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The Story of the Title

I asked my client, a woman who worked in politics, “What, if anything, do you remember about our first session—and how, if at all, has it played out over time?”

She leaned forward in her chair, squinted her eyes, and took a slow, intentional breath. She looked deep into my eyes as if I were a lobbyist whose agenda threatened her constituents. The corners of her mouth curled as her brow furrowed, revealing a career of staring down adversaries. I swallowed hard, wondering if I had, perhaps, misspoken during our first meeting.

The long dramatic pause ended with, “I’m not a crier. I don’t cry.” She paused again. “But last time, when I left here . . . I had to meet a colleague for cocktails.” Tossing her head to one side, she added, “And I cried all the way to happy hour.”

Snorting may not have been the best response, but snorting is rarely something one puts a lot of thought into.

My uncontrollable laughter clearly caught her off guard. As if she received a physical blow to her body, she collapsed into the suede wingback chair. Her eyes opened wide, and her mouth remained agape after a fast and full inhalation.

When I could catch my breath, I asked politely, “May I repeat that back to you?”

Hesitantly, I mirrored verbatim what she had said to me: “I’m not a crier. I don’t cry. But last time when I left here, I had to meet a colleague for cocktails, and I cried all the way to happy hour.”

She let out a howl of laughter that overshadowed my own. Her stony veneer was no match for real human interconnection. In an instant, we were laughing together like old friends reliving an inside joke. The more I laughed, the more she laughed. I could see on her face that she hadn’t shared a moment like that with anyone in a very long time.

As we both wiped tears of joy from our eyes, I asked, “May I have that? I think that is the title of my book.”

“I am me; I am you; you are you; you are me.

A plethora of nuance and difference and yet wholly the same.

Fundamentally animal.

Human.

Civilized?”

- Brian D. Mahan

A Personal Note to You

I would bet my bottom dollar that you have already tried many ways to change and heal. You probably feel as though you have made progress, but you just can’t seem to

cross the finish line. And now, you are searching for the missing link. You may be questioning yourself for even picking this book up, afraid that it, too, won't get you to where you want to be. I'm sure that you're exasperated, and might even feel like you are broken beyond repair.

You're not.

I see you, I hear you, I get you, I acknowledge you, and I appreciate you. I empathize and sympathize with you. I feel great compassion for you.

I don't want to make any false or exaggerated promises, and I want you to have realistic expectations. Healing does take time. I won't tell you that reading this book is all that you will need to do, but I can guarantee that, by doing so, you will save yourself an enormous amount of time and money and fast-track your personal transformation.

The good news is that all of your prior introspection, self-help exploration, and therapeutic approaches have had enormous benefit in creating the scaffolding needed for your transformation.

Up until this point, you survived. You learned and you grew. You entangled and untangled. You stumbled and got back on your feet again. You got stuck, you quit, and you found the resolve to engage again. You bent, cracked, and nearly broke, and, as best as you could, you soldered yourself back together and soldiered on. Now, you strive to thrive again.

Like a blacksmith through his own sweat and tears, the people and experiences of your life have forged the fingerprint that you have come to be. All the potential of who you could have been was melted down and slowly poured into a mold that was much too small. At times, the whirl of the world guided you gently—at other times, it rammed into you with nearly unimaginable force. The furnace of others' expectations pitted themselves against your natural tendencies and genetically encoded predeterminations. The metal of your character has been hammered into place, regardless of if by care and nurturing or by the intentional demand for you to change shape.

In response, you became entrenched within a unique kaleidoscope of defenses, coping mechanisms, survival strategies, unconscious embodied beliefs, and subsequent repetitive behaviors.

I got into the work, first, as a client. I went from living a life of dissociation, angst, unbreakable patterns, and full-blown panic attacks to one of self-confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, embodiment, and joyfulness.

But for decades, I had been an insatiable seeker. By hook or by crook, I was determined to stop being my Self. I tried everything I could think of to try to feel better. And, truthfully, I didn't even know what was wrong with me—but something was seriously wrong with me.

I read every self-help book I could get my hands on—except for that one on self-sabotage. I never finished it. I sought out the guidance of a plethora of therapists, self-help visionaries, healers, psychics, kahunas, and even a witch doctor (yes, really). I became a human guinea pig and gobbled down every pill, potion, and powder known to man. I filled journal after journal after journal. I attended dozens and dozens of workshops and retreats. I sat at the foot of many a guru (gee, you are you) and fervently prayed. I took countless hours of yoga and meditated and medicated myself into a stupor. Yet, try as I might to heal my inner child and embrace my feminine side and do everything else they told me I should do, time and time again, my “isms” kept kicking my dogmas to the curb.

So, needless to say, I have been there, done that. Got the T-shirt, the merit badge, and the bumper sticker.

But, here’s the thing: even if you had all the dentistry textbooks and tools, I don’t think you should attempt to fill your own cavities. And I’m sure your dental hygienist isn’t who you would choose to perform a root canal. What I mean by this is, in time, you may find that you need to avail yourself of the right kind of professional support.

I understand that most trauma survivors want the process of healing to be over and done with, like yesterday. Let me be frank with you. There is no magic carpet ride. There is no one-size-fits-all formula. There isn’t a step-by-step process or simple equation you can follow and then rinse and repeat. However, there are some fundamental basics and

universal truths that, when deftly leveraged, can unlock and release you quickly from the bondage of that which you were informed by and have been formed into.

If you are currently in crisis, the third section of this book is filled with straightforward tools, skills, and resources for quick and easy reference. Perhaps you may want to start experimenting with a few of them in order to find some immediate relief. Also, don't be surprised if reading some of my narrative or the other case studies is activating or triggering for you. If you find that to be the case, take a break and practice The 5's Open-Eyed Moving Meditation™ to orient yourself to the present moment.

The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me

It was December 21, 2003, at around 7:00 p.m. The I-10S freeway was packed with last-minute shoppers. My sidekick cocker spaniel, Aspen, had come along for what she thought would be a joy ride. Dog was my co-pilot.

I was keeping up with the flow of traffic, staying between the dividing white lines of the second lane, and had plenty of room between me and the car ahead of me. Suddenly, something shot by me at such high velocity I couldn't even imagine what it could be. Reflexively, my eyes darted to the rearview mirror to orient to my environment in a futile attempt to figure out what the hell was going on. Then, I heard an insanely loud sound behind me—the engine of a high-performance sports car downshifting as it tried to swerve around me. It was the second of two cars that were racing, like out of the movie,

The Fast and the Furious. One of the witnesses said that she thought that the car that hit me was red, but it was going too fast to tell for sure.

My eyes never completed their trajectory to the rearview mirror. Instead, they became transfixed on Aspen, who was standing on the instrument panel of the car! I could practically smell the smoke from the gears of my mind grinding to a halt. My conscious mind grappled with how she could be standing on a vertical surface.

But my lower reptilian brain took command over the situation, even before my higher brain could figure out that I was in trouble. Within a millisecond, my body was flushed with warmth as my system flooded with endorphins, dopamine, adrenaline, serotonin, and whatever else my body's pharmacology had at its disposal. All my five senses became heightened. Time seemed to slow down, so much so that I was left hanging in suspended animation. I felt the air in the car get thick as molasses. My eyesight became crystal clear, capturing the finest details. My field of vision expanded as if I were looking through a fisheye lens. The sounds of metal meeting concrete and glass shattering enveloped me like a Dolby surround sound theater.

Then, I felt as though two great big arms wrapped themselves around me, and I heard a man's voice outside of my head speaking into my left ear. I had grown accustomed to hearing voices inside my head, but this was entirely different.

On the back of my neck, I felt hot air as the voice, quite matter-of-factly, told me: "There is nothing you can do anymore. Just let go."

My head whipped around to see who was in the back seat whispering in my ear. There was no one there. What else was I to do but heed the advice of the phantom voice? Without hesitation, I took my hands off of the steering wheel and my foot off of the brake.

Aspen was frozen, still standing on the speedometer. The car was nose down at that point. That which was once a vertical surface had become a horizontal one.

I peered deeply into my sweet Aspen's hollow stare and said, "Everything is going to be okay. Come here," while patting my legs gently.

She, too, was stuck in time. But she slowly crawled down into the wheel well and made her way underneath my knees, shaking like a leaf. I patted her head and her rump to reassure her . . . and myself. I then covered my head with my arms, holding the back of my head with my hands. Had I been limber enough, I would have put my head between my knees and kissed my ass good-bye.

I had a moment of unshakeable clarity: I was going to die.

For years, I had often compared my life to Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, and now the children's tale was coming true. My catchphrase had been "Stop the world. I want to get off." My opportunity had come.

I remember taking a great big deep breath. On the most satisfying sigh of my life, I was surprised to hear, “Finally,” escaping from my mouth.

I saw the image of a little red schoolhouse in my mind’s eye, which I interpreted as a symbol that my life’s lessons were coming to an end.

I’m graduating from Earth’s School of Hard Knocks, I thought to myself.

And never before, or since, have I been so “in the moment” and “present.” I was so relieved . . . calm . . . at peace. I was, instantaneously, fully surrendered to the notion that I was going to die. And I was relieved! In fact, I felt a bit excited. I had no fear whatsoever, as my car flipped in slow motion, end over end, rolling sideways three times across three lanes of traffic and sliding on the driver’s door 150 feet before crashing into a concrete wall.

I didn’t see my life pass before my eyes. Instead, my first thought was, Why did I ever quit smoking?

I had quit a few years prior, in fear that it would eventually kill me. And this was how I was going to die?! I felt ripped off. And I was pissed.

I listened to the sound of crunching metal and waited for the impact that would surely kill us.

The next thought was, Oh, I'm so glad I got all of my Christmas gift bags done.

And then, Oh no! I'm going to be one of those tragic Christmas stories!

Now, every year my friends would get together and remember how I had died right before Christmas.

No, they won't, I thought next, immediately contradicting myself with the hard-nosed reality.

Maybe a few would at first, but my friends' and family's lives would go on, and I would soon perish from their awareness, only to reappear on occasion in a wistful moment.

But what about my house and all my stuff?

And then, none of it mattered anymore. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. It could all go in the landfill. My bills and belongings didn't matter. I didn't care about the mess I was leaving behind. It would all get sorted out one way or another. The details and circumstances of my little life were rendered irrelevant.

Upside down; right side up; upside down; right side up; upside down.

A cascade of thoughts flickered through my mind, This is surely going to be a multiple car pile-up. God, I hope no one else is injured. I wonder how many cars will be involved.

Why is my shoulder so hot? That's weird. Why is my shoulder so hot?