental Health More Important than Money...

The next statement will make sense to consider in light of later events in my life.

I remembered a particular conversation I had with a young woman who had anorexia, named Anne Marie. I had described this previously. I was meeting with her parents and her. I explained that a medical doctor should be the primary person that they contact about her health. I explained that I wanted to be helpful, and I supported Anne Marie, but her physical health is outside my area of expertise. **I'm not a doctor** and so all medical matters that concerned them must be discussed with their doctor, not with me.

I had known that my role and my billable hours with her would decrease as a result of this, but Anne Marie's health was so very important.

I knew that despite her starving herself, she wanted to live a life that was meaningful, and I hoped she would continue to see me from time to time for individual therapy, and she could and was invited to come to the groups I was having for persons with eating disorders, which she found very agreeable.

A Diverse Group of Clients

I had so many different clients, dozens of them with different problems, issues, or disorders. Each of them had invested in me a solemn responsibility to care for their mental and physical health - their health and psyche as it were. It was a solemn responsibility indeed.

The past few chapters have focused on Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) as a trauma disorder and the role I played in providing treatment to persons who presented with symptoms of DID. This represented only a small fraction of the time I spent each week in therapy with people.

I have put additional focus on this particular disorder because of the unique characteristics of the disorder at least in terms of what the general public thinks about psychiatric disorders.

I have previously described the problems that I had discovered when I learned that psychotherapists were spreading conspiracy theories.

To say that my colleagues across America had some unusual beliefs about what had been done to their clients who had DID is putting it mildly.

The End of Faith?

Neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris came out with a book called "The End of Faith" in which he presents many of his beliefs that form the basis for his choice to embrace atheism.

During the years I spent with Lynn, I noticed that she was the touchstone of morality for me, and yet she was opposed to any of the symbols and terminology that makes up religious doctrine. For example, she didn't like the term "sin."

For me, I was beginning to align my beliefs with Lynn who had doubted that a loving God could have allowed innocent children to be born with a chronic, fatal illness. I noticed that Lynn had an open mind even though she did not embrace any religious faith.

My faith had been rooted in love, compassion, and empathy. That never changed even when I turned away from religious ideas.

I was beginning to think that, indeed, science might be the only tool for understanding reality. I could trust what my senses told me. That would be it!

I had at one point told Lynn that God was real and factually known and not a part of our beliefs and faith. That was such a naïve and irrational statement to make!

Religious ideas also lead people in America to embrace conspiracy theories about satanic cults, despite there being no evidence that could support a belief in these things. It seemed like the nation was being rocked by a mass delusion.

Religion seemed to inspire people to believe things without sufficient evidence and to see the world in black and white categories.

I respect the beliefs of others even if I do not share those beliefs.

A Charismatic Pseudo-Therapist

I'm not sure what to call a person like John Freifeld. He was charismatic and persuasive. He looked like Charles Manson. Later, a woman named Ruth Parris would describe his charisma by saying that "if he said the sky was pink, she would see it that way," and it sounded like she was being literal. Ruth was never a client of mine, but she was a friend. So, let's call him a pseudo-therapist.

As I stated previously, by John's own admission, he had no specialized training, no credentials, and no college degree. As of June of 2000, I had not had any contact with John in about a month or so. The situation with Tracy had so disgusted me that I could not speak to him at all.

Jessica had long ago admitted that he had deceived people into thinking he was a therapist. I mean, I got the impression that he wasn't denying that with her.

Other than Sadie and Jessica, it seemed that those clients who had DID were getting worse. I should clarify that Tracy who left the area did not seem to have DID.

At some point, I discussed the problem with my colleagues. I was the president of the local chapter of the Society of Clinical Social Workers. Chris Hauge, my mentor was at this meeting.

I didn't really have to go into much detail about what I was observing. I just said that I knew that he was not trained in the field, that I felt he was doing what would be considered "therapy" and that I noticed that people seemed to be getting worse.

The advice I got was to tell them that if they want to keep seeing me they MUST stop getting therapy from John!

Based on a review of the book, this is not a sentiment that is obvious to every layperson. It was obvious to John's sister when I spoke to her in 2020 before this book was reviewed and without me having reviewed nearly as much as I have just recounted to you, dear reader.

A website was created to warn people not to trust people like John - there were others who were practicing without credentials. Patt Stubbs had started a website called HIP - Hazards on the Internet and Protection. I had found on one of John's websites his attacks on Patt and HIP.

She was now the target of his attacks along with others.

HIP was a website established to help inform people about people online (therapists) who were making false claims about their expertise, training, education, or credentials. Indeed, according to Patt, there were others who were providing therapy online, who were announcing their services online who were misrepresenting themselves.

I did find out that there were what seemed like a number of people who had been treated by John.

On one of John's websites, he attacks all those he sees as conspiring with Patt Stubbs and HIP. That includes me, Patt Stubbs, Ruth Parris, who I would later meet, Christine Brandon, and Stephanie Bryant.

Patt had shared a story about how Christine and Stephanie had gone to John's "Treatment Center" in Virginia where he had announced that he had a nurse on staff which was his girlfriend whose credentials were questionable. I never tried to verify who she was or what her credentials were.

At about this time, I had learned that John was reaching out to other clients of mine. Anne was a client of mine who had problems unrelated to DID. She told me in late July that she had been out to the home where John was living.

I asked her, "why did you go there?"

"He said he wanted to tell me about you and why I shouldn't trust you," she answered.

"So, you didn't know him?" I asked.

"No, but he seemed like a guy who belonged here, at your office?" she answered.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around what it was about John that had people trusting him at all.

"So, you went to where he was living?" I asked.

"Yes, Jessica was there and a few other women," she said.

Then she added, "It's like a damn treatment center."

"What do you mean, it's just a home?" I asked.

"Well, they have a room for working through anger issues related to their trauma. They have a plastic bat, a bean bag, an inflatable punching bag."

My intuition seemed correct from the bits and pieces of information I was hearing, it seemed like he was trying to set up something like a treatment facility at the home of Jessica.

It didn't seem at all farfetched that he had been doing this previously, that he had held himself out as a therapist. When I say he had done this previously, I mean that the claims that he had invited people to a treatment facility in Virginia seemed entirely plausible.

I talked to Lynn about my concerns, and I said, "I feel like I should do something to help these people or at least to have someone look into these matters. Patt had said that I would be credible to the authorities and others who could look into this – like the licensure boards for clinical social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

My wife, Lynn had said to me, "don't get involved, you could get hurt."

I thought, "what can he do to me?"

In fact, there was nothing I could do and nothing that I did do. Everything I knew was confidential information from therapy sessions and I couldn't share that with anyone. It was frustrating that nothing could be done to stop Freifeld.

Section Seven: A Living Nightmare: Losing Lynn And Feeling Dead

This section of my book describes events that are dark and horrifying. This marks a radical change in the narrative of the book. Nothing that happened prior to now could have prepared me for the horrors that await.

At the end of the last chapter, I was on top of the world. I certainly would not have wanted anything to change. I would have done anything imaginable to hold onto the life I had with Lynn. I was crazy in love.

My career that I had spent the past sixteen years building was about to come to a sudden, crashing end.

Most of the events described within the chapters of this entire section occurred within one month - August of 2000.

John Freifeld became obsessed with destroying my credibility and my career. He had moved from Virginia to Wilmington and moved in with the first person he referred to me for treatment. He would brainwash some of my clients into thinking that I was the cause for all their problems and why they weren't getting better. That included one client, Sadie, who had successfully completed therapy with me and previously had said she was very satisfied with the care that I had provided.

Freifeld composed a complaint letter to the North Carolina Social Work Certification and Licensure Board (NCSWCLB) on behalf of five of my clients, including the client who had been satisfied with my care when I last met with her for therapy. The complaints were the same, verbatim.

One of the complaints was that I planted false memories of Satanic Ritual Abuse. I had previously looked into how it was that two of my clients had begun to believe that these bizarre things happened to them as children.

Everything that mattered to me was under assault. Lynn's disease suddenly took a turn for the worse. This more than anything was terrifying to me. She was my whole

life. I was madly in love with Lynn. She was part of me. We were one body. We were husband and wife.

How do you cope without the one person that connects you to the world and everything meaningful in the world? Whatever success I had found in life was made all the more beautiful and amazing because I could share it with Lynn. Now her life was in jeopardy.

The issues that clients presented to me could be addressed with rational reasoning. That had worked for a while. However, there was no similar way to cope with the loss of the entire life I had built with Lynn. Again, most of the chapters in this section occur within one month of 2000. So, there wasn't time to go ask a therapist for advice or guidance.

Previously, I would ask my colleagues, therapists, psychologists, or my psychoanalyst how I might handle complicated matters that might have an impact on my success as a psychotherapist. Now things were changing too fast - literally from one day to the next. It wasn't clear to me when I should have canceled all appointments with every client.

It would have been easier if I caught a serious illness like a virus in August of 2000. Then I would know to cancel all appointments for as long as necessary. It's easier to tell when we have something physical happen to us.

Chapter 51: Trauma & Cruelty of Cystic Fibrosis and My Connection to The World

There are things of such darkness and horror—just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty—that they will not fit through the puny human doors of perception.

Stephen King - from Skeleton Crew

Days before, things were normal. We were happy. We weren't focused on the fact that Lynn had a terminal illness that she had been born with. I am not saying we were unaware of this fact, but life just seemed normal... until it wasn't.

This might seem hard to understand to an observer. I guess we needed to believe that something could be done about the problem.

Cystic fibrosis reminded us that it was a part of our lives. It seemed like a petulant child who had to be noticed. It was part of Lynn. She had that gene defect such that when a person has two copies of this recessive gene, they always have the disease.

We had lived a life that we wanted to be "normal." Lynn's health had been good for someone with this disease. So, we were lucky.

Most of the events in this chapter occurred in August of 2000. However, things started to change in late July 2000.

We noticed in late July two things that were very troubling. One was that Lynn was losing weight, and the other was that she was having trouble breathing. That can happen from time to time with cystic fibrosis, so the full weight of this didn't hit right away.

I had not noticed, but Lynn told me she was having trouble keeping weight on her. To me, she still looked perfect - beautiful as ever. This is one of the signs of deteriorating health for someone with cystic fibrosis. She had to take pills with every meal the entire time that I knew her. It was routine. However, it is a reminder that the disease impacts her digestion.

We knew that something was wrong because she was struggling to breathe. She would become weak just doing routine things around the home. She also couldn't go to work.

It's hard to talk about this without crying. I know it's hard to understand what it is like unless you are living with this.

We went to the clinic on July 21, 2000, in Chapel Hill, which was about two hours away. They admitted her to the hospital for IV antibiotics. They had found on an x-ray that there was a heavy mucus build-up throughout her lungs and there were large black marks that indicated scarring. Her oxygen saturation was lower, which meant that she wasn't getting enough oxygen in her body. This lasted until July 28.

When she got back, she was having the same problems with breathing.

When Lynn started getting sick in August of 2000, she set up a place to eat and watch TV in the spare room that we had. She was short of breath and needed me to bring her food in there. She would fall asleep in there because she was too tired to walk back into the bedroom. We also couldn't make love or enjoy any kind of passionate togetherness.

Every night before going to sleep, she would also use a machine that delivered inhaled antibiotics, steroids, and other medications to open her airways. I brought this setup into the other room also.

Lynn and I had never slept apart in all the years we were living in this home, together, other than the month in which I tried to work over an hour from home. That could not work out well for me, so the job only lasted a month. There were a few times when I was on call for a job or away at graduate school when we slept apart, but that was it.

Wasn't everything just perfect the other day? Wasn't she telling me how close she wanted to be to me? How she said "I feel like I cannot get close enough to you" as she wrapped herself around me and kissed me so passionately. It felt like just the other day even though that was in April. But in May, June, and July, things seemed great and normal. If she had been getting worse, it wasn't noticeable to me until August.

What I mean is that it was almost like one day everything seemed so perfect and right and then Lynn was sick. Very sick!

These changes in her health hit me like a loud, hard slap in the face. Each time I saw her struggling to get enough air to walk across a room, I was so frustrated, angry, and I felt powerless.

I thought "this is not right! She is only 34!"

She had been talking about getting a Master's in Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina. It was a competitive school.

She should be thinking about those things! She should be thinking about normal life and a career just like I had built a career. I was so bitter. This wasn't right! It was not fair!

She needed me to bring her meals to the spare room where she was having to spend most of her time.

She was gasping for air at times. I could see that she was short of breath. It was so maddening for me because I couldn't fix the root problem. I could bring her food and things she needed but that wouldn't fix the problems.

Sometimes I didn't want to wait on her because it meant admitting how bad her health was, and that meant she might be closer to losing her fight with this disease. I was terrified. I also felt guilty for not wanting to be there for her whenever she asked!

I felt shame for my actions! I do know that Lynn understood the feelings of powerlessness that I felt. She knew this was taking a toll on me. I wasn't being mean and irritable at her for asking for my help. I was in denial.

"Of course, I will carry you into the bathroom and help you shower," I would answer.

Later, Lynn said she wished I had kept in touch with our friends on a regular basis. She was struggling and didn't think she could be the source of support that I needed. I wasn't thinking clearly enough to think that I should reach out to a friend for support.

Inpatient Hospitalization

Lynn was admitted to the hospital again in August of 2000.

I was blaming myself for every way I had failed to help her enough. I felt guilty that maybe I had not done enough to clear the mucus from her lungs. I mentioned earlier that I would do something that involved tapping on her back, her left and right sides, and on her chest. This was to break up or loosen the mucus that built up in her body. This excess mucus was a breeding ground for infections.

These infections and excess mucus were causing problems with her breathing.

I felt guilty that I had not kept the house cleaner. Lynn was worried that dust and other particulates could get into her lungs.

So, we went to the University of North Carolina Medical Center Hospital in Chapel Hill, because they had specialist doctors who worked with cystic fibrosis and other lung diseases - they call them pulmonary specialists.

The IV antibiotics are adapted to the person's body. They also have different ways of delivering antibiotics. Once she was admitted to her room, they set about inserting an IV in her arm. This time, they had to run the IV all the way up her arm to get it closer to her heart which will pump the antibiotics throughout her body and I guess it is close to her lungs, where the infection was.

This was unusual, more complicated, and a longer process.

It was painful to watch them piercing her body with a needle. I would NEVER have let anyone do anything to break or bruise her skin under normal circumstances. It was killing me to see this happening as I held her hand.

No, this wasn't the first time she had IV antibiotics, but this was so difficult for her and by extension, it was difficult for me. I was trying to be strong for Lynn. We were both crying.

As they finished getting the IV into her, I had to get up and walk a bit to keep from passing out. I paced around that floor of the hospital and returned to her side. I felt ashamed for leaving her. It was just a few minutes and I had made it through the procedure, but I was beating myself up for every failure on my part.

This reaction on my part had not happened previously when she had to go into the hospital. There was something more symbolic and disturbing about this time. This time the reality of her survival was the thing that overwhelmed me.

I stayed with her and tried to do anything she wanted or needed. Anything to make the time more passable for her.

They let me sleep in the bed with her. I don't think they had the heart when looking at either of us to ask me to leave. I think there are dorm rooms or other places where family members can stay when someone is in the hospital.

I must have looked like hell. I felt so overwhelmed.

The days were something of a blur. It felt like a bad dream.

I would tell myself, "This isn't happening."

You cannot unsee the woman you love gasping for air or short of breath doing just the smallest of things... routine things.

My entire reality was now like being in a fog, or I felt like I was in a dark and misty place. I felt like I had wandered out into the mist and sanity itself was somewhere in the distance like dim lights along the coast as seen from a boat on the ocean.

Things were changing for me and I felt powerless over it all.

I felt such despair and hopelessness.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this. They were going to find a cure someday. A cure for cystic fibrosis. I had hoped and prayed so long and desperately. This was happening too fast for me. One day you are on top of the world, the next day the love of my life is fighting for her life and might die.

I tried reaching out to my family. Lynn had said she wished I had kept in touch with our friends, but for some reason, I thought to reach out to my parents and siblings.

I was about to find out that to my surprise they didn't have the capacity to demonstrate any compassion or concern during all this.

What kind of mother, father, sister, or brother doesn't know that this is extremely painful and a time when I would need help and support? That's a rhetorical question. I am sure that my readers understand the pain I am describing.

In a previous chapter, I said that I was losing my faith. That isn't entirely true. I did pray desperately that what was happening now would change, that Lynn would get better, stronger, healthier. I also prayed that the pain I was feeling would be bearable also, so I could be there for her.

I had those feelings of a fog hanging over me as I tried to navigate life overall. I had an important role to play in the lives of others. I was a psychotherapist.

The nightmare of everything happening with Lynn was about to get more complicated and confusing.

Chapter 52: The Fog - The Nightmare Continues

[Disclaimer: I have used aliases for the names of clients to protect their identity and confidentiality.]

I knew that something was happening to me. This was different than what I had ever experienced previously in my life. So far, I described the impact of what was happening to Lynn and what that did to me.

I tried to act like things were going to be okay with Lynn. For a while, we might have thought things could return to normal.

I drove back home on Monday knowing that Lynn was going to be in the hospital for a while.

I tried to return to work thinking I could still do my job. I had an appointment to see a woman and her two children. Both parents were asking me to work with their children because they were going through a difficult divorce. I had been working with both clients, the mother, and father for some time.

Play therapy seemed to be just the thing I needed. I had met with each parent as well. They both expressed concern that the other parent was not competent to be the primary custodian. Play therapy was sufficiently unstructured to avoid anything that either parent told me from affecting the therapy with the children.

I was curious though to find out if either parent had been abusive. None of my questions seemed to yield anything that indicated abuse.

Looking back, I wish someone had asked me this question growing up. Anyway, during this time, I was not at my best. The mother would later ask me if I had found anything to help her in the custody hearings. By that time, I was even further gone from the life I had known.

I had a few other clients that didn't seem to present too many challenges. One was an older woman, named Anne, who was dealing with major depression and some addictions - not to alcohol or drugs but to sex. She wasn't really old at fifty-eight.

Something happened on three separate days in August. I was falling asleep on those days.

This is going to sound strange because I have no factual proof of what was happening, what caused the problems I was having, or why.

Alice just happened to come in during the morning on those three days. Alice had come down from Virginia with that guy John Freifeld. She had declared that she had Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). I mentioned that she had come with Tracy when John had moved to Wilmington.

To this day, I have no recollection of what Alice discussed or what she looked like.

I am guessing that I would have used a diagnosis of adjustment disorder because that is generic and used when you have no other sense of what diagnosis to use. After learning that she was being referred to me for treatment of DID, I do not recall anything that she ever shared with me. Nothing. I just remember thinking that I had no idea what diagnosis to use.

It was Tuesday, the 8th of August of 2000 when Alice came in during the morning, at 10 AM. I let her go to the office while I used the restroom. I had a big Coca-Cola that I picked up at the convenience store near my office on Chestnut Street in downtown Wilmington. This was the first time that I noticed something unusual happening to me. I had a 32-ounce cup. I remember this because I needed the caffeine that day.

I was unusually tired from the driving back from Chapel Hill where Lynn was in the hospital. But that was late Sunday and now this was Tuesday.

I found myself struggling to stay awake! That's all I remember about what happened after Alice came to the office.

Over time I have found that my mind wanted to fill in details about these sessions with Alice but honestly, there is just a blank spot in my memory around everything

related to her other than the sense that I became extremely sleepy after she came to see me.

I have memories of going to the men's room and splashing water on my face during this hour with Alice. I thought pacing or cold water would wake me up, but the feeling lingered for hours.

Rebecca came in at 1 PM and laid down on the couch facing the wall perpendicular to me as she always did. She was tall and attractive. She had been coming to me because she had relationship issues - she had been unfaithful with her husband and she thought she needed help with her sexual addiction.

Today, again, I had to get up again and use the restroom to try to wake myself up.

"How could I help anyone if I could not stay awake?" I couldn't think clearly enough to figure out what I should do at this moment.

Vanessa came in the next day. She was one of my clients with DID who had been coming from the Myrtle Beach area. She had just been released from the hospital for treatment related to her condition – DID. Her psychiatrist had made those arrangements.

She had been suicidal, though, for a person with DID, it manifested as a plan by one personality to harm "the others." Yeah, to her or them, they were a system with different people, and the fact that they all shared the same body could be forgotten by one personality or another.

Vanessa, after being released from the hospital, now was frightened that something nefarious had happened to her while she was at the hospital.

She was talking about how some cousins had raped her repeatedly at some point in the past. Sodomized her. Held her down. Again, this was that same day August 8, 2000. It was 3 PM.

One of her personalities, inside, was a teenage boy who went by the name Victor. He liked to cut the body and now he was threatening to kill the body with a gun. I wondered why she had been released if she was still in this state. I was feeling like I

was responsible for finding a solution to prevent her from acting on her plans to end her life.

She showed me cuts that Victor had made on her arms and legs. She seemed amused as she described this.

Again, Vanessa spoke about her husband sodomizing her. Ironically, this was what seemed to startle me enough to feel awake finally. The way she described it made it sound like it was a brutal and sadistic form of torture.

"Sodomized," she had said. It echoed in my mind like a sharp, cutting blow to her motionless body.

She said she could not move as her husband did this. She froze. But again, her husband did this despite the fact that she had said it triggered reminders of her trauma.

Yesterday's session with Patricia came rushing back. Patricia had started therapy at the same time as Sadie had back in 1999 before Jessica had started seeing me. They both had reported that they had known for some time that they had different personalities. She like Sadie had seen the newspaper article describing the workshop in which Louise Coggins had been the presenter.

That seemed like a lifetime ago – about 18 months had passed.

I would think during this time that it was a good thing that she had not come to that therapy/support group for people with DID. Patricia had no contact with any of my other clients and I knew that John Freifeld didn't know about her. None of those from the DID group knew of her existence, as it should be.

Anyway, Patricia, on Monday, had described how her father had done something disgusting for reasons that were hard to understand it was so offensive. She described an abusive scenario in which he had defecated into the toilet and then pushed her face into the toilet bowl.

This event which she was describing had occurred years ago.

On Monday, August 14th, after spending the weekend with Lynn in the hospital, I was back in the office and Alice came in at 11 AM and Rebecca came in at 1 PM.

I began to wonder if I was somehow experiencing the symptoms of my clients. Was I trying to escape in my mind from the reality of what was happening to Lynn? I mean at the time I was wondering if there was a purpose to what I was experiencing. It was one of those existential questions about suffering.

During the rest of this past week, I was so stressed about what was happening to Lynn. I couldn't sit still. I couldn't sleep. I was tossing and turning. My heart was racing. My stomach was upset almost all the time.

I knew about dissociative disorders. If I was going to zone out in response to something there would have to be a trigger of some sort.

Nothing stood out about last Tuesday and now today, Monday.

This was just nothing like I had ever experienced. There was nothing to which I could compare this experience.

Anyway, the day dragged on and I couldn't shake the feeling.

My thinking and my perceptions were foggy, like looking at the world through a fog. What is strange is that I described that sensation earlier but at that time I was agitated, anxious, my heart was racing, and I would not have been able to fall asleep.

Now, today, Monday, I was struggling to stay awake all day.

I had not discussed this with Lynn because I felt she had enough to deal with.

For months and years after this, I would have a powerful sensation where I would see myself walking down a hallway and I would be thinking that the observing me wanted to shout at the vision of myself during this time, "wake up, wake up."

"What are you doing?"

I found myself in the men's room several times trying to wake up and squeezing my hands against my forehead and my face trying to figure out what is happening and to stay awake. I couldn't even focus on a plan as to what I should do about these experiences.

I just walked about like some zombie or a robot. How was it that no one was noticing anything?

Yeah, looking back, I would think I should have stayed home or called someone to get myself "grounded" ... just as I had helped others. My mind wasn't clear enough to do even that when it was happening.

Then the next day would come and I would be so confused about events the prior day. I wasn't sure I had dreamed what happened or if it really happened.

On Thursday, August 17, beginning late in the day it started to happen again. The fog hung over me into Friday. I wanted to say that I couldn't sleep that night, but I actually got home at 6 PM and fell onto the bed asleep.

I had vivid dreams that night. I remembered that snakes were appearing in the dreams. Sinister looking. A diamondback rattlesnake with an expression that seemed to embody evil itself. That's just what was going through my mind. It was like I was in the presence of something evil because while the face of the snake was not distorted in any way, it had a human expression. I remembered thinking this is what evil would look like.

This was the third incident when my mind was not acting like it normally does.

As I write this, I have a mixture of clarity, but it is still foggy. There are some things that I cannot recall.

As an aside, I did write a collection of poems called "Puncture Wounds" with another poet friend of mine in the late 2000s. It was inspired by my experiences with Freifeld and a few others.

My poet friend Jean had said, “maybe you did find yourself in the presence of evil.” He was Episcopalian like Celta had been – it’s very much like the Catholic faith. He invited me to receive some blessing at Church one day years ago.

I remember Jean had said, “if you believe in one you have to believe in the other.” He meant belief in God, who is good implies a belief in Satan and evil itself. Yeah, Freifeld seemed soulless. Like a vampire. The collection “Puncture Wounds” is partially based on the themes and symbolism that go along with the vampire legend.

Reflections

These events, whatever they were, and my behavior during this time have never been explained. I have to live with that knowledge. I wanted to know like everyone else who is in an emotional crisis wants to know what happened and why. These experiences seemed to happen after I had met with Alice but I cannot be certain.

I have NEVER had experiences like this previously or since then. More than two decades have passed and I have no answers.

It wasn’t a dissociative disorder because in those cases the experiences must last longer than one month. I had never heard of someone saying that they had a dissociative disorder just one time in their life.

It wasn’t a psychotic break because I have never heard of anyone saying that it happened once during a brief period of their life and never again. Usually, a psychotic break is the first of a series of episodes and medication is required.

I’ve never been on medications for either of these conditions nor have I been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder or a dissociative disorder. Actually, there was one exception when someone speculated that I might have impaired reality testing. I’ll get to that later but what he was really saying is that I should be examined to get more information.

We always have to rule out the influence of mind-altering substances. I am going to qualify my statements in this regard by saying that I have never knowingly used

mind-altering illicit drugs or street drugs. I also have no evidence to support the belief that I had been drugged. I cannot say why it would have been done.

At times I have declared this, and some people have accepted it as if it were a fact. I merely stated that Alice had the opportunity to put something into my open soda cup.

The limited nature of these episodes also would have been something I would ask clients about to rule out the influence of a mind-altering drug.

There were other ways in which I was acting irrational and confused... making bad decisions. Some of this happened later.

This is all I can offer in terms of what I remember and what is lacking from my memory. The lack of any memory of Alice, what she looked like, or what she discussed is also strange and inconsistent with the rest of my experiences.

The only other person I cannot form an image of is Tracy. I recall her sessions with me as I described earlier. She had come to Wilmington with John Freifeld. I only met with her on two occasions.

Chapter 53: Threats to My Career - The Impact It Would Have on Lynn

[Disclaimer: I have used aliases for clients to protect their identity and confidentiality.]

While all these things were happening, while I was trying to stay to hold onto my sanity amongst the grief over what had changed in my life with Lynn and the feelings that I had been drugged, I learned that grievances had been filed against me with the North Carolina Social Work Certification and Licensure Board (NCSWCLB). Everything was happening all at once.

This was during August of 2000. For the most part, this entire section of the book covers just one month in my life when everything changed. I was in a fog. Things didn't seem real. I was trying to process that the love of my life, Lynn, might die.

Everything had been fine just yesterday – I mean it felt like just yesterday. It felt like one day things were great and the next day I was living in a nightmare. There had been some gradual worsening of Lynn's health, as I tried to indicate previously; but I had not noticed what was happening.

I had been on top of the world, successful in my career, living a happy life with my wife. We had a "normal life." ... until it wasn't normal!

How could I mount a defense against the complaints or grievances? For me, I never imagined anyone would complain about my services. I felt shame!

Looking back, I had not been reflecting on the reality of all the people who had been totally and completely happy with me over the past decade! Easily hundreds of people!

It wasn't comforting enough to know that these individuals had been brainwashed by John Freifeld. Why was he so obsessed with me? I learned that he had composed one single grievance letter or statement and the same exact letter or statement was signed by all five clients.

Let me give a summary of what was said. Again, this was the same exact grievance statement. That in itself is strange since each client had different issues. They all had Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and two of them had been referred to me by John Freifeld.

They didn't feel that I could treat DID. They claimed that I insisted that I speak to their alters – ironically, that was what Tracy said she hated John for doing. She had not been involved in this grievance since she had returned and left the area a couple of months ago.

They speculated that I was working with them because they were female, and they speculated that when I left the room to use the restroom it was to masturbate! Gee, I wonder where they got such a bizarre idea? Maybe from the guy who brought Tracy down to Wilmington to help her and then made unwelcome sexual advances on her, forcing her to escape the area?

They claimed that I spent too much time in sessions with them. They also claimed that I planted false memories of satanic ritual abuse.

What do I mean, brainwashed by him? Well, Sadie had left my services over two months previous to this. She had NEVER once mentioned the topic of satanic ritual abuse or anything that bizarre. She had NEVER expressed any dissatisfaction with anything I had done. Neither had her mother, other friends, and family, nor her wife.

The only two of them that even spoke about these conspiracy theories or anything related to that were Vanessa and Jessica. What they had shared was very vague and it had a religious tone to it. It was only enough to send me looking online to find out more about what might be going on with them. That's when I had gone down the proverbial rabbit hole. That had only just happened.

I remembered how Michelle had been triggered by something she and Vanessa saw in the movie "Conspiracy Theory", but I never found out what it was that triggered her or what it might mean to her.

They had retained lawyers and filed malpractice civil suits against me as well. My malpractice insurance company assigned me a lawyer who helped with the NCSWCLB complaints/grievances as well.

Lynn was in the hospital during this time, and I was going to have to tell her about this. I dreaded bringing more stressful information to her. I knew how much she loved me and wanted me to be happy and successful.

Chapter 54: Lynn Leaves the Hospital: The Cystic Fibrosis Nightmare Continues

[Disclaimer: I have used aliases for clients to protect their identity and confidentiality.]

It was August of 2000, and Lynn was in the hospital. It would have been easier if I was physically ill because then I would know to stay home and not see any clients. Instead, I made trips back to our home and I tried to work.

On one of those days when I was feeling like I had been drugged, something very unusual happened with Vanessa, one of my clients who had been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). She had just been released from the hospital as I noted earlier.

I didn't think she had any contact with John Freifeld until I learned that she signed that grievance letter to the board – the one that I would find out had been written by John. All this information was still coming in.

I was with Vanessa in a therapy session. I started speaking to one of her child alters. I was sitting in my office chair which had wheels on it, and it was rocking. I was dozing off. Before I knew it, she was on top of me in the office. Her lips had met mine.

I recoiled and rolled back slamming my chair against the desk behind me. No one had done anything like this to me! "What the hell," I shouted and stood up.

She was laughing and "Cinnamon" seemed to be out. That was one of her personalities that had been seductive. My hand moved up and I clenched my fist.

This triggered a change and suddenly Victor was out. When people are newly discovering their personalities, they don't switch very quickly and it looks more dramatic.

He (she) took a swing at me and hit me in the face. I knew I was still looking at a female. I was completely disoriented by what had happened. But I was awake.

Clearly, I could not meet with Vanessa any longer as her therapist. Yet, I still felt shame. I was the therapist. I was so trusting.

Michelle had been drawn into this as well. When she was in therapy the next day, she said she had spoken to Vanessa and heard all about it. She had been mad and spoke up for me, she said. She was bragging that she had said that "the only reason she could hit me is that she knew I couldn't hit her back."

I was there in the hospital explaining this event to Lynn. I never kept any secrets from Lynn. I also would NEVER knowingly allow anyone to get that close to me. It just never happened. From the day I started seeing Lynn on July 4, 1992, until now, I had never had an experience like that. I couldn't quite wrap my mind around how it happened.

I should have known that Vanessa had this seductive personality, and I should have been more careful. Right? But I had been so out of it. I was dozing off.

Vanessa had that laugh that said she enjoyed my discomfort. Only the younger personalities didn't like the way Victor or Cinnamon acted toward me.

To be unfaithful to Lynn was unthinkable. I had never thought of anyone romantically other than Lynn from the moment I moved to Wilmington in April of 1992. This wasn't a pleasant experience in any sense of the word. In fact, I felt violated.

My impulse to strike Vanessa was in part a form of anger turned inward against myself. That being said, I was disgusted with what she had done!

I wasn't going to hide this from Lynn, but it still hurt to talk about anyone else getting so close to me. I had attractive clients over the years, but I had processed those issues of countertransference with my psychoanalyst.

This event was not like this at all. I think Lynn knew this, but it was still shameful to bring this news to her while she was in the hospital fighting the infections in her lungs and trying to build her strength. I could tell she was hurt all the same.

I could barely speak the words of apology which was strange because I had always demonstrated guilt and remorse, whenever I said anything hurtful to her. I would profusely apologize. Now, I wanted to keep the thought, image, and idea so far away from our minds.

We moved past this, somehow.

Lynn's Hospital Struggles

I stayed and watched her try to walk around the unit and she had to do that with an oxygen tank by her side. Any moment she might need help.

I would be told that I needed to stay in the dorms, and couldn't stay all night with Lynn in the hospital but that was not enforced. I would curl up next to Lynn and hold her trying not to hurt her arm where the IV had been inserted. I am sure the nurses could see that I was crying when Lynn had faded off to sleep. I was trying to be strong for her when she was awake.

I would take her down to the lobby and outside for fresh air. Her mother was visiting as well, but that hardly registered with me. All my thoughts were with Lynn.

Let me repeat that again. All my thought were with Lynn.

Occasionally, I registered that my family barely showed any concern at all for what I was experiencing.

What we were experiencing.

Some of these insights only recently came to me. At the time, I was too focused on Lynn to reflect upon how messed up my parents and siblings were.

They didn't come to visit Lynn or me. I mean for all practical purposes; Lynn was like a daughter-in-law. We didn't have a wedding and they knew why - it was related to Lynn's health and need for insurance. The failure of my siblings and parents to visit Lynn disgusted me.

I was also shocked that they had not been there to visit Lynn because it just didn't make sense even for them. They were never the most sentimental or emotional people, but this was just so extreme. Their seeming indifference made no sense to me. I was not spending much of my time thinking about things like that, though.

Problems with My Career

I had to explain to Lynn what was happening with my career. I said that the North Carolina Social Work Certification and Licensure Board (NCSWCLB) had received five complaints from individuals who I thought were associated with Freifeld. I was still getting information drip by drip.

I had malpractice insurance and I was assigned a lawyer by the insurance company.

I would later be informed that the grievances were known to have been composed by John Freifeld. I would also learn that the grievance statements to the NCSWCLB were all the same - verbatim. My lawyer would convey this to me over time.

Lynn didn't need to hear all the details about the nature of the complaints.

This was stressful enough for her. I knew that she wanted me to be happy and that this was overwhelming her.

Lynn's Future After the Hospital

Lynn's health was stressful enough without these things happening also. She said she couldn't focus on healing and help me deal with everything I was going through in my career and in my life.

I had the bright idea of renting a room for a couple of days to a guy. I can't even remember how I found someone to rent a room in our home.

No, he wasn't a client of mine. It's reasonable to wonder about that because, at this time in August of 2000, my life was for the most part split between taking care of Lynn, being at the hospital with Lynn, or worrying about her well-being and trying to make money.

This guy to whom I rented a room ended up stealing my car. I had left my car keys out and he drove off with my car. I called the police, but they couldn't call it a theft at first because he had lived here. That seemed strange.

Eventually, the car was located, and I found out that it was totaled. This was another stressor making Lynn's life miserable because she had cosigned for the car and we owed money on the car. This was the last thing I had intended to have happened!

Lynn's Concerns About Her Discharge

Lynn was concerned that I also had not kept the home clean enough for her and she was going to have to be on IV antibiotics when she was sent home. This was to keep fighting the infections in her lungs. As I explained elsewhere, the infections were scarring her lungs.

Lynn was worried that because I had not kept things clean enough, the dust and other particulates in the air would affect her lungs and cause more infections. So, she said she was going to move in with her mother when she was discharged.

What could I do at this point? She was also overwhelmed by everything I was experiencing in my life and she couldn't face all this.

Only years later would I put together the fact that she was so overwhelmed because of her love for me and her desire to see me happy and successful. So, just as her illness affected me, so had the failure of my career and my private practice affected her.

It was all too much for her. I felt survivor's guilt in a way. I wasn't the one with a deadly disease. Lynn was only 34 and it seemed like she might die. So, it wasn't like I could say that I am having a hard time myself. At least that was what was going through my mind. I was constantly beating up on myself for every way in which I was letting down Lynn. I felt worthless.

I felt powerless.

Chapter 55: Lynn Might Not Come Back to Me! Cystic Fibrosis and Death

It had seemed that cystic fibrosis was about to destroy my entire life, as well as threaten the life of the woman I loved. I feel selfish to say that it was destroying my life. I cannot say that I was dying, not literally. I felt survivor's guilt because of this fact. I felt I didn't have a right to speak about how I was experiencing all of this. That might be part of the reason why I didn't reach out to friends and say, "I need your help" or "I need your support." or "I need to talk."

Lynn had known the devastating pain this would cause me. I just had a hard time thinking about "me." It's ironic that by not focusing on how this was affecting me, I didn't appreciate that this was an emotional, psychological and existential crisis for me.

To be honest, it happened too fast for me to get in to see a psychotherapist or a doctor for help to deal with this. If I had a physical sickness, I would have called my doctor and gotten an appointment in a day or so, maybe a week. With a psychological crisis or sickness that comes on so quickly, we don't think in terms of emergencies that must be addressed immediately.

I was like a walking zombie without Lynn.

She was now staying at her mother's place in Wilmington, the place on Wrightsville Beach.

I was beating up on myself for not keeping the place clean enough for Lynn to feel comfortable living in our home... but in reality, there was more to the story of why Lynn was living with her mother.

I was reflecting on the entire month that and what had happened.

We had two cats and they used the litter box in the garage. Sometimes I would forget to clean that also or before she went into the hospital the second time, I didn't want to do it myself. I had been in denial and struggling to admit to the fact that she could not do the things she used to be able to do.

Every little failure or thing I forgot to do made me feel ashamed. I hadn't been stubbornly refusing to do these things. I hadn't been angry at Lynn for not helping with any of these chores that would have been shared in the past. No, I just was in denial of what was happening and what her inability to do certain things meant.

It might have seemed like an easy calculation, that cleaning the home and doing other things to make it more likely that Lynn could come home is the most obvious thing for me to do but that just wasn't registering as something that was so obvious. Plus, I was terrified that Lynn might die. I kept pushing that thought away. In so doing, I was pushing a part of my reality out of my mind.

My normal capacity for planning and problem setting wasn't working at peak levels, to put it mildly. All the resources within me that had served me and guided me throughout the years were non-functional at this time. It seemed like those faculties had shut down.

We all need help at times in our lives - a supportive person like a therapist, friend, family member.

Dear reader, you might wonder why I could not offer myself the same support and guidance that I might offer a client. You might wonder why I couldn't draw upon my own skills. Up until this point in my life, I would have been able to step back, plan, figure out what I need to do, and then do it.

I would have done something.

I cannot overstate this fact, but I would have done anything imaginable to hold onto the life I had with Lynn - to hold onto any life with Lynn!

We were still in the month of August of 2000.

Clients depended upon me also.

Despite the grievances of those five clients, I had dozens of other clients whose therapy was going along well and things were fairly "normal" in that regard. I felt a responsibility to try to help them.

I couldn't just wallow in the grief and pain of losing Lynn forever. I also didn't know what to expect regarding Lynn's health. I felt powerless to help her so I didn't know what to do.

I had developed a coping mechanism to deal with the issues of being in love with someone who had a terminal disease called cystic fibrosis. We had lived life "in the moment." What else can you do? I mean, whether you are talking about Lynn who had lived with this her whole life all those years before she met me or if you are talking about me knowing in some way that I might not have Lynn forever, we both had to focus on what we had.

That strategy might make the best sense in a way, but it can also lead to denial. I know that this is what I was experiencing in August of 2000. In essence, it was like telling myself "This isn't happening. Everything is fine." But things were not fine. Lynn needed me and I wasn't giving her any sense that I could be there for her.

I wanted and needed to believe that the situation with Lynn living with her mother was temporary. Lynn's mother, Diane had separated from her husband, Bob, and was living down in Wilmington all the time. She had gotten a job as a psychologist in one of the schools.

On about the fourth of September of 2000, I heard Lynn tell me that she might not come back to me. I couldn't even begin to have a "logical" conversation about this because I broke down and started crying.

I was moving through life on autopilot.

I was in denial when I heard those words from Lynn that she might not come back. I thought, "this is not happening."

This is not happening. I could not wrap my mind around the reality of what I was hearing.

I reflected upon the weeks and months before the nightmare had started.

Just a few weeks earlier life had seemed so "normal." We were so in love. I had felt her body next to mine and knew that the love, passion, and romance had not faded at all in all the years we were together. If anything, it had only grown.

We had been so close just weeks earlier. Falling asleep with my arms around her. My heart and breathing synchronized with hers. I had felt such a sense of serenity as she drifted off to sleep. I tried desperately to hold onto that memory and that peace, but I couldn't.

My mind kept trying to conjure images and memories of this serenity of falling asleep, our bodies touching. Both of us facing the front window in the bedroom.

Her heartbeat and breathing slowing little by little as she transitioned into sleep. That was just a few weeks ago but it felt like the day before.

It might have been the day before but for her disease - cystic fibrosis.

There were other things that were happening in my life, but I was so consumed by the changes in Lynn's health that I could not function as I once had. I had tried to go on coping and working but things were different now.

Chapter 56: The End of Life as I Had Known It - More About Cystic Fibrosis

I was just trying not to believe that it was really happening. The life that I had known for years could not end so quickly, could it? It was mid-September and I had nowhere to go.

A meteor had come crashing down upon the life I had known, obliterating everything.

I kept thinking about how everything had been so right and normal yesterday – not literally yesterday but that’s how it felt.

Then everything changed and I had not seen it coming. I would have done something surely if I had seen danger ahead or if I had known that life would become so extremely challenging.

It wasn't long after Lynn first stated that she might not come back to me. How could this be? I NEVER imagined a life without her. I also had not foreseen the problems I was having in my career. Who would believe that some fraudster - John Freifeld - would be able to do anything to hurt me or my career and reputation with my clients?

No one who had not come in contact with Freifeld was complaining about my competency or performance as a psychotherapist. I did have problems and had noticed over the past month and a half I had not been myself or at my best. It didn't seem that anyone actually noticed that I could not still provide psychotherapy for them.

People were still calling me for appointments, but I had to close down my private practice.

The fact that there were grievances at all made me think that I better put all therapy sessions on hold for a while. I didn't know where to turn for help though. It had been a few months since I had an appointment with any of my previous therapists.

I then heard from Diane, Lynn's mother, that she was planning to sell the house she had bought for Lynn and me to rent.

I had to move out of our home.

It seemed like just a few weeks ago everything was perfect in my life and in the lives of Lynn and me. But it also seemed like it was during another lifetime. How can things fall apart so fast?

My mind went to that song by Don Henley called "New York Minute." It was just the first week of September of 2000. The lyrics went through my mind.



"He had a home
The love of a girl
But men get lost sometimes
As years unfurl
One day he crossed some line
And he was too much in this world
But I guess it doesn't matter anymore"

And then Don Henley sings

"If you find somebody to love in this world
You better hang on tooth and nail."

I had tried so hard to hold onto Lynn!

Then Don Henley says

"And in these days
When darkness falls early
And people rush home
To the ones they love
You better take a fool's advice
And take care of your own
'Cause one day they're here;
Next day they're gone"

Darkness was all I knew now.

And finally, the most poignant lines from the song read

"I pulled my coat around my shoulders
And took a walk down through the park
The leaves were falling around me
The groaning city in the gathering dark
On some solitary rock
A desperate lover left his mark,
He said "Baby, I've changed. Please come back."

What the head makes cloudy
The heart makes very clear"

I was that desperate lover crying out to Lynn "Please come back!" My head might have been cloudy, but my heart was so desperately clear in what I wanted and needed with every fiber of my being.

I used to think about this many years earlier after Celta died in a fire. I had just spoken to her the previous day. Now, with those words from Lynn that she might not come back, I was lost in darkness without a compass or guide.

Not long after that, Diane, Lynn's mother, announced her plans to sell that house. I had moved out already.

A meteor had come crashing down upon my life. The home we had known was being obliterated. My home!

On September 7, 2000, I was summoned by Diane to retrieve what I might want from the home. I wanted Lynn. I didn't want to see these boxes. Lynn wasn't even there. I wondered how she was doing.

The kitchen table was still there. The living room couch still sat where we had it along with the chairs. This is where we would entertain guests - our friends - and family.

I felt like I was dead - literally. I know that might sound hard to imagine.

When we experience stressors in life, our minds and bodies react in different ways. We might become anxious and the fight or flight response kicks in. It's like being on the plains of Africa and seeing a hungry lion. Our bodies need to prepare us to run. Something like that happens in response to any type of stress that humans face - we respond based on our thoughts as if we were in physical danger.

There are other responses like the freeze response which animals use as well. One might imagine an animal playing dead as a survival mechanism. We might also think of this as a turtle withdrawing into its shell and hoping not to be noticed by a predator.

Something like that happened to me on that day when I showed up to gather what I might want. I wanted Lynn.

I was so overwhelmed, and my body felt like it was shutting down. I went into the room where we had the computer and the bookcase. It was around the corner and

not visible from the living room. I put my back up against the wall on the left next to the closet with the mirrors on it.

I slid down the wall and raised my legs up at the knees and stared blankly ahead. I was vaguely aware that Diane was frustrated and angry at me.

I was supposed to be doing something. She needed to sell the place. I was expected to act. But instead, I just stared ahead blankly. Like I was dead. I wasn't trying to be difficult or putting on an act of defiance. I felt dead!

I could vaguely register that she had called my mother when I didn't respond at all.

Diane was either mad at me for acting this way or frustrated.

Everything I had known was here... This was our home. It felt comfortable for me and now it was being packed up and put into boxes.

Life as I had known it was disappearing like ashes from a fire. The love of my life, Lynn, fading away. It couldn't be. My home being deconstructed and taken down as if it had no meaning.

I wasn't being told that Lynn didn't want me to keep visiting her at her mother's place.

It was too easy to deconstruct the life we had. Somehow, somewhere along the way, Lynn had lost her ring.

There had been no wedding and no official marriage certificate.

We weren't talking about what this meant. There were no goodbyes.

It was a reverse of the first few years but all in the space of two months.

Lynn and I never had to talk about "are you seeing someone else?" She brought up the issue of whether we were more than just friends, one year after we started seeing each other. But it was just a formality. Everyone and anyone who saw us knew we were more than just friends back then.

The engagement happened without actual planning. I mean it was just a part of us saying to each other, "I'm in love with you." I remembered how I had given her the ring and she was in tears – tears of joy – as I opened the box. I had been shocked because I had thought she knew I was bringing her ring over that day.

We had NEEDED to live together after that. As much as Lynn needed as much oxygen as she could get so had we needed to be together.

So, when Lynn said she might not be coming back, I didn't have to ask what that meant. I wouldn't ask or speak it!

No, no, no, no!

This is NOT happening! This is NOT happening!

What happened next, I don't remember. The next few days were dream-like. I was seeing the world as if I were looking through smoke, ashes, and fog. And all I could do is watch.

Chapter 57: My Final Days in Wilmington

- Reflections on What Happened

For a few weeks in mid-2000, I had been making over \$1000 per week. Yes, indeed. I had forgotten to mention that previously in this book. Things were really taking off for me. In June, I had been putting in more than forty hours per week and loving that. I wouldn't want to do that forever, because I wanted to enjoy the life I had with Lynn - before everything happened. There were a couple of weeks where I brought in over \$2000.

I had plans. All that collapsed in August and into the first week to ten days of September of 2000. I am not going to offer an itemized list of how I went from being on track to make six figures per year to nothing. The funds that I had were not all for me, of course.

I want to try to comment on the nature of what was stated by the clients who filed grievances with the North Carolina Social Worker Certification and Licensure Board (NCSWCLB). I mentioned that I knew that John Freifeld had composed the entire grievance/complaint letter for the clients. I found out from my lawyer that the board was aware that he composed the entire statement that they made.

Some aspects of this complaint letter were vague and likely a form of projection. He filled their heads with the idea that I had only been interested in meeting with them each week because I found them attractive. It seemed to me based on my experience that he was projecting his own motives toward women onto me.

I do not know exactly what was going on at the home of Jessica, the first client he referred to me when he was still living in Virginia.

I had heard months earlier that she was having "flashbacks" and "panic attacks" and that was why she and her husband needed John to be living there for free. Yes, that was stated at some point. They thought he was helping her. My efforts to point out how they were getting worse and not better with Freifeld's help were not effective enough.

These individuals who met in one of the groups that I had I believed were spending time over at Jessica's home. I heard that he had a few rooms set up for helping them process or deal with their memories/flashbacks of past trauma. Again, they were well aware, as I explained earlier, that he was not trained to know how to set up anything of this nature.

I had discovered the "conspiracy theories" on the internet following some interactions with two of my clients. I had just done some searches online with various keywords and that led down a rabbit hole.

I remember how I had as an activity for therapy groups that were like scrapbooking. It seemed like an icebreaker or a way to facilitate discussion. I had used this with various clients over time. I'm only mentioning this because I remember a book that I stumbled upon online called "Paperclip Dolls." That made me think of that workshop on dissociative identity disorder (DID) that I organized in early 1999 with Louise Coggins, MSW, LCSW.

Louise had mentioned ritual abuse in more than one context, including at that workshop. And she talked about using scrapbooking with magazines as a creative form of therapy.

I thought I was hearing facts and I did not put "ritual abuse" into a context with "satanic ritual abuse" which was part of the conspiracy theories that were being spread across the internet during this period. My discovery of these "conspiracy theories" was only after I had noticed a bizarre theme coming up in therapy with Jessica and one other client.

Anyway, the book "Paperclip Dolls" was another book that was in that same vein of a person discovering and reconstructing memories of "satanic ritual abuse" and mind control programming. By "programming" I mean something like behavioral psychology techniques where some cue or trigger could elicit a deliberate programmed response. Think of how Pavlov's dogs would salivate in response to a buzzer or a light because it had been paired up with dispensing food for the dogs.

Somehow the author of "Paperclip Dolls" had discovered that she had been abused as a child and she had discovered the memories of this from various images in magazines that caught her attention. These discoveries and the sense that they

caught her attention seemed to confirm that her new memories must be true. She came to believe that she must have been part of a government program that involved mind control.

This is what the author of Paperclip Dolls had discovered. I hinted earlier in this book that I had been flipping through that book on a very memorable moment and sexually intimate experience that I had with Lynn back in April of 2000. At the time, I had no idea that I was going to be accused of planting false memories of "satanic ritual abuse."

I wish I could offer more details about how any of my clients had begun to believe that things like this happened to them or why they believed it happened to anyone for that matter. Again, I didn't know what was happening at the home of Jessica, where John Freifeld was living and seeking to help a few of my clients.

I had mentioned that my colleagues - members of the local Society of Clinical Social Workers - suggested that I tell these clients that I could not help them if they were also receiving treatment from Freifeld. For one thing, everything had been happening so fast that I had not had time to implement this policy. I also don't know how he or the clients with whom I spoke about this felt.

Family Connections

I mentioned that I had turned to my family for support when Lynn became ill. Any reasonable person would understand how traumatic or tragic all this would be and why I would need support.

Up until last year, I have maintained a relationship with my parents and my sister. I mentioned earlier that I had not spoken to my brother since shortly after I made a call to child protective services. I had seen him lose his temper and push his daughter Emily up against a wall like she was a rag doll and she had told me when I asked her about some marks, that "your brother did that."

As I was saying, I had maintained a relationship with my siblings and my parents until recently.

Then it hit me. It seemed so insane that they were not there at all during this period. They had not visited Lynn in the hospital to see how she was doing. Heck, they never even sent a card to me or her. They seemed indifferent to my suffering.

My sister, Carrie Whealton, has never married or been in love. However, it's not reasonable or rational to suggest that she would not understand what it would be like to lose the love of one's life. She has parents and grandparents.

I'm not saying that I am JUST angry that this happened. What I mean, is that there has never been any explanation offered for how or why they could have acted that way. It made me feel like I did not matter at all in their eyes. My success did not matter. My happiness didn't matter.

I cannot spend my time speculating on how or why they made those decisions. I know that I deserve better.

I suppose I could have been upset at Diane for not caring at all that I had nowhere to do, no income now and I was devastated beyond being able to cope with life at all. But my sense of survivor's guilt kicked in. So, all I felt was shame and worthlessness.

We couldn't get married for health and insurance reasons, so it had seemed too easy to deconstruct our life. In retrospect, Diane knew we were living as husband and wife. So, I was like a son-in-law.

I had always been welcomed for holidays with Lynn. More than that, Diane bought the home for us. Sure, it was an investment but her decision to sell it when Lynn decided that she didn't think she would be coming back demonstrated that it was for us and that she knew that I was the one that had made Lynn so happy.

She must have remembered that.

I had nowhere to go now. Lynn took the cats. For a while, I asked to take the cats, but I was feeling sufficiently guilty, and I was on the run soon... without anything that I had known for so long.

I would end up leaving my clients stranded as well without an explanation.

Dear reader, if you have any unanswered questions now, please understand one thing that is key. I was so out of it, so in shock, so unable to process everything, so overwhelmed... I couldn't figure out anything myself!

I entirely expect readers to have many more questions. When you fully appreciate my state of mind, you will understand why I do not have answers or did not know then... anything.

This might be a good time to make a transition to another section of my book. Where I went and what I did as I bounced around after this, as a ball dropped down some steps, will be described in the next section.

Here's a poem that I wrote as I reflected upon the horrors of this period, including the inability to handle the trauma of my clients as I had been able to do in the past.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

I'd like to think
I'm just like
anyone else -
that we all have limits...
There's only so much
we can take...
So much -
Pain... Fear... Loss... Trauma.
There's only so much
any of us can experience
and remain sane
and true to
our ideals, our values,
who we are and
the person we have become.
When the pain,
the fear, the terror,
the trauma
exceeds this limit,

We snap
and for a while
we drift away...
away to someplace
in our mind,
someplace utterly unknown,
unexpected,
outside reality...
maybe we come back
and then maybe we don't...
It depends on what
might call us back.

You will learn about what was happening... not why. You won't read about someone with a plan or hopes. First, I have a short chapter that is a letter to someone else who loved Lynn.

Chapter 58: Honoring Lynn – A Letter to Her Mother

Diane was Lynn's mother. In my healing, I have come to forgive myself for my mistakes and to love myself. To develop a sense of self-compassion. It was devastating to discover that I was not mentioned in Lynn's obituary. We will get to my reflections upon that in a moment.

Dear Diane:

What I am about to write is not about me or for me. I need to honor Lynn and her legacy ... to talk to the world about her value. I'm not writing this letter for personal reasons.

I wanted to announce a book that I wrote that honors Lynn and what she offered the world. This letter is a chapter from that book. It's up to you if you want to read the book. It's my autobiography but Lynn features prominently in the book. I titled it "Memoirs of a Healer/Clinical Social Worker – Autobiography of Bruce Whealton." It can be found online at <https://brucewhealton.com/autobiography>

I spend a large portion of the book trying to make sense of what happened in 2000 to me. At some point during this period, I heard that you thought I needed to have learned more about emotional intelligence. That my impulses were not in check.

I couldn't forgive myself for not being there for Lynn when she needed me in 2000 when she got sick. I never reached out like this because I imagined I didn't deserve any compassion or understanding. I understood what I would feel about anyone who caused Lynn any pain.

So, I get it. Let me repeat it. I know how I would feel toward anyone who caused Lynn any pain!

In Lynn's obituary, I read nothing that comes close to conveying just how profoundly amazing she was and how she made the world a better place!

We might think, “well, that’s okay, Lynn didn’t have anything to prove, or she wasn’t looking for recognition in her actions.”

I know differently – at least when she was with me. She loved that I had been willing to declare my love loud and clear for anyone who would listen. I give examples of his in this book.

Take, for example, a time when I got up in front of a group of people at the poetry reading at the Coastline Convention Center and read a new poem – a love poem – that everyone knew was about Lynn and dedicated to Lynn. She had been doodling because she thought I was going to read only poems she already heard. She felt so embarrassed when she realized what she missed.

After that, she would read that poem of mine, dedicated to her, about my love for her, whenever it was her turn to share at some poetry reading, and perhaps she didn’t have something to read of her own.

As I was saying, this letter is part of a chapter in a book that does just that. It’s my autobiography.

Diane, you are right, I was acting crazy in 2000. I know I was supposed to be there for Lynn. But when it came to matters of the heart, my personal life, my choice of Lynn, I was driven by my passions.

And it seems like we are dishonoring Lynn by not acknowledging or accepting her judgment as you once did!

Lynn wanted someone crazy in love with her! Do not EVER doubt that I was not totally and completely in love with Lynn. That is something that can be known to be true above all else!

There are few things in life that I know or believe for certain. My love for Lynn is one of those things that I know with absolute certainty.

There might be many things that one might say about these things, but no one can say that I stopped loving Lynn ever or that I wasn’t still totally and completely in love with Lynn even during the 2000s!

During that next decade, I was still in love with Lynn. I would break down in tears ten years after we went on a different path.

I have no idea what Lynn was going through. I was afraid that reaching out to her directly would cause her pain by reminding her of the love we once had that had not lasted. I have no idea if that was the right choice.

I used to ask people who I met on Facebook. They were nice and I was only giving them her phone number which was available to the public. They were really moved by the love I had conveyed and my desperation. I heard a few of them called her but we didn't get anywhere.

I didn't know what to do.

I made a new friend who was a writer named Ryan Miller who was introduced to me by Jean Jones – a mutual friend of Lynn and mine. I would stay with him when I visited Wilmington and I would share stories about my life with Lynn, revisiting places where we had gone.

To this day, I do not have a full understanding of what was going on with me during a period in 2000 – I think it was August. I have tried with the guidance and counseling of others to find those answers.

It wasn't like I was always that same person that let down Lynn when she needed me and did such crazy things. To believe that would be to dishonor Lynn and her judgment. Winning, earning, deserving the love of Lynn was not something I took for granted. For all those years, I would think about how lucky I was and how much I needed to continue to deserve Lynn's love.

I couldn't believe when I saw her in mid-1992 that she didn't already have someone in her life.

Then when I gave her an engagement ring, I saw tears of joy and there has been a no more joyful moment in my life – that I could make her that happy! We had picked out the ring together and I thought she knew I was coming with the ring that day. I was taken by surprise when I saw the happiness that I brought to her. I'll never forget that.

What I am saying is that I could not possibly have been in my right mind back in 2000 when she decided and told me that she wasn't coming back home. I wasn't myself.

I had so many draft letters that I consulted with therapists upon that I meant to send to Lynn.

Earning her love was the single greatest accomplishment in my life. To lose that... to hear that she might not or isn't coming back home... I'm speechless.

Lynn saw something was happening to me. She said she wished I had kept in touch with our friends because she couldn't provide the support I needed.

There was no closure. Lynn didn't say "I need you to get help before we can go on together because you are acting crazy."

I came to feel worthless and undeserving of her after what happened. I also had no idea what she was feeling or wanting later. I certainly didn't want to cause her any more pain. The way I was in 2000 at a certain point during that year, was completely different than the way I had been.

Sometime in 2009, I went to a poetry workshop that Lynn attended as well. I was in the same room with Lynn, she was right next to me. My heart was racing. I was so nervous and confused. I couldn't form any words. It almost seemed like someone had created this opportunity... but I wasn't able to realize if that was true or not.

The poem I read was called "Fugue State." I suppose I had been lost and confused, in fog, without Lynn.

Then when it came around to her to comment, she said "I pass." I had already been shaking and nearly hyperventilating. Within moments I got up and went out into the night walking.

I did not know I would go crazy when Lynn got really sick, and I feared losing her. It doesn't mean I loved her less than you did.

There was a moment when I just shut down while you wanted me to pack up things from the house as you were selling it. I wasn't trying to be difficult nor was I acting

out. I have studied the Polyvagal Theory recently and it seems that what happened was that I had reverted to the primitive brain's method of coping by shutting down. Drawing inward and away from the higher brain functions that are typical of social animals.

Something inside of me died during that time period.

So, I suppose you shouldn't have been calling my mother when I shut down and you didn't know what to do.

My mother's abuse and emotional neglect left me vulnerable in a way that I had not expected. I had been in therapy for so long with so many therapists, trying to be sure I worked on all my issues. If any of them got a hint that there was something more to work on, they would have told me.

Lynn would have noticed too. Trust her judgment. You did from the day Lynn and I started seeing each other.

Lynn wasn't shy about telling me what was not acceptable! About where I might want to improve or what I needed to work on.

Crazy in love is just that. I felt like I was going crazy at the thought that I would not have Lynn!

Lynn wanted that or she would not have stayed with me as long as she did.

I think everyone should know that if Lynn truly doubted that I was in love with her more than anyone or anything else, she would NOT stay with me. With my book, they will know this.

That was real.

Year after year, I lived as your son-in-law.

Lynn wanted someone who came and apologized right away when I said something hurtful. Someone who didn't let us stay angry at each other for long.

I would apologize profusely and demonstrate how sad I was to have upset Lynn. She saw that and knew that. I always felt that I could not take for granted having Lynn and that she could and would leave me if I was disrespectful toward her or if I wasn't making her happy...

If she doubted that I was in love with her, I believed she would leave me.

I never found an instruction book with answers to what one should do if anything like this happens or if one finds oneself in the situation in which I found myself beginning at some point in 2000.

Even now I understand my choice of words might sound odd because I am talking about things happening to me instead of my actions or inaction. I often felt like I couldn't find self-compassion regarding these matters because I didn't have a disease that was threatening my life. However, I had been overwhelmed beyond my capacity to cope. If anyone saw that coming, I would have welcomed their counsel and acted upon it.

Regarding the situation of what happened with Lynn and me.

There was no formal discussion between Lynn and me about going our separate ways. I had been visiting her at her mother's. Then she said she might not be coming back.

Just as so much that was good about our relationship didn't need to be said, we knew it before it was said, so had Lynn slipped out of my life. All I knew was that she had to focus on her health and that she couldn't help me – it was too stressful for her.

Did that mean she lost her love? I never let myself contemplate that. She had a strong survivalist instinct. I find some slight comfort in knowing that her desire for my happiness and success was part of the reason why what was happening to me hurt her and overwhelmed her.

Instead, I became aimless and without a sense of what to do to get Lynn back.

Section Eight: Life Without Lynn: Injustice, Poverty & Homelessness

The horrifying events of late July, August, and early September were described in the previous section. I structured it around the changes in Lynn's health. I had been in love with her. I loved the career that I had built over sixteen years, but I wasn't *in* love with my clients or my career. That being said, the career reflected some important ideas about what gave life meaning to me. It is in the connections that we make.

For me, part of what makes life meaningful is doing activities that are social in nature or which involve helping others. If we were to think of a hierarchy of needs, to me, love and connections are the highest needs that bring the greatest rewards. Abraham Maslow listed self-esteem and accomplishment above love and connections and self-actualization above that. In a sense, it is easier to reach these higher needs if we have met our needs at lower levels.

I had lost the love of my life. I lost that sense of being part of a family - Lynn and I were a family. I lost my career. I didn't have funds saved up for an event like this because I had not seen anything so all-encompassing happening. I was lost and overwhelmed.

That feeling of being lost would linger for the next few years. I had my intellect and a proven history of overcoming obstacles and challenges, but this was different. It was hard to find meaning when everything that gave meaning to my life was gone.

The bigger point is that every aspect of the life I had known for years was lost in the timespan of under two months' time. It seemed like common sense that I was going to need support during this time period. At the time, I made the mistake of thinking that my family would be supportive. I should have reached out to my friends. I had a very special friend named Thomas Childs and I will describe that friendship.

This section of the book covers the darkest years of my life. To be clear, the most disturbing events in my life occurred mainly in the month of August of 2000 which is described during the previous section of the book.

During this section of the book, I primarily will cover the years from late 2000 through some time in 2006, along with more recent events. I knew only poverty and homelessness. This was an experience that I had never known previously. It should be noted that I had worked as a social worker and was well aware of how poverty and homelessness impact others. I also knew of how I might advise others to confront these challenges and barriers. So, I would have drawn upon the wealth of my knowledge of resources that might exist to overcome barriers of this nature.

I was intelligent, educated, informed, and knowledgeable. I knew I had skills that I could offer the world based on my years of experience in the mental health and psychiatric field. Things were never that simple or straightforward though.

In this section, I will also describe the victimization and injustice which was hinted at previously in my book. This will make you question everything you thought you knew about these matters. I will assume that we all agree that it is disturbing when a good person is harmed and has their entire life destroyed based on the lies of another person.

What about when the victim is treated like the perpetrator, and nothing the person says will satisfy the police who are supposed to find the truth? Are we wrong to believe that the police want to find the actual truth, and that they follow all the evidence wherever it leads? I can't generalize unless I were to discover that the police, in general, are encouraged or trained to find evidence during an interrogation to confirm their original opinion. If that is true, then the best advice is to say nothing at any point when an encounter seems like an "interrogation" if nothing you say can alter the opinions and impressions of the police.

This section will culminate in an examination of how viewing the police as authorities who will discover the truth failed for me.

Chapter 59: No Stable Home - Defending My Professional Performance

Hopefully, you are wondering, dear reader, what exactly was happening to my career. I left out some details with the focus on Lynn's health. I said that individuals who were also getting treated by John Freifeld were suing me and they had filed grievances with the North Carolina Social Work Certification and Licensure Board (NCSWCLB).

The NCSWCLB would have the final say as to whether I could continue to work in my field. So, this was not just about my private practice. This was not like losing a job. This was career-changing, or it could end my career. I was a mess at this point and I needed time off to heal but I had my entire future on the line.

The role that John Freifeld played in this situation is important. Some of what I was being accused of doing either I had heard that he was in fact doing those things or I could see how if there was someone to blame for the deterioration of the mental health of my clients, the fault should go more toward the individual who did not have any training or expertise. I am NOT saying that this means I didn't care about my clients.

As you will recall, John Freifeld had admitted that he was not a trained psychotherapist and he had no degree, had no specialized training, and no credentials. He had admitted to my client Jessica that he had misrepresented himself previously as a therapist.

If asked, he would say that he is "just a support person." My colleagues had readily recognized the problems that I was describing and had advised me to tell my clients that I cannot be their therapist if they are receiving services from John.

However, I have sought to explain how and why his actions were not helping others and were in fact making people worse. I would later in 2020 begin to talk to his sister Ruth.

She said recently when I asked if John would have stopped hurting me if he knew it was hurting another innocent person (a fact I will get to later) and she said "John

had no sympathy, compassion, or empathy for other people... if he sought out to hurt someone and he found out indirectly he was hurting someone else they love that was more power to him he lacked empathy.”

As a psychotherapist who wanted to work in private practice, I had to obtain malpractice insurance or liability insurance. It is standard practice for this to cover up to \$1 Million per claim and \$3 Million total. I'm not sure where I heard this, but I heard that Freifeld knew about this insurance coverage and that he expected to benefit in some way from this. It is hard to imagine that a specific detail like that would just happen to be made up by someone.

One could imagine the proceeds of a civil suit being used to set up a treatment center in Wilmington, and Freifeld would imagine a role for himself in that treatment center. I have no proof of this. I can point out that when my client went over to where John was staying, she said, “the place is like a damn treatment center.”

I felt like I was on the run during this time.

I regret that I had to end things with my clients so abruptly, but my life was falling apart so fast. I didn't feel competent for the first time in my career. At least temporarily, I was not well.

I closed the office and turned in my key. Some of the office furniture was thrown away or left for someone to pick up. The owners of the building had a say in how that was handled.

As I took one last look at the office I thought, “It was amazing how Lynn had made the office look so nice and comfortable/inviting. I felt so good about how I had fixed up the office without spending too much money. I had gone from renting an office that was used by Chris Hauge, DSW, LCSW to getting my own office fast, within a couple of months. That was an amazing accomplishment and not something my colleagues had expected.

It's hard to believe that that was just a couple of years ago. It seemed like another lifetime.

I tried to store the client files somewhere stable but nothing about my life was stable at this point. My entire life had collapsed in just under two months! So, other than furniture, I packed everything into a car and tried to figure out where I was going to store everything. I brought some of it to our house, but then all of that was being packed up in that first week of September. Plus, the last thing I wanted to do was to overwhelm Lynn with the details of what I was confronting at this time.

I had bought a new car after the car that I previously had was stolen and then totaled. Yes, I felt guilt and shame for having burdened Lynn with that expense because she had cosigned on that car when our life had been "normal."

The company that provided my malpractice insurance had assigned a law firm to represent me. The issues of the grievances and the malpractice claims were both being handled by the same lawyers. Obviously, they needed documentation to review the method and nature of the treatment interventions that I had employed.

This was happening at a time when I was emotionally distraught. I was overwhelmed. I was moving from one place to another without any permanent residence. I had never been prepared for days or events like this.

How do I put together the treatment notes for clients A, B, C, D, and E? I couldn't focus. This wasn't life as I had ever known it to be. My lawyers were not mental health counselors who could help me with the overwhelming stress of everything I was dealing with. They only knew about facts and evidence.

Maybe if my life had been more stable and if I ever had a moment of peace, I might have been able to provide detailed notes, treatment plans, observations and so much more. Plus, we all sometimes get behind in our notes and documentation. In an ideal world, I would be able to document everything and find experts to explain how nothing I did was wrong, unethical, or amounted to malpractice.

My life was a million miles from an "ideal world" scenario.

I also believed it was all my fault that I lost Lynn. I was consumed with guilt for not being everything she had wanted and expected. I had been that way until she got sick in late July or August of 2000... until I broke under the overwhelming pressure.

The fact that Lynn could have understood that was not registering at all to me.

It was not like Lynn and I broke up, there were no goodbyes. I just could not persuade her to find a place for me with her. With Diane selling our home, I was on the run and I didn't feel I could ask to move in with Diane.

Continuously, I kept seeing in my mind examples of how I had not been there for Lynn or how I let her down.

The point is that I was having a hard time focusing. It seemed like I wasn't going to be able to offer evidence to act in my own defense regarding the grievances with the NCSWCLB or in my civil suit. I was having trouble providing what was needed by my lawyers to mount a defense.

I would come to see how the NCSWCLB was not provided with sufficient or complete information that they could use to make a decision regarding my licensure. They were not made aware of the tragic and stressful events that I had just experienced. They were not aware of the role that Freifeld played in the lives of these clients.

How do I know this to be the case? Let me explain.

First of all, with the chaotic nature of my life, I had trouble providing documentation to inform them. My lawyer was therefore unable to present any useful information. Being disorganized and overwhelmed does not mean that my actions were unethical.

It also does not mean one is incompetent or unskilled.

The NCSWCLB also hired two psychologists to do a psychological assessment on me. They were David Ziff, Ph.D., and Dr. Williams. From my experiences meeting with these psychologists, it was clear that they were not made aware of the recent stressors that I experienced. And they did not ask any questions about what might be happening in my life. That fact in itself is rather bizarre because even before I started graduate school, I would have known to explore recent events and stressors.

So, these psychologists had only the information in the grievances to go on.

In just one day, they would come to a conclusion that no one else had ever made about my competency and mental health.

My perceptions about them were that they were cold and indifferent, lacking in empathy and compassion. That seemed odd for mental health professionals, though I have felt the same about some of my colleagues where I had worked – psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, and psychotherapists.

I made a feeble attempt to defend myself with Dr. Ziff which must have come out wrong. I might have stated that I didn't think that the problems that my clients were having were my fault. I know that was misunderstood when he asked, "what about how this affected your clients?"

I was speechless. Of course, I cared about my clients. How had this session devolved into some caricature of how not to build trust, empathy, and a working relationship with another person? I also had assumed that he would have known that I was not living with them and providing therapeutic interventions with them as Freifeld had been doing.

It was clear that Dr. Ziff wasn't even curious as to the veracity of the claims being made. Neither seemed to wonder how I had been so successful over the past decade. I must have fooled every colleague, therapist, and supervisor who came before them.

My lawyers told me that they didn't think they could defend me with the licensure board - the NCSWCLB - at this time and because I wasn't able to provide documentation. So, they advised me to just sign what is called a Consent Decree. I should just sign what is called a Consent Decree. It stipulated that I would surrender my license, but I could dispute the findings later.

This was in March of 2001.

I was profoundly depressed already with low self-esteem and a low sense of self-worth. So, I didn't think I had anything to offer the world. It's truly astonishing that I would believe this based on everything that had happened over the past years.

I felt a profound sense of helplessness and powerlessness. Of course, the loss of the life I had with Lynn was perhaps a greater contributor to that feeling at this time.

Remember this psychological assessment lasted only a few hours in one day.

David Ziff wrote that he thought that I lacked social skills and empathy. That was the most profoundly untrue thing that anyone could say at this point... any of several hundred people would strongly disagree with that statement.

I had told my lawyers that we could dispute that by interviewing 10 or more colleagues and therapists that I had over the years.

It's ironic that he was accusing me of not having empathy. Neither one of them had demonstrated even the most rudimentary capacity for empathy or interest in connecting with me as a person during our interactions together.

I could compare and contrast that to everything I had ever observed from psychologists and psychotherapists that I had ever worked with. While I have known some psychotherapists or psychiatrists who lack empathy and compassion but none of them had the audacity to describe someone else as lacking those qualities.

You might think, oh, you are saying that because you are mad at them or upset with their findings. That's partially true. But as I have said previously, empathy is a dynamic that exists between a client and therapist/psychologist/counselor. It's somewhat subjective and it's something that must be experienced by the other person.

I cannot comment on their abilities in general. I can only comment on how they acted in this situation.

He also wondered if I had a schizophrenia spectrum disorder. Apparently, no one ever noticed that either. None of my therapists, psychologists, supervisors, or colleagues had questioned my reality testing before Dr. Ziff. In the decades since then, no psychiatric professional has ever diagnosed me with a disorder that involved problems with reality testing.

Unfortunately, I didn't think I had any options but to sign the agreement that was drafted - a Consent Decree. And that is how I surrendered my license. It was a condition of the Consent Decree.

I could challenge that later.

Chapter 60: On the Run: My Trauma and Treatment

My First Experience of Injustice

After I had lost everything, I was moving from place to place in Wilmington. I was living in Southport when I received a criminal summons. It was absurd. John Freifeld had gone to a magistrate and without any evidence claimed that I placed five harassing phone calls to him on a Friday and a Monday in September of 2000. I had not spoken to him in months since we had a falling out.

He also claimed that I was cyberstalking him. It's a sufficiently vague law that prohibits one from making any statements online that might embarrass or harass a person. I was not aware of anything that would amount to anything regarding my online activities.

I was absolutely certain that I had nothing to worry about regarding the harassing phone calls. Why? Well, wouldn't you need some evidence? A recording on the phone, or some phone records? Since it never happened - I had not contacted him, I had nothing to worry about or so I assumed.

Unfortunately, he is very charismatic, and my lawyer and I underestimated that. He represented himself in the matter. My lawyer demonstrated inept legal counsel by going to trial right away. I wasn't thinking until after the trial that he should have gotten the phone records.

Since this never happened, obviously Freifeld had no recording to present as evidence. The judge found me not guilty of the cyberstalking - the judge threw that claim out. However, just on the word of Freifeld, he found me guilty of the harassing phone calls.

I was livid as I left the courtroom. My lawyer asked, "do you want me to appeal this? Do you want me to get the phone records?"

I was thinking, "now you are thinking of that?" I answered, "yes, appeal it. And, yes, get the phone records. This did not happen!" It was a matter of principle. It was wrong!

Moving Away

I had been working as a paraprofessional again as I had before I got my degree or my license. Freifeld cost me that job as well. I have no idea why he was obsessed with me months after I had no contact at all with him. He called my employer and told them about the matters related to my license and the grievances. Despite the fact that nothing had been determined yet (I had not signed the Consent Decree surrendering my license until a few months later) and despite the fact that the work did not require a license, I was not able to work with the agency.

Having no options as to how or where I could live in Wilmington, I left for Durham to live with the people who offered me a place to stay for a little while for free. David and Ruth were their names. Ruth had been hurt by John Freifeld, and they both followed the news about what was happening to me, what John was doing. Freifeld seemed to want to brag online about what he was doing to me.

I started going to the mental health center in Durham for therapy. It was all that I could afford.

Like other victims, I felt wretched and ashamed. I felt like I didn't deserve to exist. I had nothing to offer the world, I thought.

I needed some support from my family because I couldn't stay with Ruth and David long. So, I asked Ruth to explain the situation to my parents. She tried desperately to explain to my mother the cruelty of John and how he is able to convince people to do bad things. She said, "there was a time when if John said the sky was pink, I would believe it and see the sky pink."

It didn't matter, my parents didn't care at all.

I moved into the homeless shelter at some point after leaving David and Ruth's home. They asked me to leave as I had stayed long enough. That sense of isolation and loneliness, of being discarded and worthless was pervasive and traumatic.

Living on the streets was traumatic.

It was no wonder that I felt profound feelings of abandonment and feelings like "this isn't happening." I would find myself walking around places and visiting the emergency room feeling like I was unable to cope with the burden of life.

With everything that I had been going through, my sense of self was unclear. It was late in the year 2001 when this was happening. I felt like I had no real support in my life and that only added to the shame that I felt as a result of the victimization.

At about this same time, I was working at the Eckerd Store in the photo department when I was asked to work the main register, not the one in the photo lab which was less busy. I was totally overwhelmed by the long lines and I was still dealing with extreme anxiety.

I was so anxious and could hardly focus. There was this young woman who came to buy some alcoholic beverage and I asked for her ID. She presented it to me without hesitation. I was under so much stress that my eyes had trouble focusing.

I wasn't able to perceive that she was under 21. A manager stepped in and later, the police showed up and handed me a citation to appear in court. It was a minor error, but it might seem like something worse if you consider the statute that I was said to have violated - "buy, sell or obtain alcohol for a minor."

The Nightmares Continue

Somehow in the middle of everything happening that was so chaotic in my life and without a stable residence, I missed a court appointment. They issued an arrest order due to failure to appear in court for the misdemeanor regarding the sale of alcohol to a minor at Eckerd's.

I told my friend Johnetta what happened - she was someone I had gotten to know since I moved up to Durham - she owned a non-profit that helps the homeless and others. I was hoping that she could do something to keep me from going to jail. I was terrified of this happening to me.

Nothing could be done and now for the first time in my life, I was arrested and put in jail. People like me are never prepared for something like this. I had lived a sheltered life.

On top of that, I found out that I missed a court appointment in Wilmington. The lawyer who represented me in the case of Freifeld's lies that I made harassing phone calls to him had appealed the judge's verdict and he had a new court date, but he had not been able to reach me.

I was forced to move from place to place, including living in various shelters. So, I had lost track of time and I was not always in one location. Now I had a failure to appear in Wilmington.

I also had lost track of time. It was all a blur this past year or so. Everything happening was entirely new in that before a certain point in 2000, nothing like this had ever happened in my life.

I reached out for support in Durham to get out of jail. I called my parents because I thought they cared about me and I knew they would understand the fear I felt. Whatever minimal compassion that might have had in the past was now gone. They didn't give a damn about what was happening to their son.

I had no idea why I was being treated this way by my own family!

I ended up being brought down to Wilmington in chains, inside a metallic cage or box that looked like it had been put on the back of a pickup truck.

My nightmare was in full swing now. Day in and day out I was living in hell.

It was humiliating and shameful to be treated like this. I was pissed at my parents as well. They had lacked compassion and empathy in the past but this was a new low for them.

The message my own family was sending was that it's okay to hurt Bruce because nothing will happen to you. Go ahead, hurt Bruce.

I did get out of jail but was left down in Wilmington for a while. I didn't know what to do or where to go. My own family for reasons unknown to me did not offer any support at all. I don't know why I still expected them to care.

I felt so ashamed of my wretched condition as I wandered the streets of Wilmington. I had no home and nowhere to turn for help. It was cold and I was wet and limping about.

I had all my belongings in a couple of bags. It was coming into the winter with snow falling. My friend Jean invited me to dinner with his wife and family - his mother was there. I was so ashamed to be carrying all my belongings and looking like a street person or a homeless bag lady.

I tossed my belongings behind a bush outside the restaurant where Jean offered to treat me to a meal with his family. We had been friends for years. Jean was the friend that I met my first week in Wilmington back in 1992 - a mutual friend of Lynn and me.

I was feeling so overwhelmed by my circumstances. I couldn't think straight. Where should I go? What should I do? I was just wandering around, and it felt traumatic for me. It felt like I didn't matter as a human being. No one seemed to give a damn about me.

I was too ashamed to know how to seek support or friendship. I felt wretched. I wanted to scream out to the world or to God, "Help me! Please!"

I did go to the mental health center to get help to get back to Durham. I had been meeting with Vocational Rehabilitation and they said they could help me with employment. I had no other sense of what to do or where to go.

So, I found myself at the New Hanover County Mental Health Center and at the Department of Social Services to get financial assistance to get a bus trip back to Durham.

"Well, this is awkward," said the woman who sat down with me at the Southeastern Center for Mental Health Services in Wilmington.

"Yes, I used to be with the Society of Clinical Social Workers. Maybe you know me from that," I said.

"You were the president. I came to training workshops that you organized."

I felt myself tearing up. I answered "things changed so suddenly for me. It got so crazy. So much has happened. I lost everything in just one month back in August. It feels like many, many, years have passed and that was another life."

I added, " When you saw me, I had come so far. I had struggled, you know. I used to have doubts, but I found the encouragement that comes with success and the support of others."

She said something about how sad and overwhelming it must have been. Clearly, there was little need for a long conversation at this point.

I got a bus ticket and went back to Durham. You might be thinking that things can't get any worse than everything that has happened. Unfortunately, you would be wrong.

Chapter 61: Some Other Unusual Experiences

I had been going to the mental health center for treatment. In my mind I still envisioned myself returning to working as a psychiatric social worker. That was my passion in life. I had helped so many people.

I now know that I have a rational mind and can objectively review the entirety of my professional experience from start to finish. I know that the conclusions of Dr. Ziff that I lacked social skills and empathy were totally and completely false. It was irrational to imagine all the success that I had over the years would have been possible without empathy, communication skills, and compassion.

I knew at the time that I had to go through therapy first. Life had taken a toll on my mental health and I needed to build back. There were doubts that I felt. How had I gotten to a point where anyone would want to file a grievance about my actions? I had felt "out of it" in August of 2000 and I had not been at my best, to put it mildly.

The work of psychotherapists is so serious that I felt I needed to find out if and when I would be ready to begin again.

Let's skip ahead a few years now.

We are into 2002.

I tried dating some. I used online dating services. I guess I wanted the connection I once had with Lynn and the same feelings.

Was I ready to date or love someone?

In looking back, I had not started loving myself completely yet. I think that to fully love another one must love, value, and respect oneself. One must love oneself and have self-compassion.

One such intimate experience was very unusual. It wasn't with someone I met through a dating service though.

I had been a participant in a therapy group at the mental health center and I may have mentioned that I had worked, in the past, with people who have Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and that this experience had caused me some problems.

Sometime later I was staying with Elaine, a friend I made in Durham, and I made friends with someone else from that therapy group named Cathy. She had seemed "normal" for the most part. I wasn't so sure I was into her or attracted to her, but I let things develop in that direction.

At one point, we were in my room and we were becoming sexually intimate. Suddenly she changed. Her demeanor and expression were that of a child. I felt like I was with a child. I got up and put clothes on and asked her to cover up. It was like she had become a little girl.

She was like a child in an adult body. This reminded me of those times when people with different personalities will switch to another personality or identity. Technically she was an adult, but it still felt weird and uncomfortable.

I would find out that this had never happened previously in the presence of another person to the best of her knowledge.

Later, she seemed to want my help in dealing with this. I explained that it is not possible for me to do this. For one thing, I wasn't credentialed at the time. Secondly, I had been her friend and the nature of the relationship was such that it would be inappropriate for me to be her therapist.

This was strange because I had never said to anyone that I was looking for people I could help with their psychiatric issues. I could not imagine why she would have gotten the impression that I would be able to help her.

DID is supposed to be rare but here I was miles away from my private practice in Wilmington, years later, and without even looking I seemed to have found another person with this rare condition.

I thought she understood that I could not treat her. I thought we could be friends still. She got back together with her boyfriend and invited me to move into a spare room in their apartment. That didn't go over too well. I had noticed she was

expecting me to be there for her at certain times. I couldn't live my own life. Cathy was acting like she was jealous of the girlfriend that I had named Shonda. What was strange is that she was back with her boyfriend.

I wasn't in a serious relationship, but Cathy was jealous of the time I spent elsewhere.

I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable ANY time I returned to the apartment and it wasn't just that she was jealous of me dating. She was mad that I had not been there for her.

I had to involve the police to move out because of how uncomfortable I felt. I was hiding outside until the police arrived. My girlfriend Shonda helped me move out of there and temporarily stay on the bed in the area behind the store that she was renting for her business. It was behind the area where customers would come into the store.

I moved around a few times before I found a place to stay that was advertised as a male boarding house in Durham. The upfront move-in cost seemed like the most affordable option for me and therefore the best choice. That would prove to be a very bad decision with painful consequences.

This would lead to the next nightmare. As I mentioned, you might imagine that things couldn't get any worse than they have been described.

At this point in the story, we are into the first part of 2004.

I don't think it is worth it to describe each and every place where I laid my head each night during this time period of several years... I was either in a homeless shelter or staying with a friend temporarily.

Chapter 62: Living in A Drug Infested, Crime-Ridden Part of Durham

As I mentioned previously, I had no sense of support and/or options for where to go. My income and funds were very limited. I saw a listing for a one-room apartment in Durham. It seemed like a good choice because, unlike most rentals situations you need to come up with two month's rent and a security deposit, this apartment only required an upfront payment of one week.

I soon learned that the location was not somewhere where I should have been living. It was located on Holloway Street in Durham which is not far from downtown and the main library. I was learning that this area was known to be a drug-infested, crime-ridden part of Durham – not a place for someone like me.

I could sense as someone who should not be walking alone especially at night on those streets. Few people should be walking alone down that street if they wanted to stay safe.

There was actually a bed and breakfast up the street from the apartment that catered to a more affluent person, but it was behind a gate. Still, it seemed strangely out of place.

On the street, you could see needles that had been discarded. These obviously were used for illicit drug use.

The house had two floors. Each room was a separate Single Room Occupancy (SRO) apartment. There were five rooms upstairs and five rooms downstairs. The stairs were the first thing you see when you open the front door. Each tenant received a key to their room. My apartment was the first one on the right as you enter the front door. Down the hall, there was a soda machine and a snack machine. Then at the end of the hall, to the right, there was another hall with a shared bathroom and shower. To the left was the kitchen area with a stove and microwave for the tenants to prepare their meals.

Next to the kitchen was another door that leads outside to the driveway. Around the back was an apartment where Scott was living. Scott was the one who collected the

rent each week and gave us a receipt. I believe he was getting free rent in exchange for this service and a few other small responsibilities that he had.

The landlord was named Jimmy, but he never collected the rent. We always paid Scott. Jimmy sometimes came to visit and to stock the soda and snack machines. He seemed nice enough for a while.

He introduced me to a very nice woman named Grace who I befriended. She was very attractive. She was a single mother with two children. From time to time, she would take me to the Durham Bulls to see a baseball game. Other times she had me come to her place to work on her computer.

Beginning in June, Jimmy contracted with me to build a dating website. He understood that it would take a while to do this. We could buy profiles that would make the site look like there were members and that hopefully would encourage people to want to join the website - for a free trial that would convert to a paid subscription. This arrangement was in exchange for my weekly rent.

At this same point, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) had funded my training to get a certificate in web design from North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Following the completion of that, they were funding the startup costs for me to start a home-based web design business.

The fact that I had discovered years earlier that computer or other technical jobs were not for me did not seem to matter with my counselor.

I felt so little self-esteem or self-confidence and my sense of hope and identity was non-existent. So, I went along with this idea.

Working with VR, we developed a business plan with a list of start-up expenses that VR would fund. My counselor at VR, Eric Peters, asked me "where are you going to run the business?"

That seemed like an unusual question since we knew it was going to be a home-based business. He pointed out that the neighborhood was known to be a drug-infested crime-ridden area in Durham. That's obviously problematic for having people come to the business which might happen from time to time. In addition,

they were concerned about the possible theft of property that was owned by VR. As part of the plan, VR would maintain ownership of the computer equipment for a few years.

They also maintained ownership of the software that was purchased. At that time, software was distributed on DVDs which were kept in the office area of the room.

The room was about fifteen feet by twenty feet. There was a wall that was about 8 feet from the door to the apartment which hid the bed that was behind that. A couch came with the room and a desk with a couple of chairs and a mattress that was on the floor. My computer was on the desk that was to the right as you enter the room.

At one point, VR was willing to pay the rent for a couple of weeks, and on another occasion, the Department of Social Services paid the rent. This was before I had the arrangement with Jimmy to work on his website in exchange for the cost of my rent, which was \$90 per week.

Somehow VR agreed to let me set up my home-based business at this location.

A number of weeks after the dating website project had been underway, Jimmy became overly disappointed that he wasn't making money yet. So, he pulled the plug on that and demanded that I go back to paying rent. I wasn't prepared to pay rent when this demand was placed upon me. I had not seen it coming. I thought he understood that it would take time.

I had some options because there are resources in the community to prevent a person from being evicted from their home. VR might be able to help me as well. Maybe I could turn to my family for help as well.

I received an eviction order and was given a hearing.

He even cut the cable line to my apartment.

During the court hearing, I appealed the eviction. I was merely asking for some time to make arrangements for where I could store the items that could not be replaced, as well as clothing and the computer equipment. I also felt I could find a way to pay the back rent. The judge agreed that my request was reasonable and allowed me to

be given two more weeks. It looked like VR would help me with the rent to get caught up.

Before we move forward, I want to mention a discussion that I had with Jimmy as he was stocking the soda and snack machine. This was before the work for rent arrangement had broken down. This will be important to know in a later chapter.

I had commented upon some aspects of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) because the treatment of DID had played a role in my current situation.

As an example, I said that if I had the disorder, which I did not, I might have a different personality that might take control of my body. That other personality might have a different name. I might have amnesia for the time when the other personality was "out."

[In consideration of future events for which I could not know yet, I want to add something that I had not shared with Jimmy. I couldn't have explained the "switching" to him because there's no specific way that happens. It's unique each time. Certainly, a layperson would not recognize it, right away. A person doesn't repeatedly cycle through various personalities or identities. Again, the switch might not be noticed by the average person. It's not obvious.]

Also, I explained to Jimmy that if a person switched to a different personality, that other personality would or could be out for an extended period of time.

In my example, I said that if I had different personalities, one of them might be named "Brucie." I was thinking about how grandpa had called me Brucie as a kid.

Getting back to the eviction situation, I did have ideas for work and to catch up on rent. Jimmy had multiple properties and each one had multiple tenants. It is reasonable to assume that landlords have to be aware that they will have empty rooms or apartments from time to time. The same is true for hotels and motels.

It's important to realize that at this time, so many aspects of photography are based on actual film. The film gets developed at a photo lab like the one where I was working at Eckerd. We gave people the negatives of the photographs so they can print them in different sizes later.

All my memories of the life I had known for the past decade were on photographic prints, the film negatives, and I had many photographs that I had scanned and stored on CDs, DVDs. This included all the photographs that I had taken growing up in Connecticut or as a young adult.

All my memories of a lifetime were stored in these ways. So, it was precious and irreplaceable. That included photographs of Celta and then of Lynn.

All the letters that Celta wrote to me were also things that I wanted to preserve.

My life had fallen apart but I wanted to hold onto what had sentimental value to me. I certainly had drawn a great deal of strength from the experience I had with Celta even after she died. Lynn always knew about this and she understood that I wasn't clinging to the past or someone more special than her.

As I was saying, I had plans for catching up on the rent, or I would find a place to store my most precious things that could not be replaced. I planned to do that before it was too late. I had to figure something out. There had to be some options. Maybe I could ask some friends to hold onto these items that were not large and did not take up much space, but which had value to me.

Later, as the nightmare got worse, I would lose everything that I had in this apartment. The landlord would end up just throwing it all away. I would be devastated when I learned this. I would have nothing physical to hold onto in terms of the memories, mementos, keepsakes, and photographs.

What happens next would be one of the most bizarre and horrifying events in my life.

Chapter 63: Trauma and Victimization

This is a very traumatic and disturbing story to tell. I want to imagine that you, dear reader, are with me and supportive of me as I tell this. This chapter is only the beginning of a terrifying event in my life.

Victimization

As I said, there were things that were irreplaceable and of infinite value to me. I was scared by the sudden eviction and not yet having any arrangements for what to do with those things.

Things like this happen and there are resources in the community to help people when they get behind on rent.

What was about to happen to me was the darkest and most evil thing that any person could do to another person. *The first part of the story may not seem like the most evil thing you have ever read because that will be revealed in the next chapter.*

It was Friday, October 15, 2004. I believe the date is October 15, 2004. I was planning for a yard sale the next day. I had lots of books. Someone I met at the homeless shelter was going to join me. She was a new friend. It's important to note that she was a black woman - this will be relevant in a moment.

Books were stacked up all over the apartment - the single room apartment.

You couldn't get pizza delivered there because it was known to be a bad part of town. The only females that showed up there unaccompanied by someone good like me were prostitutes willing to sell their body for \$10, which must have been the cost of a fix on crack.

I had been mugged more than once walking down the street after dark. More than once. There were other times when the police had to come out there. Someone in the apartment across from mine almost got shot by another tenant.

At about 5 PM, I was expecting my new friend to show up to prepare for tomorrow's yard sale. She was a very sweet person. I had met her at the homeless shelter but

that doesn't mean she wasn't very intelligent, talented, or educated. I had been in the shelter, myself, or I was there for meals so one should not look down on anyone who finds themselves down and out. She was just a friend, though. I was still seeing Shonda. I wasn't in love with Shonda, but we were dating.

Because I was expecting someone, I left my door partially open so I could hear if anyone knocked on the front door to the building.

I then heard someone say, "where's Bruce?"

I instantly turned in the direction of where I heard this and looked at the stairway that went toward the upstairs. A woman had walked partly up the stairs and was looking at Danny, one of the tenants. I had no idea who this woman was. She was white and about my height, perhaps in her mid-twenties.

Immediately after she heard me say "I'm Bruce," she moved without pausing and entered my apartment room. This happened so fast that I had no time to react and say, "who are you?" or to not let her enter my home.

I stepped into the room behind her, and she then closed the door and locked it. This happened in a few split seconds. She then turned around and started to brutally and violently punch me in the face repeatedly.

I was dazed and shocked. I staggered backward. There wasn't much room between the door and the couch where I fell.

She shouted, "why do you keep calling me?"

I answered, "who are you?" with genuine shock in my voice. I was wondering who the heck was attacking me. And why was this happening? She was a total stranger. Everything happened so fast.

I was hurting badly. Blood was pouring out of my nose and across my face almost immediately. Less than sixty seconds had passed.

Was she high on drugs? I did not think that I had ever seen her before.

She had invaded my home; my apartment and I had no idea why.

Somehow, I managed to pull her toward the door. I had brought my hand to my face and noticed it was smeared with blood. As I pulled her toward the door, I left a blood-smeared thumbprint on the door frame. I then unlocked the door and got her outside. I wanted to establish safety from this crazy person so I could call 911.

As I tried to shut the door, she was pushing to get back inside. I couldn't close the door. So, I reached my hand through to try to get her away from the door so I could call for help.

Finally, I got the door closed and locked. I picked up my phone and dialed 911.

Some of the guys who lived in the house were coming back from work at that time.

I emerged from the room after realizing she was gone. There were three people in the hallway or on the stairs who looked with shock at just how badly I was bleeding.

Someone asked if I knew her, and I said I had no idea who she was. I was told to go look in the bathroom at how bloody I was. I was shocked at how profusely I was bleeding all across my face. I wondered why I was not bruised as opposed to seeing my face sliced up like this.

Joachim, one of the other tenants asked me, "so, you don't know her from Adam?"

"No, I have no idea who she was," I answered.

I didn't think to ask if any of them recognized her. I assumed they would have said so if they did.

Someone asked me why I let her into my apartment. I said, "It happened so fast. I didn't have time to think. She just walked right into my room and then locked the door. What could I do? After she came down the stairs, she entered the apartment in a split second. I had the door open because I was expecting someone."

I was wearing a fairly dark striped, green short sleeve shirt. It was covered in blood. I was wearing shorts and those were covered in blood as well. Even my socks and shoes were bloody.

Within a few minutes, the police arrived in response to my 911 call. They were let in the front door to the building which is right next to my apartment. I heard them and stepped out to greet them.

The first police officer held out his hand saying, "don't come too close." I knew he didn't want to get my blood on him. I was still bleeding. Blood was all over the apartment.

The police officers started taking witness statements. No one had any idea who she was nor had they seen her previously. I stated the same thing, that I had no idea who she was. I described exactly what happened and how it happened. At least they weren't chastising me for letting her enter my apartment. They seemed to understand that I was shocked and that everything happened too fast for me to react.

I was asked if I wanted paramedics. I was in such a state of shock but even I knew that my injuries should be photographed. Surely, they had cameras to do this. Surely it was going to be necessary for the court to prosecute her for her crime.

Then I heard a phone ringing in my room. I had not noticed previously that she was carrying a phone. I gave the phone to the police officers saying that this might help them find the perpetrator of this crime.

I had not noticed anything that would indicate why she was able to slice open my face and cause me to bleed so profusely.

The police left shortly after that.

I thought that I would not find anything more out about this for some time. That calculation would prove to be wrong. This nightmare was about to get even more terrifying than you can imagine.

Chapter 64: Interrogating the Victim - Profound Injustice

And the most terrifying question of all may be just how much horror the human mind can stand and still maintain a wakeful, staring, unrelenting sanity.

- Stephen King, from "Pet Sematary"

Please, dear reader, let me imagine you are with me as I tell my horror story and try to imagine the comfort that I need when I am so scared like now.

Within just more than an hour, with the sun getting low now, the police showed up again. The most disturbing nightmare of my life was about to begin. My attacker had done a larger and far more sinister evil than brutally attacking me and leaving me literally covered in blood.

I noticed lights outside.

Then there was a female police officer in the doorway next to the stairway that led to the second floor. It was a warm day, this October 15th of 2004.

I heard something repeated on the police radio that a woman had been sexually assaulted out here!

What! Oh, my God!

This is not happening! No, no, no.no.

The police were just here. They knew what happened. They witnessed the extensive nature of my injuries.

It had not occurred to me that this would be hard to believe.

Time moved at an excruciatingly slow pace. I was waiting to speak to someone and clear all this up. Surely, they would know what had really happened. They had been out here just an hour earlier.

The Inquisition, Torture, And Humiliation

Before I knew it, I was being put in a handcuff and put into a police car. I struggled to speak. My mouth was dry, and I could barely draw a breath. I wasn't sure my words were being heard when I said, "no, I was attacked."

I was terrified beyond belief. I wasn't shaking but I was frozen. I felt dazed and confused. It seemed impossible.

Then I started to move from the frozen reaction of a trauma victim to the fight or flight stress response - a misnomer since neither fight nor flight was on my mind.

On the ride with the policeman next to me, my female friend called me. My hands were shaking as I tried to pick up the phone. My heart was beating so fast, and I was fumbling with the phone. My voice was shaking as I said "Hello,"

I began to explain what happened to me. I wanted the police officer to hear me and the sincerity of my words.

I told her that I wanted to see her soon and that this will get all straightened out, but I didn't know about tomorrow.

She was shocked herself. I can imagine her desperately out of words to say to comfort me.

Choking on my tears I said, "I'm scared. I don't know how this happened to me."

She knew a little about me and so she recognized the concern in my voice. I heard compassion in her voice as she said how sorry she was that this was happening to me.

I then hung up the phone. I registered the fact that someone had said that she was the landlord's wife. The landlord who had evicted me recently.

The police officer had handcuffs on me and took me inside a police station. I saw the woman who attacked me inside the doorway, and I said, "she's the one who attacked me."

I was still holding onto reality.

They sat me down outside a room somewhere. I was asked to wait. It didn't seem like anything was happening. I tried calling the pre-paid legal provider firm as I had maintained an account with them. I never imagined I would need it for a criminal matter.

They were not very much help. I couldn't process what was being explained to me.

I had never imagined a scenario even remotely like this in my worst nightmares.

I was naïve enough to still think that the police wanted to find out the truth.

We sat down in a room with them across a table from me. I re-enacted exactly what had happened with me going to the door of the room where I was with the police detectives and opening it to demonstrate what I had done and how said "I'm Bruce," and how before I knew what was happening, she was entering the room or apartment.

They didn't like that and so I tried to re-enact it again. I was confused as to what I had left out that they didn't like or wanted to hear.

They still didn't like what I explained.

I had no idea what they wanted to hear. I couldn't process the questions or make sense of anything. I was sitting in front of them covered in blood from face to feet and shoes. Every piece of clothing was soaked in blood. How is it even remotely possible that they didn't recognize this? Why were they treating me like a criminal in this matter? I was the victim.

Then they said that she was the landlord's wife and that her name was Ana.

I stated that I had briefly seen her with her husband in a pickup truck but that she had not left enough of an impression on me for me to recognize her when she showed up.

One of the police officers was saying that I would not forget someone that attractive. I thought "what are you talking about? That woman we saw on the way in. You think she is pretty?"

She was like a frightening psychopath who had just brutalized me, and I doubted that at any time anyone would call her attractive. What they said made no sense to me.

None of what they were saying made any sense. It wasn't like they were giving me any clues as to what she had said or what they thought happened. So, I could not possibly make them satisfied.

The time went on and on and I lost track of how much time had passed. It felt like something from a book by Franz Kafka - bizarre, surreal, and nightmarish. Why? Mainly because I was sitting in front of them clearly appearing as the victim. What could be more obvious? And they wouldn't tell me what they wanted to hear from me.

If you wanted a photograph of a victim, you could have photographed me at that moment.

I wondered what kind of people am I dealing with? Why are they doing this to me?

I had never even been in a fight in my entire life! I had NEVER done anything remotely aggressive. NOT EVER! Can't they tell things like this? Doesn't their gut tell them when something is so obvious? Couldn't they contact someone to find out who I was?

I looked to them as authority figures who had control of everything so I wasn't saying much of what was on my mind.

They then suggested that she was there and maybe things got out of hand. That made no sense. Got out of hand? What were they talking about? She had entered my home and brutalized me.

They should be going after building a case against the real perpetrator.

I was still hoping against hope that they would see the light and realize that I was the victim. I naïvely believed they wanted to know the truth.

I had always seen the police as authority figures and protectors... people you could trust... To get it right. These two didn't seem to care at all about the truth or getting to know me at all.

I had been a therapist who helped victims. I would NEVER harm another person! Wouldn't these facts about me show up somewhere when they look into my background?

To make it even worse, now they were talking about something sexual happening. I just repeated that she attacked me, and I pulled her outside the room and called 911.

I should have pointed out that their fellow officers had witness statements that supported everything I was saying... but I wasn't thinking clearly now.

More time had passed but I was losing track of how much time had passed.

Then I heard one of them ask to speak to "Brucie."

I was speechless at first. This was a well thought out intricate plan. I had spoken to Jimmy, the landlord, and husband of my attacker. I remembered how I had discussed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and used the example where if I had DID, maybe one of my personalities might be named Brucie.

No, I don't have multiple personalities. I just had used that name as an example in a discussion with Jimmy, her husband.

Logic and rational thinking had seemed to have left this interaction at some point – how long had passed, I don't know. With the police, seeing them as authority figures you try to do whatever they want. I was thinking about what to do. By this point, I was so exhausted and overwhelmed that I would have pretended to be Mickey Mouse if they asked me.

I said "I'm Brucie" in a soft voice that a personality that was a child might have. It was just a last-ditch effort to make them happy.

I was still thinking that I could convince them to recognize that I was the victim and this entire game that they were playing was not worth it. I had no idea what they were getting out of this. My initial impression that the truth would emerge had evaporated. They weren't here for the truth. This was a bizarre game for them it seemed.

When that didn't satisfy them, they showed me a statement that they wanted me to sign. I looked at what one of the police officers had written and I was shocked. He was asking me to sign a confession. I asked, "that's what you think happened?"

"I'm not signing that," I answered. "That didn't happen."

First, they brought me in front of a magistrate. I felt a feeling of horror, unlike anything I had ever experienced.

I think Stephen King once described terror as something akin to what one might feel running from danger. Horror was a feeling you get when your mind is taken to places that are unknown when the hair on the back of your neck rises and a chill runs up your spine.

I was the victim who was being put into jail!

I thought I would state that I was suicidal as a desperate cry for help. I wasn't planning anything at this point nor was I processing these horrors.

I was stripped down and put into a strange outfit that I guess is for people who are suicidal. Then they took photos of me. I thought I was being taunted like Jesus had been before he was crucified.

I was being charged with second-degree kidnapping and second-degree sexual offense. This was so terrifying that I could not process the events that were transpiring.

The next day I saw what she had told them and what she had written in her "statement."

Her claim was that I tried to undress her or pull off her pants. That's why I was charged with 2nd Degree Sexual Offense.

I was put into jail.

The way she described it, I would have had to have been standing over her, which would have meant I would have gotten my blood all over her. That was clearly a lie. How could these so-called detectives have overlooked these details?

She also said "he kept switching" in her statement. Hence the question that they had for me - they had asked if they could speak to "Brucie."

What the heck does that even mean, "he kept switching?" I can't even imagine what that might look like. Even those with DID do not do things like that.

It was clear that this was a well-thought-out and planned scheme, but why had they done this?

They had drawn my blood at the hospital, and I thought it would be helpful to demonstrate that only my blood would be found anywhere. This would prove that I was the victim. Right?

The next day I was brought to court for the arraignment. I tried to tell the lawyer that was supposed to represent me that I was the victim and could she fix this NOW! She just said I should talk to the lawyer who will be assigned to the case later.

Why couldn't SHE do something?

I desperately needed help and NOW!

I could not find a friendly and/or a safe face or voice for months after that.

I was alone and abandoned! I desperately prayed every day asking God to help me because God knows I was the victim, and I didn't deserve this.

I felt utter desolation. This was the definition of hell on earth.

Chapter 65: Captivity and Injustice

Dear reader, if you are feeling overwhelmed by everything that has happened over the past dozen or more chapters then you know what it was like for me. There seemed to be no end and no limit to the depths of suffering I was experiencing.

I had lost the love of my life. I had lost my home. I had lost my career. Most of that happened in one month - August of 2000. Then in March of 2001, I had to surrender my clinical Social Work license.

I saved for this chapter the details about how the case of the false allegation by John Freifeld that I had made harassing phone calls was resolved. The lawyer who appealed the case was able to get the phone records for one of the two days that I was alleged to have called Freifeld on five separate times. He got the records for the day before and after just for good measure. It proved that I had never called Freifeld. I knew that was what would be found. So, we could prove that it was a lie. Right?

Wrong. For some reason, my lawyer couldn't get phone records for the other day that I was supposed to have called Freifeld. It was within a week of the other day so that made no sense. While it was a minor misdemeanor, it's the principle of the matter. It was wrong.

My lawyer said the infamous words "the truth doesn't matter, only what you can prove." I had thought that we were innocent until proven guilty.

Can you believe that? Someone can make stuff up about you and force you to spend a month of your life in jail on a lie. You will recall the humiliating way in which I was brought to Wilmington from Durham. In a cage with chains on me! Like I was a wild and dangerous animal! If you have read this far into this book you probably know that I am about as dangerous as a fluffy bunny or a butterfly.

Then I was back in Durham trying to put my life back together, little by little, and this happened in October of 2004. This was the kidnapping of Bruce Whealton by the state. The name of my attacker was Ana, she was the landlord's wife, Jimmy's wife.

This was a form of prolonged and seemingly never-ending suffering of biblical proportions.

I felt like I was experiencing shell shock. Literally.

If you are wondering what else happened during these four years from late 2000 through my victimization at the hands of Ana, there is not much to tell other than what I said. A bad nightmare of being profoundly depressed, without hope, poor and homeless. It was just a blur. I am not saying I have amnesia, but it is now very much a blur.

I cannot even remember 9/11 as a significant day! That is how overwhelmed I was.

It was October of 2004, and despite having done no wrong to anyone and having led a good life, always treating others with kindness and compassion, I found myself abandoned and in jail. Also, it should have been obvious that I was the victim here. My victimization was written in blood on the clothes that were still down in a locker room at the jailhouse – they would stay there from the day of my arrest until May when I got out.

When you get assigned a court-appointed lawyer, they take their sweet time coming to visit you. My lawyer didn't seem to care about me at all or how I was doing. I would write to him frequently, but it was close to impossible to get an appointment with him. I saw him over the next few months once and I saw someone else from the public defender's office just once. Each time it was for not more than fifteen minutes.

This was extremely terrifying for me. I was placed for a while in the general population. I met people who were guilty of real crimes, violent crimes. I met someone who had been on death row. I didn't feel safe. The guards seemed to have no compassion for individuals who might be innocent and are supposed to be considered innocent until proven guilty.

My body was reacting in strange ways to this captivity. I was having panic attacks where I would feel overwhelmed by surges of adrenaline. Thinking I was going to die. Feeling short of breath. I would push the button in my cell as a way to cry out to

see a doctor or nurse, but no one cared. At least no one cared for a good long time until they put me into protective custody.

I also discovered new things about my gender and how we think of gender. The first signs of that were in jail. I met a very effeminate person who went by the name Lulu. She was born male but identified as female.

She was an African American woman who was born a man. I am sure she had male genitalia. I didn't care.

She was very kind and sweet to me. I needed to be close to someone. No, you don't get that much privacy in the Durham County jail... nothing remotely intimate happened. Not physically intimate.

I thought she was attractive though. I only remember noticing her legs and her face.

While I did find some comfort and humanity from Lulu, there was no way to change the reality of what was happening to me. My entire life hung in the balance. I was terrified every moment of every day.

I had reached out to my so-called family from the depths of my pain and desperation. Surely, a mother would be moved by the unjust suffering of her firstborn son. For reasons I will never understand, nor can I forgive, both parents abandoned their own flesh and blood - they abandoned the son who shared the same name as his father - I am Bruce Martin Whealton Jr and he is Sr.

I spent seven months in jail! Seven nightmarish months.

Despite my desperate pleas, my family lacked human compassion and empathy. What little capacity they once had for somewhat normal human emotions had died. My sister also could have done something. They all had the means to rescue me. They knew just how horrifying this was, and yet they did NOTHING!

It would be literally impossible for me to not act to hire a lawyer and free my siblings or a parent, or even a son or daughter if I had one.

They didn't even come to visit me! That is an act of evil in the faith in which they raised me. It is a mortal sin!

Their capacity for ignoring the pain of someone they were supposed to love knew no limits or bounds.

I don't know why I expected them to act like real human beings. They had been demonstrating their inhumanity for a long time now - since Lynn got sick in August of 2000.

Years later, my second wife said that you don't treat your enemies that way! That's true. ***Their actions were evil!***

The faith in which I was raised does not allow for us to act this way. Everything about how they acted over these years goes against everything I was taught as a Christian. I have since metaphorically divorced myself from them. They are my ex-family.

I had kept in touch from time to time with my sister. She said she and our parents (my ex-parents) *knew I was innocent of everything I was ever accused of doing. That wasn't surprising, actually.*

I know that I did not deserve this to happen to me.

My so-called family could not even be bothered to bring me clothes to wear when I was released from jail.

I was released finally, in May, to await the trial.

I moved to Chapel Hill where it was safer. I was staying in the homeless shelter. After my release, I met with my lawyer for thirty minutes, if that. My lawyer had told me that I would sit on the stand and tell my story and that no one in the jury would believe that I was capable of doing what I was accused of doing. That was the plan.

He said he knew I was innocent. He should have known I was the victim too. I had asked him if he could test the bloody clothing that I had been wearing. He said that

since I wore it outside of jail after I was released this could not be done to help my case.

He had seven months to do something like this! I had written to him countless times when I was in jail.

A Guilty Plea for the Victim

I called my lawyer on a day in March of 2006 and he told me to come to court immediately. He didn't say why. I got on a bus and rushed there. I didn't want to make my case any worse than it was.

My attacker should be the one going to prison. Ana should be in prison for what she did.

I was out of breath when I arrived in front of the courtroom. My lawyer was there, and the prosecutor saw me for the first time. You might think she would look at me and drop the whole case, laughing - I looked so pitiful and small.

My lawyer scared me, telling me that I would spend 10 years in jail if I didn't take a plea. I was in total shock. What was the big rush? Why was he telling me this in the hall outside the courtroom?

He could have at least told me something before I headed to court!

My lawyer insisted that I knew this was coming and that I knew what I was looking at if I was found guilty. That is patently false. He had never discussed anything like that.

He previously had told me to expect a trial. He also never hinted at the punishment that might come out of the matter. NEVER! It remained as some abstract idea that hung over me like a shroud for nearly two years.

He had promised that a jury of my peers would see the truth and free me. Then I would pursue justice against Ana - the perpetrator!

He knew that I was not only innocent but a victim according to his own prior statement to me.

One usually thinks that a person chooses to take a plea. This implies some time to think about the matter and contemplate the decision. I was still winded. I was hardly in my right mind. The last thing they wanted was for me to think about anything.

I walked down the aisle to stand in front of the judge. He began to speak. He asked if I was satisfied with my legal representation. This was my chance to protest this farce. I began to talk but my soft voice only managed to say, "I don't know."

The reality of what was happening began to settle in and I wanted out of this. I don't think the judge was picking up on what I was trying to tell him. My voice was soft as a mouse. I was scared, I had no allies. I couldn't get enough air to vocalize my words clear enough to be heard and understood.

I have seen on TV shows and movies where they ask the defendant if they are on drugs that might impair one's judgment when entering into a plea deal or if a person had a mental illness that would impair that ability to enter into a plea deal.

I would have answered that "yes I am on mind-altering drugs" though they were prescribed and "yes, I am suffering from a mental illness that would impair my judgment." I was suffering from anxiety, major depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. "So, I am not competent to be entering into a plea deal."

That's what I would have said.

I had been traumatized by the entire matter that resulted in me standing in front of a judge on this particular day in my life history up to this point.

The judge asked if I was in fact guilty. I said, "Well, that's what my lawyer told me to say for the purpose of this plea deal but... " I was trying to explain.

Sometimes on courtroom shows, they depict a person elocuting to the "crime." That means they say what happened.

Had anyone asked me to say what happened on that October day in 2004, this would not be the culmination of a plea deal. I would have described how I had been brutally attacked in my home resulting in every item of clothing being soaked in blood all the way down to my socks and sneakers. It would have been a statement of my victimization and my inability to even defend myself.

But no one was concerned about what really happened. They wanted this wrapped up before the real victim, who was being treated like the perpetrator had a chance to think about what is happening and what he is doing.

Guilt was an abstract term. No one in that courtroom heard anything resembling the truth as to what happened back in October of 2004. What I mean is that in no way did we talk about the events in question.

No one cared what really happened.

My fate and future were sealed. All hope is gone.

Chapter 66: Crucified Despite Doing No Wrong - My Captivity



I had been victimized and didn't even defend myself. Yet, I was the one convicted of a violent crime. I was the victim of a brutal and bloody assault where I did no wrong.

That was the end of my normal life and all the hope that I had ever had in life. I believed that my life was over, and I would only live a wretched existence with no hope of any future.

It was Edmund Burke who said at the time the US was being formed into a nation that the only thing required for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

I would argue that a person who doesn't respond to the pleas of a victim is not good. That is so much eviler when it involves your own family!

To have maintained a relationship with them after this was a sign of my inability to act with love for myself or with self-compassion. By maintaining a relationship with my parents and siblings after this, I disrespected and dishonored myself.

I would NEVER forgive anyone who did such a thing to anyone else. It was evil, pure and simple. *They had known the nature of my character and had admitted later that I am a good person and that they never thought I was guilty of what I was accused of doing.*

It was evil, pure, and simple as far as I am concerned!

They had been doing me wrong repeatedly over and over for going on six years when this plea deal went into effect. They also didn't speak up and say "oh, you should appeal it, let's get you a lawyer." I have heard of parents who make it their mission to save their adult children who are falsely accused of crimes.

My so-called family, my now ex-family, did nothing! That sickens me and a quote I heard somewhere comes to mind, "I hate them with the burning hot passion of a thousand suns!"

Until I found I could be indifferent toward them. I have gone "no contact" which is a strategy I heard for dealing with narcissists.

I would be hard-pressed to find anything good or redeeming about them, now.

I was struggling with this and my finances in March of 2020 when I called the Catholic Social Ministries. I needed help with rent, and they were listed as a community resource for this.

I spoke to the lady who ran the social ministries there, Mary Ellen McGuire, and she said, "Can I pray for something for you?"

I didn't really answer because I wasn't much of a believer after everything I had experienced. I had once believed. I had prayed so desperately when I was in such desperate need of comfort. From the depths of my soul, I had prayed repeatedly over and over many times per day when I was in jail for seven months. I had said, "My God, you know I am the victim and I need help. Please help me!" But I got no aid.

This was going through my mind.

I heard Mary Ellen ask again, "Is there something I could mention in prayer for you?"

I said, "You know, I was raised Catholic. I used to go to church until recently. I always lived my life according to the highest morals. I NEVER harmed anyone, ever! Yet, I had everything taken from me and every hope of happiness."

"I loved helping others and I worked as a psychotherapist. It was so amazing to be able to help others who were suffering from emotional pain. In a world that makes sense, I would be of great value. But years ago, there was something bad that happened. I was falsely accused and convicted of a violent crime. Me! I have NEVER acted even remotely aggressive in my entire lifetime. Now, they say it's too late to get justice or to clear my name."

I continued, "You know, I studied the Bible and the book of Job. Job had it better than me. In that story, it is revealed in the end that he wasn't being punished for some wrong that he did. You could say his innocence had been revealed. He was vindicated."

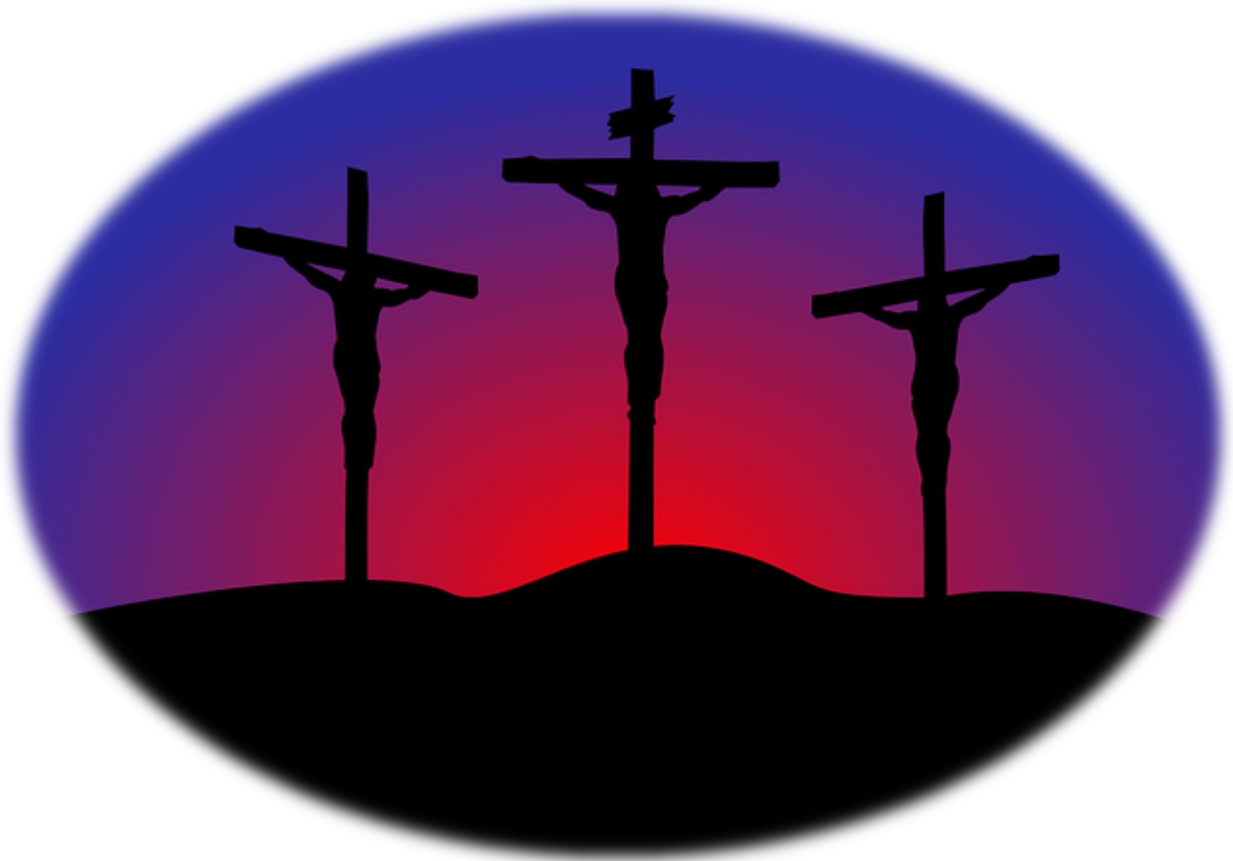
"For me, there is something called a statute of limitations. I was supposed to have appealed the plea arrangement back when I was in a very dark place and all alone."

I added, "and my own family abandoned me and didn't do anything."

She then said, "well, Jesus never got justice. He was never vindicated. He died yet he did no wrong."

Wow, I could agree with that from a historical perspective. I could relate too. Jesus went around healing people.

I said, "I actually had thought about that before. Thank you for reminding me."



The imagery of the cross is about the idea of someone who has done no wrong facing a shameful crucifixion.

The first books of the "New Testament" - the gospels - end with a good person being executed. There was no stay of execution at the last moment with the truth setting Jesus free.

The friends of Jesus faced execution if they were associated with him when he was arrested. Those who abandoned me, the woman who gave birth to me, the sister who claimed to love me, faced no such threat to their well-being.

My entire future was on the line and I was thrown out into the cold streets and without a home. They didn't even give me warmth or shelter during those years.

I met someone who was assigned to be a peer support person in my recovery from mental illness last year. He kept insisting I needed to find a "higher power." I protested saying that I do not believe in such foolish ideas.

I said it would be a miracle if I got justice for a crime that happened sixteen years ago way past the statute of limitations. "If that happens, I'll believe," I said to shut him up.

He was insisting that God would or could not do anything for me now. What? Your god can reanimate a dead body, bring someone back from the dead but that same God cannot inspire and touch the hearts and minds of people. That god cannot persuade people?

That makes no sense to me. Why would you believe that the God of Easter can raise a person from the dead and all it takes for justice is to persuade others to recognize the truth and embrace justice.

When I was a believer, I heard that God is all about justice. This would be the most obvious and pertinent thing on the list of things that God would want to do.

It doesn't matter how much time has passed or other difficulties. For God, all things are possible. This is certainly less complicated than creating a universe and raising a man from the dead.

This individual who said I should believe in a higher power was part of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. I asked for a different peer support person to be assigned to me.

Believing that things will work out in the end if we trust our higher power hardly makes sense if you simultaneously believe that some things are not possible even for your higher power.

Mary Ellen McGuire sent me a book called "Everyone Has Someone to Forgive." She understood how seemingly impossible it was for me to forgive my family. In sending this book to me she respected and recognized that a great wrong had been done on their part by their betrayal.

I have a takeaway from my present insights. We do not contemplate forgiving those people who mean nothing to us. We just don't think about them because other things are on our minds.

That is where we are as I am about to wrap up my autobiography.

Chapter 67: Remembering My Dear Friend Thomas Childs



I dedicate this chapter to my dear friend Thomas Childs, who continues to live in me and in my memories of a very important part of my life. There is a Thomas-sized hole in me that I will never fill in; it's my way of keeping him alive.

I took the photograph of Thomas above in 2008 down by the Cape Fear River near the Battleship.

Sadly, Thomas passed away in 2010, or he would be writing a recommendation for this book. He would recommend this like he recommended my poetry collection, which you can find on Wattpad also - it's called "What Really Matters."

Just like he did for that book, he would say that he is "honored to be asked by me to recommend that you read this." Trust me. I know my friend.

Some of the most meaningful and lasting relationships of mine were formed beginning in the early 1990s. Second, only to Lynn and Celta, was my friend Thomas Childs and my second wife who hasn't been introduced yet. Obviously, my connection to Lynn had a romantic component that was lacking in all other types of friendships such as my friendship with Thomas. However, that doesn't exclude him from being considered a part of my family.

As I write this, I am thinking of the song Empty Garden by Elton John. The lines that stand out are "a gardener like that one, *no one can replace...* and I've been knocking... most of the day...and I've been calling."



This was a time when I felt really connected to a group of people - a social circle. That being said, some of us really clicked. Thomas was one such person in particular with whom I felt really comfortable. We felt a sense of belonging to each other. This was my family. I felt at home in this life that I had.

It's amazing when you can sit down together and not worry about stilted conversations. Not worry about what you should say. Not worry about if you are okay or not. Not worry about whether you made the grade or are good enough.

I could talk to Thomas on the phone for hours when we connected sometime after I had been through my own dark time, or dark night of the soul as it were. I wish I had reached out to Thomas during those dark years. We could have supported each other.

Lynn had wished I kept in touch with our friends when she became ill in 2000. I felt like I had abandoned my friends. For those dark years that began in 2000 and lasted until sometime in 2006, I tried to make it on my own.

That was the biggest mistake I ever made in life!

Then in late 2006 or early 2007, I came down to Wilmington from Chapel Hill. I met Jean - a mutual friend - at the bus station and I asked about Thomas.

We picked up as if no time had passed. I would speak for hours on the phone with my dear friend. We had the same interests of course and so we could find things to share. TV shows or movies that we should watch.

Current events. Our writing. Things to laugh about together. Commentary on things. Philosophical ideas. Reminiscing.

"Oh, dear Thomas, I could have used your help, my friend. It was so hard when Lynn got ill in 2000. She said she wished I had kept in touch. I could have just picked up the phone.

"I was so scared. This wasn't supposed to happen to Lynn at just 34. We had a life planned; it was perfect."

"The biggest mistake was not calling and telling you what was happening, my dear friend."

Instead, I wallowed in the misery of what was happening.

Had I called Thomas, I would have discussed the challenges I was facing in my practice and in my career, as well.

I used to share some of the things I was learning with my friends.

Let me tell you more about this, dear reader. About this part of my story. It's about the importance of friendship.

It's so important in times of stress. Emotional support is key.

We had a social network of friends, as I was saying. This was from the poetry scene. I was part of this group. This was my social life. We felt we were doing something important, together.

Indeed, we were. Thinking. Writing. Sharing ideas. Creative ideas.

Our group included in the beginning, Thomas Childs (my friend), Lynn Krupey (girlfriend, fiancée, wife), Dusty (didn't catch her last name), Jean Jones, David Capps, Jeff Wyatt, (David) DJ Ray. I could live within the sanctuary of these people and the scene, as it were.

There was something comfortable, safe, and meaningful about this reality.

This was our time to become something. I was going to be defined by all of this and the relationships that I was building. I was growing up and forming a family... a family of choice.

Arriving on the Scene and Necessary Balance in Life

I could have been afraid and failed to attend that poetry reading at the Coastline Convention Center in April of 1992, and thought to myself, "I can't read my own poetry in front of others."

What good would it be to show up and be a ghost? What good would it be to sit there and watch others all the while thinking about how I don't fit in?

I can't imagine how my life would have been if I had not come out for this poetry reading that first week. I might not have met Lynn and shared a life with her. I might not have had the confidence to pursue my dreams.

That confidence grew out of the events that happened when I did decide to attend that poetry reading. It demonstrated to me that I could speak in front of a group and be the center of attention. I learned that I had something special to offer to others.

Through my relationships and connections with others back then, my life was transformed. I had not been in a good place before that time, when I first arrived in Wilmington. Friendships like I had with Thomas and the relationship I had with Lynn were so valuable and they nurtured something special in me. I was able to give that to others as well.

This book might not have existed and you dear reader, might not have known me at all. I came with ideas about what might or would likely bring me happiness and meaning in life. And that is what I found.

That's what shyness can do. It can paralyze you and prevent you from making the connections.

Yet, I felt a need to share. To give my gifts as Dusty would say. Dusty was the emcee who worked at the Coastline Convention Center.

Dusty said that we were "sharing our gifts." I thought I was sharing something personal. Lynn wrote for herself; I would grow to learn. But Dusty said these were "our gifts." Wow!

Indeed, sharing something of yourself with another is a gift.

Some might say that we were a bunch of idealistic artists, but I had come there with a degree in engineering, which would be the springboard for graduate education in Social Work and toward becoming a Clinical Social Worker.

It might be more accurate to say that I have had values, passions, and interests than to say I was just idealistic.

The creative side of me might have been somewhat aligned with the values that drive a person to pursue a career in social work.

To us who work in the field of mental health, we need the support of others. The work can be rather frustrating. The work can also take a toll on you as you support those who have been hurt by life or harmed by others.

Spending hours with people who are overwhelmed by major depression and anxiety disorders can and does take a toll on you. You need balance and support in life. Emotional support.

In order to be a social worker, I learned social skills and how to deal with what I called shyness. Those same skills allowed me to share myself with others in my personal and social life outside school, training, the job, and everything else.

I wrapped myself in the warmth of the friendships I had formed. Back in the 90s, the welcoming nature of Dusty was always a source of comfort. I could show up for drinks at the Coastline Convention Center if I was feeling overwhelmed and alone, and Dusty would make me feel welcome and expected.

She would seem to have this genuine interest in me and so glad that I showed up. Later, she would ask about Lynn, of course. I would feel less and less alone but occasionally overwhelmed by things in life.

I remember the warmth of Lynn would envelope me as we sat on the beach at Wrightsville Beach during cold winter nights. That memory would sustain me as well.

Then it was the comfort of a friendship like I had with Thomas. Again, our conversations were so comfortable, and the time together felt comfortable. Not stilted or desperately searching for something to keep the conversation going.

In a larger sense, this was a time and place that I knew was something amazing. Everything seemed so right and comfortable. I knew I was on the right path and that everything was going right.

I had a sense of belonging.

I knew who I was and what I wanted. We as friends would talk about the struggles, challenges, and doubts which existed from time to time in our lives.

Changes in the Late 90s and Into the Next Century

At some point, I regrettably got over-invested in the job beginning in mid-1999. I only allowed time with Lynn and those times when her family came with their kids which I mentioned earlier in this book.

So, unfortunately, I allowed myself to stop spending time with my friends, and my social life of writing and attending poetry readings was not happening. It was a crucial missing piece.

Fast forward to the summer of 2007, and I started visiting the area again. Life in Durham had not been rewarding in any way.

Anyway, on one of those visits back, Jean was having a poetry reading in celebration of a new chapbook of his poetry being released.

This was one of those visits back to the place I had called home. I was happy to see my new friend, Ryan. I was thrilled to see my new friend, Ana – obviously not the Ana that attacked me. I was thrilled to see Thomas and Jean. I was happy to see David Capps (he had been part of the scene back in 1992, though he was inscrutable to me).

Here is a video of Ana Ribeiro reading poetry at the Word Salad Poetry Magazine Event in Wilmington in October of 2009. In the video we are at the lounge where I saw Lynn again as described in the next chapter. This is not the same location where Jean was releasing his new chapbook, so it's a different evening than what I am describing.



Here is a video of David Capps reading poetry. He was there this evening that I am describing but the video is from a different evening.



I knew Lynn would be there and so it was a bit surreal. There was no longer a "we" which was what made this surreal. It's hard for me to explain. I felt queasy and I had a knot in my stomach.

This was a reality that I had never envisioned. She had gotten new lungs and so she was still living, but there was no "we."

The autobiography of my life would need to include this reality. Thomas was that glue in that he had been our mutual friend - a dear friend who had been part of "our" shared life together.

He had navigated the roads of time maintaining a relationship with us both. Jeff Wyatt had been a mutual friend as well, but I seemed to sense that he was a bit colder than he had been in the past. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Thomas, Lynn, and I had been mutual friends but now there was no "we" that was Lynn and me. This wasn't supposed to happen, and it just felt so uncomfortable for me.

There had been no breakup and things had been so vague and confusing all these years.

Knowing Lynn was going to be there made me tremble, my heart was racing with anxiety. A good bit of alcohol made this only slightly more bearable.

I could sense Lynn nearby while I spoke to David Capps. My face was flush not just from the alcohol. My heart racing, pounding.

I wanted to find something to say to Lynn with every fiber of my being. But I couldn't do it. I just felt uncomfortable. Lynn and I talked about everything - we even fought and got over it. Thomas and I had not argued nor had Celta and me before that. It seemed to me that being able to get into an argument and get over it, move past was a sign of how much more comfortable I had been with Lynn than anyone else.

This was frustrating so I stepped outside through the side door as people were milling about. I had noticed Thomas step outside. Ana was there too, talking to Thomas. Ana had not been part of the scene in the 90s.

I tried to bring up the topic of my discomfort with Thomas. This wasn't the first time I brought up the topic with him. What could he do? What could he say? I couldn't make sense of this new reality.

I did remember how in the early 2000s, I had enlisted people I met on Facebook to contact Lynn prior to this evening. They heard the story and were moved to call Lynn. She was polite but we never got anywhere.

I was still carrying the weight of profoundly low self-worth. I had no sense of worth as a person and whether we call it shyness or something else, we have to take action, or nothing will happen.

Sadly, Lynn might not have known that I still loved her or was in love with her...but she probably did.

I mean whoever these people were who called her they were moved with such a profound feeling of inspiration to want to connect Lynn and me again.

Life Changes

Later, Thomas had been happy to find out that I met someone else that I was going to marry.

Her name is Elnaz Rezaei Ghalechi (Elee). We got married in Ankara, Turkey. She had been submitting poetry to Word Salad, which was being published by Jean and me. Word Salad Poetry Magazine was started by Lynn and me in 1995. Later, Jean became the co-editor and co-publisher.

Thomas was a brilliant poet as well. I am sure we published some of his poetry.

Elee and I married in November of 2010 and when I got back, I found the news on a voicemail and on Facebook.

My dearest friend Thomas had died. He had died of a heart attack.

When I first heard the news, it didn't register. I had just seen him. I had spoken to him and he was happy for me. We had so much more to discuss!

No!

Elee responded appropriately. She was on the other side of the world and yet she understood better than my own sister. Elee consoled me as anyone would respond to news of this nature.

I started drinking when I heard the news about Thomas. My mind became a smooth flowing river. I thought this was a way to cope but it wasn't. It just made me sick.

Whatever was inside me wanted out and I clutched a table to stay alive. I fell to my knees due to a combination of grief and what the alcohol had done to me.

I had not made it to the funeral. I felt such shame for that. Would I have found the strength to speak to the crowds at his funeral? I think I might have done so. I wasn't the same person I once was but I could and would have had words to say. Or maybe I would have cried and cried.

Both.

It's hard to describe the hole that is left by a dear friend. It's hard to describe friendship and the love that we felt.

For someone like me to be at a loss for words is something in itself! I'm usually rather verbose... but what words can convey the specific things that connect two people and create that comfort among one another?

Had I made it down there, I would have found the words. I would come to feel great shame for years... To not even make it to the funeral of your dearest friend!

Anything I would have said about his brilliance should have been known by anyone there, but I would gladly repeat and confirm it. I can say that he is not gone! He lives in me and can't be taken away as long as I live and can write.



That's what I would tell his family!

That's the point of all these chapters that move between the past and the present... in this single chapter, I've covered events that have spanned eighteen years in this chapter, and each year, month, or day flow around one another in one stream of consciousness full of sound and fury, signifying everything!

What I most wanted to say was something only Thomas would understand. What we had was ours! It was for us and it was epic!

Dear reader, did you expect something less hyperbolic to come from me? You should know me better by now!

Writers like me are loath to employ trite statements that just sound like what you are supposed to say when you speak of someone who has passed. No, when I write, I mean it quite literally and explicitly.

There are so many times in which I have thought, "this reminds me of Thomas," "I would love to talk to Thomas about this" or "I should talk to Thomas about this, he would appreciate it."

The past is there in me. We are all together in that home that Lynn and I shared on Brucemont Dr. in Wilmington... or at a bookstore... maybe a coffee shop down by the Cape Fear River. I am haunted by the ghosts of the past, but that's a good thing!

I'm not going to try to summarize a friendship that began in 1992 and lasted nearly two decades until his death. The formality of a funeral has passed. On such occasions we find the necessary strength and words to speak.

Later, we realize how much was left unsaid and how much cannot be known by anyone besides the one we lost, in this final paragraph of this chapter, that person is Thomas Childs.

Chapter 68: More Thoughts About Lynn

Some people have questions like what happened to my first wife, Lynn. She died in 2015, I found out. From cancer. There had been no "we" for all these years. Merely talking about her and what happened has been so painful.

Before I met Elee, my second wife, I had tried to get back with Lynn, but it never worked out. As I said in the last chapter, the times when I saw her down in Wilmington were very awkward and surreal. What could my friend Thomas do? Other than understanding what I must have been feeling.

I couldn't say anything when she was right next to me. I'll get to that scene below.

I had been more comfortable with her than with anyone else in my life. We had trusted each other implicitly. We had such a connection. I had stated the fact that I would have done anything imaginable to hold onto a relationship with Lynn. That fact cannot be understated.

I should have said something when she was right next to me. I had previously tried so hard. I didn't want to call her after a certain point about three years after we had started living our own lives - she with her mother and me in another city.

I had asked others to contact her and convey how much I felt for her. Obviously, those who heard my story were moved to call her and to convey this information. I had hoped to get some information that might lift my spirits.

I believe it was too painful for her to have to move on without me. I didn't want to cause her more pain. I don't know how she dealt with the memories of when we were in love.

I am so sorry!

Lynn had this survivalist instinct due to her illness. After we watched "Titanic" we were discussing the movie with a friend of hers who had cystic fibrosis like her. Her friend and I had agreed that we would jump back into the boat as the girl did to be with the guy.

Lynn disagreed. We had been living together for years at that point. So, I guess she was saying that she would not jump back into the boat to be with me. I know with one hundred percent certainty that I would jump back to be with her if she was in peril instead of getting into the rescue boats that would result in my near-certain survival.

I would NEVER be able to go to safety on a rescue boat with Lynn in a sinking ship. She would not find any justification in dying on a sinking boat just to be with me a bit longer. She might have found it senseless to stay on a sinking ship. I would have done anything to be with her, to help and protect her, no matter what.

So, there was a combination of factors that kept me paralyzed from contacting her from 2003 until her death in 2015. I had not wanted to make her life more painful. What I was going through was extremely traumatic for me and she was in survival mode.

There was another occasion when I almost spoke to Lynn during another awkward moment, years after we had been apart.

It was in late 2009.

Jean had invited me to come to a lounge on a Saturday evening in downtown Wilmington. He told me he was having a workshop for poets. We would share a poem to be workshopped. We would read it and ask for support or feedback from the group.

I had called him earlier that afternoon from Wrightsville Beach near Johnny Mercer's Pier.

I had been here at this location not long ago... up at the front area is where they have the poetry readings and music. I don't think this place existed in the 90s.

I have some videos of me reading some poetry at that location. See below.



Here's a video of Jean Jones introducing me.



I heard Lynn would be there.

My mind had been racing with ideas about what I would or should say to Lynn if I said anything. This would be an interactive event... My heart raced throughout the next few hours as I headed in that direction.

What would I say?

I didn't feel the need to explain what had happened to me regarding the false accusations and conviction. I knew that she would not have wondered about that. She knew the kind of person I was.

Recently, I figured out in my mind that I had been a good person - always. So, the idea that I was undeserving of her was a false belief I had back then. It's sad that I figured this out after she died!

I had gotten so close to saying something on another occasion.

That evening came... I was told to go to the room in the back by Jean.

A few people were talking and then they left the room. Lynn was standing there - alone. I was right nearby.

Had others planned this? Left us in a dark, quiet, private room.

I was thinking and at the same time, my mind was trying to muster the willpower to do or say something. I was thinking of something to say. My heart pounded hard in my chest. I felt frozen – not cold but motionless. I was composing thoughts "I... I what?"

I imagined myself saying "I love you." and her answer would be "I know."

Wow! I just realized what a cliché that would be. It's right out of "The Empire Strikes Back" when Han Solo is being frozen in carbonite and Leia tells him. "I love you."

I'm sure I would have broken down, falling to my knees, weeping bitterly, crying "I love you so much. I NEVER stopped being in love with you."

My mind's a bit blank as I think back to what happened after that uncomfortable moment when I was there alone, close enough to touch Lynn.

Others filed into that room from the front. They took seats. Four to my right. Jean is the "leader" – he sat on the right. Three on my left. And then Lynn. My hands and arms were trembling. My breathing was fast and shallow. I'm sure others could hear me nearly hyperventilating.

The rotation was coming around toward me. I had selected a poem that I wrote called "Fugue State." A fugue state is a symptom of some dissociative disorders. I said they are caused by "trauma", but I could have just said extreme stress or distress. I had written this about the dark times I had known not too long ago.

Sometimes I don't know what I want to say until I say it. Below is the poem that I wrote. It's in free verse.

(I realized later that it was the imagery of dreams, disorientation, desolation, and despair are that I was trying to convey. I didn't know how to do this with rhyme or metered verse.)

Holding the poem in my hand I begin to read.

Fugue State:

In the dream...
I think it's a dream -
I'm not sure how I got
here or where I was going.

It's dark.
I look at the street signs
that I walk past,
and for a time I'm
not finding any that I recognize.

Then I begin to think
that things look a bit

familiar but I'm...
uncertain.
I want to run
but I'm tired
and unsure how far
I have to go.

I try to remember
but nothing comes to mind
to explain
how I got here...
where I am going...
where I live -
where my home is -
or if I have a home.

I don't seem to be injured.
I want to remember...
I begin to question
whether I even know
for certain
who I am?

The people I pass
look unfriendly -
not dangerous;
they just don't convey
anything resembling kindness
or friendship.
They don't know me.
They don't pay much attention.

What should I say anyway?
Ask them to tell me who I am?
Or ask where I am?
I cannot ask how to get

where I am going
because I do not know that.

I don't know if I am afraid of the ridicule
or convinced of the futility
in even trying to get help.

I want to fall down on my knees
and cry... cry out to someone,
"Please help me!"

But I'm paralyzed by my fear
and all I can do
is keep walking
and hoping that somehow
things will become clear
and make sense.

I can't remember the feedback that I got.

When it came around to her, to offer feedback on my poem, she said "I pass."

I got up moments later, the feelings were overwhelming me. I walked out into the night, moving fast. I stopped into a bookstore and looked at some books. I got a call from Thomas, who was on the way.

"Okay, I'm heading back there, I'll see you in a little while," I said.

I returned and took a seat near Jeff Wyatt in that front room near the bar. He had been friends with Lynn and me just like Thomas had been. He went into massage therapy at some point.

Here's a video of Jeff Wyatt reading poetry at the Word Salad Poetry Event. Lynn wasn't at the lounge that particular evening.



I suppose that my last words to Lynn were "Fugue State." My life had been a trance since I had to go on living without her being a part of me and me being a part of her.

I wasn't even mentioned in her obituary.

To this day that hurts so much to think about it.

I mean it really hurts. My tears blur my eyes and roll down my cheeks as I write this in 2021. It feels wrong that I didn't try harder when she was right next to me.

There was no closure. I had failed to just say those words. I love you!

Chapter 69: Moving on and The Conclusion

I was able to find an intimate relationship with a woman again. I got married in Ankara, Turkey to Elnaz Rezaei Ghalechi or Elee, as I call her.

Elee had been submitting poetry to the poetry magazine that I was publishing with Jean Arthur Jones called Word Salad Poetry Magazine. I, at one point, asked her "would you ever marry someone like me?"

I had thought she was very beautiful. We began talking on the phone and chatting with video chat across distances that separate us. She was in Iran.

It would not be honorable for her to come to America without a commitment toward marriage first.

It might seem like a strange way to get married for Americans. We date people and get engaged, then have a period of engagement, and then get married. Elee and I only knew each other virtually when we made the decision to meet in Ankara and to get married.

Iran has an embassy in Turkey. I had to tell them that I was going to be a Muslim for Iran to allow the marriage to be recognized. That just meant that I had to say something.

Ankara was very nice. The Mosque there is very beautiful. The food was amazing. The people could tell that I was an American. I walked outside the hotel and they would speak to me in English about the food that they wanted me to try in their restaurants.

Then we had to wait almost two years for her to get a visa to come to America to live. She even went back to finish her education in medicine. Elee had been training to be a doctor. She had completed that training.

I hope Elee can help me to reach my goals again, and to help others who will benefit from my services in the human services and psychiatric field.

Elee and I got separated in 2018. We weren't communicating well. We both thought the other one didn't want to listen to them. We fought all the time. I kept trying to get her to go for counseling or work on the problems in our relationship. I was afraid to lose her and wanted to work on our relationship. She seemed uninterested.

We just are not meant to be married.

So, we are in the process of getting divorced.

We are friends though. So, it's complicated. She is there for me when I need her. She paid for me to get into Epcot Center this past December of 2020. It was such a special and memorable event. We also went to Daytona Beach and then to Cocoa Beach.

Getting into Epcot center is so expensive now. It costs \$125 per person! Elee is not rich at all. We had to pay another \$25 to park there. Then she paid for food that day. When you buy food inside the park, it is very expensive. It's like \$5 for a small candy bar. The most affordable place we could find for lunch cost about \$40.

The cost of renting the car for five days with insurance and coverage for the tolls was almost \$200. Yes, I paid for some of this but it would not have been possible for the day at Epcot had Elee not paid for that day. She also took me out for a crab or lobster dinner overlooking the beach at Cocoa Beach.

Dear reader: This book is a true story of the life I have known. I am writing to you to share this story in the hopes that we can make sense of things. I welcome your response and feedback on the story you have read.

How do we make sense of suffering like this? Or injustice?

I would wonder every year since that plea deal that had been threatened into taking, how I could still get justice. I haven't stopped wanting that. Ana and Jimmy should pay for what they did to me. And no amount would be enough!

I keep wondering, how can I prove my innocence and Ana's guilt (or Ana and Jimmy's guilt? Clearly, they had a well-contrived plan.

If you are wondering why, I would even consider a plea deal, consider the fact when I was sitting covered in blood, knowing that my attacker didn't have a scratch on her, that didn't matter at all!

The sense that I could not get justice or do anything made me become suicidal in December of 2019.

My memories of the good times with Elee are complicated by the fact that we separated the way we did in 2018.

Anyway, I was told by a law firm that no lawyer or attorney could possibly help me. They said there were no options. I cannot overturn the conviction, appeal it. I cannot get it expunged. I cannot sue to make the case in a different court.

Since everything that makes life meaningful and which brings joy to me is social in nature and is defined by connections and relationships, it seemed like no hope existed for me ever. This would follow me forever.

You know how I like kids. Who would let a guy adopt children if he has been convicted of a violent crime?

Even volunteer opportunities seemed out of reach. That's what I was thinking.

I am shy so I fear rejection and now with lies out there, I have reasons for my fears of rejection. I had tried to go on a date once and it seemed like she found out something about me online and didn't show up.

I suppose getting this book out there and telling the world who I really am is my way of changing things.

It's ironic, John Freifeld died and that is why I cannot sue him for what he put up on the web about me. The lies.

Those lies show up in a Google search.

I felt things were hopeless for me in every avenue and area of my life – everything that makes life meaningful and happy for me.

So, that's why I started taking those pills and drinking back in mid-December of 2019. I wanted to end my existence.

Then I met some people and realized that there are warm, caring, and compassionate people in the world with empathy. People I met in the hospital, other patients.

The year 2020 was one of the best in many years for me, despite a pandemic.

So, relationships, friendships, and more will connect me with life.

I will continue to pursue getting my clinical license in social work again. I will continue to pursue employment in the field. Because I learned that when people do get to know me, they know my character, my goodness, my compassion, and my empathy toward others.

What can you do? Protest injustice. Stand up for the weak and oppressed! Do not accept the status quo when it is wrong. Do not accept ideas like "that's just the way it is." It doesn't have to be that way. Think about how things might be very hurtful to someone. Offer that person comfort, compassion, and empathy. Listen with understanding. Offer a shoulder to cry upon.

I was considered by the government to be disabled during the period that included 2004-2006. So, I should not have been able to enter into a plea deal.

Help me fight to get justice.

I have so much to offer the world as you can imagine by now.

So, my request is not just about me but the people whose lives I will touch in such positive ways.

Justice for me is doing those things that I used to do. And I will continue to advocate for the vulnerable. You can do that too.

Comfort the sick and injured. Fight for justice. Never accept injustice. Never believe the lies that "nothing can be done" or "that's just the way it is." Demand change!

Listen, listen, listen with a warm and compassionate heart. Find out how you can help. What does the person need? Just ask and then listen. Be a change agent.

If a person is hungry, give them food. If a person lacks sufficient clothing, help them with clothing. House the homeless. If you see injustice, protest, speak up, and be the change so that justice can triumph over injustice.

Again, I must repeat the words of Edmund Burke who said, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing!" How true.

If you cannot fix the problems a person is facing, after you listen to that person, go speak to others in society. They need to hear about what happened or what is happening. Society needs to know. The world needs to know. That's how we show love.

This book should inspire action!

Yes, for me but not just for me!

For me, spread this story to the world. Let's see what we can do together. Let's fix these problems that I have described. I don't know what the solutions will look like. I don't mean to be rude, but the solutions will not be abstract ideas or matters of faith.

Just as a hungry person needs food, a person who has experienced injustice needs justice!

A Request

We don't need just wishes or reasons to believe in something else out there. We need action!

A certain number of copies of this book are available for free and you may share the book with others to bring attention to the stories contained within the book.

Suggested donation: \$10. Please visit <https://www.gofundme.com/f/justice-and-publication-for-bruce-wheaton> to make a donation on GoFundMe.

If you have any comments or questions, feel free to email me at brucewhealton@outlook.com I love to hear from readers and get an idea as to how you were touched or moved by the story. I always love to hear about what you like most about what was presented in the book.