

You Are Not Your Trauma

Uproot Unhealthy Patterns,
Heal the Family Tree

CAROLINE BEIDLER, MSW

with Diana Dalles, LPN, MSSW



Lake Drive Books
6757 Cascade Road SE, 162
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

info@lakedrivebooks.com
lakedrivebooks.com
@lakedrivebooks

Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book includes personal stories. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences and information gathered over time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

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For my mother: thank you for choosing to heal.

*To my dear daughter: because you've shared your story, you've
inspired me to be vulnerable and share mine.*

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*God is making miracles to free us from
the shame that haunts us.*

—Cole Arthur Riley

Introduction

Ripe with Possibility

When I found out I was pregnant, I had to sit down.

The chair I fell into was a reupholstered antique that had once belonged to my great-grandmother. I never knew much about her other than her husband was a farmer who looked (in the one picture I saw of him) like Ryan Gosling in *The Notebook*, only with real farmer biceps—the kind of muscles that pull soldiers up out of foxholes.

I stared at the pregnancy stick my work friend said I should drive to Walgreens to buy because that's what women do when they miss their period. I grabbed onto the smooth wooden arms of the chair, the arms that my ancestor had rested her own hands on. I looked down at the rough, gold material that was selected to cover over the coils and puffs of whatever is on the inside of these old chairs.

I didn't think this was something I'd ever do—buy a pregnancy test. I had been married for only six weeks. I didn't think I could even have children. I'd had enough unsafe sex to have birthed a football team by then. But I took the test (because that's what women do, my friend said). And I waited there for

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almost an hour with a towel covering the little window of results.

Despite things being pretty amazing by this point in my life and recovery, considering all the trauma, brokenness, and years of unhealthy patterns I'd lived through, I still tiptoed around life. Even though, six weeks before, I had walked down the aisle to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," surprising the heck out of my family. Even though they all sang along as I smiled through tears of joy and looked toward a stable, handsome, driven, and smart green-eyed man.*

Somewhere inside, I still harbored the secret thought that God was going to disappoint me. That *I* was going to disappoint me. I'd be able to yell, "See! I knew I couldn't trust you!"

"See, your trauma is too much."

"*You* are too much."

Our early October wedding was a dream, with the kind of wind that kicks up Lake Michigan in a beautiful frenzy. A dusting of yellow leaves and fading hydrangeas adorned the ceremony of only a few close family and friends. I wore a dress that was way puffier than I had envisioned. My longing for something sleek and classy and crème flew out the window as soon as I tried on this once-in-a-lifetime gown that made me feel like a combination between Xena the Warrior Princess and a giant tulle cupcake.

We picked out the flowers the morning of the ceremony at a small floral shop where the owner looked on, disgusted

* As a sidenote: It's okay to keep our prayers specific when we are praying for a mate or partner. My prayer was a tall, green-eyed, supersmart hunk of a man who challenged me intellectually and spiritually, and that is exactly what I got. He's a theoretical physicist and Methodist. Go figure.

(apparently wedding parties picking out flowers in the morning for that afternoon's wedding is looked down upon). My best person and I made our bouquets on the gray-marbled kitchen counter of an Airbnb right before driving to the old white farmhouse where the hunky physicist and I said our vows under the most glorious tree I'd ever seen, with gray branches reaching toward the heavens.

I was the happiest warrior cupcake ever.

But even as it was happening in real time, I couldn't believe that it was happening for me (*it* meaning a "normal life").

Just like the moment I sat on the edge of the gold chair that had so lovingly cradled my ancestors' butts and stared at the stick I had just peed on. I kept shaking my head no. I kept looking at it and then reading the instructions again.

One line – not pregnant.

Two lines = pregnant.

Do I have one line or two?

I looked down.

Two.

Wait.

Is that . . . ?

(Reading the box again.)

One line – not pregnant.

Two lines = pregnant.

TWO?!

Once it finally sank in, I jumped up and sat down, then walked around as if in a trance—an "I can't believe I am pregnant! Am I pregnant?!" stupor. I smiled the half smile of someone who wasn't quite sure if I should be happy. *Is this going to last?* The fear already creeping in.

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But I *was*—I was ridiculously happy. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that I actually got pregnant. I had always had an inkling that if I was able to have kids, I would have had them by then—out of wedlock, as I so bluntly alluded to earlier. Plus, I'd had my share of sexually transmitted infections that can impact a woman's ability to conceive, or so Google informed me.

I praised God.

I cried.

I praised God again.

A snippet of a quote from one of my favorite authors, Brennan Manning, came to mind: "Freedom brings an appreciation for the lessons of captivity."¹

Then I wondered what the hell I was going to do.

My husband was away on a work trip in San Diego doing some important sciencey stuff that I still can't explain. He wouldn't be home until around midnight when I was supposed to meet him at the airport. So, I decided to do what many women do when we find out we're pregnant: I went shopping.

I strolled the baby aisle and brushed my fingers against soft muslin and plush blankets and the teeniest, tiniest onesies and miniature gloves and hats and little slippers with the heads and ears of forest creatures like bunnies and foxes and bears. Around me were other women who looked like me. Some were either stary-eyed with tight tummies or a little more drained-looking with basketballs in their shirts. Then there were the women I couldn't yet make eye contact with who looked like someone had sucked their insides out with a straw, with one baby tugging a breast, another in a stroller, and one pulled along by the armpit.

It was winter, just before Christmas, so I found the most adorable tiny faux leather boots with off-white fluff coming out

the top. Both shoes fit on one of my open hands. I stared at these tiny shoes. There was going to be a little human in these shoes (I did not know yet that there were going to be two little humans). I searched the clothing and tried to find something gender neutral. Not too frilly. I found a forest green and navy long-sleeved onesie that said something about going on a journey.

This moment was like coming out of a strange wilderness. God showed up again. Despite my fear and unbelief. Despite my doubt that good things were going to keep happening, God showed up in a heart-wrenchingly beautiful way: I was pregnant. I couldn't stop saying it.

On the way home from picking Matt up at the airport, I was so nervous I could barely breathe in the car. I had to roll the window down, and the night air wafted in.

Deep breaths.

You can do this.

I didn't exactly know what I was going to do. How was I going to say it? When should I tell him? We drove the familiar path back to our small rented house. Matt talked about his work, but I could tell he was tired from being on a plane for hours, still adjusting to having feet on the ground.

We arrived and the dogs greeted us. Matt set his bag down and went to the bathroom.

This was my chance. Even though he was exhausted and I was unsure, I decided I had to tell him. Immediately. I took out the little boots and set them against the wall near the front door where the rest of our shoes were lined up.

I smiled. This was *really* happening.

When he came upstairs, I led him to the doorway and pointed. I couldn't even say the words.

He looked at me in shock.

That was the beginning of everything.

At that moment, I realized that *we can be part of a new story.*

We are not our trauma.

Olive trees stand apart from each other like distant lovers. The thick trunks lead into a chaotic crisscross of limbs and grayish-brown question marks. It isn't a blissful picture with angelic clouds and a rainbow of flowers. Instead, a grove of olives is straight out of a scene from *Lord of the Rings* when you know everything is about ready to go to hell.

Mature olive trees are eerily beautiful though. In all their mangledness, there is something about them: Strength? Life? Hope?

What appears from the tips of the most distorted branches is a verdancy that surprises: a flutter of grassy green and a glint of yellow in the light, like a clapping Colorado aspen.

Russell Stafford is a self-proclaimed “hortiholic and plant evangelist” and wrote an article called “Specimen Trees and Shrubs with Elegantly Twisted Branches.” In it, he talks about a number of trees, like the olive, that are zigged and zagged from the main trunk.

Stafford writes, “Some trees are just twisted—literally. Rather than growing in the usual linear pattern, their stems crazily zig and zag, each segment veering in a different direction from the previous one.”²

He goes on to talk about a variety of crooked trees like the scarlet curls willow, contorted beech, and dragon's claw willow. They each have branches that twist and curl and do backflips into

the sky. They are characterized by “whimsically erratic angles” and “theatrically wild silhouettes,” according to Stafford. There is less pattern and regularity. No predictability. Yet something about them makes them stand out. Makes you stare. Wonder.

They are lovely.

Hardy.

Add variance to the landscape.

These trees, like the olive, make you stop and think and (for people like me) wonder at the God who created such variety. Such beauty from the misshapen.

My own life has been like this: a branch from a family tree that is as bent and meandering as a dragon mulberry. I have wandered into painful scenes, my own personal Garden of Gethsemane, surrounded by a family that is less than perfect. Family that is twisted. Struggling. Absent. I, too, have asked questions in this garden and struggled my way to recover from trauma: death, divorce, addiction, and sexual violence. I asked God, “If you are really here, why do you allow such things?”

Let this cup pass from me.

I have asked aloud, “Where is God when it hurts?” And I have wondered in secret why some families are sturdy like oak trees and mine is slow to grow and low to the ground.* Yet I’ve also experienced the other side of the questions. Where the light hits just so and dances on the forest floor. Where a garden of questions is transformed into a prairie of peace. The place where I know God has a plan and a purpose. And the plan and purpose are good.

Thy will be done.

* *Where Is God When It Hurts?* is one of my favorite books by Philip Yancey.

As a now East Tennessean, I've looked out my window at the towering ash and cedar trees around us and marveled at their strength. How when the wind sweeps through the mountain ridges, only the tops of the branches sway. Roots twisted below, stretching in and out among the rock, they get water and nutrient-rich soil wherever they can. Making it against all odds. Born to be resilient. Created for recovery.

The journey we are about to go on together is an exploration into the concept of intergenerational or family trauma and how it can nestle into the branches of our family trees without our even being aware of it. This book is also a journey of recovery through trauma and its symptoms and unhealthy patterns that mirror my mother's story with uncanny particularity (you'll see why in a bit).

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, the preeminent researcher on trauma, says that regardless of the specifics, most of us are survivors of trauma in some form. Most of us, to live healthy lives and make healthy choices, need to learn how to "develop a mind that heals."³ We must learn how to have compassion for our stories.

Even if the specifics of our stories are different, we can relate to one another. Even if your idea of recovery is different from mine, we no doubt have something in our pasts or in our families' pasts that keeps us from living the lives we dream of. My mother and I invite you into our stories so that you can see yours, perhaps, in a new way.

Over time, I've come to believe that we can gain the ability to see our stories and our experiences with new eyes. By searching the past for clues, we can discover how the muck of our own lives resembles, in some ways, that of our mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, or other family members.

And importantly, we can learn that we don't have to stay stuck there. We can move into a place where we feel safe in our own bodies, where we can hold our stories with compassion and hope. We can choose healing today for our children's tomorrow. We don't have to identify with our trauma any longer.

I've also uncovered, along a recovery journey, that we should ask these questions: What is it about our family trees that allows particular forms of trauma to spread like a disease? Why do some of our lineages foster hardships like sexual trauma, addiction, unhealthy relationships, and more? And how can we move beyond a cycle of family brokenness, suffering, and trauma? This allows us to open our hearts and minds to learn and see new things about our experience.

I love the way Trey Ferguson in *Theologizin' Bigger* puts it:

We are shaped by our experiences. We carry many of the lessons we come across—even some of the ones we'd rather leave behind. We are marked by our trauma. Our communities and families of origin have left their fingerprints at the core of our being.⁴

While we may be marked by our trauma, we can live in freedom, breaking the cycle. We can live more joyfully and ensure that our children don't have to live in our chains. We can heal the tree and experience the spaciousness of a new identity.

In this book, I'm going to share with you what I've learned about intergenerational trauma and recovery from my personal experience, from research, and from your stories. Together, we are also going to uncover that healing is deeper than a trending TED Talks big idea. Recovery is deeper than a formula designed to concoct the right solution. Recovery isn't a moment in time

where we arrive. Recovery is a *process*. And we owe it to the next generation to go deeper with our healing.

I identify as a woman in recovery (from addiction, trauma, anxiety, depression, men, ice cream, the list goes on) and also an expert in the field of behavioral health and social work, having worked with thousands of individuals looking for solutions. I've also had the opportunity to build things like nonprofit recovery homes for women, statewide peer support organizations, and even a recovery ministry, all centered on one truth: transformation is possible. Our stories, even the broken pieces, can be redeemed.

I know this. People I've worked with have experienced it. I've witnessed the way recovery brings light back to the eyes. Maybe you have too.

I'm also a Christian. I know—please don't hold this against me. Some of you may be challenged by this.

Saying such a thing is weighty in our culture today. It may even carry uncomfortable weight in your own life because of religious trauma. I feel you and I've been there. I include parts of my spiritual path along our journey together because that is a large part of my story. I say all of this because I don't want you to choke on your chai when, along with evidence-based information, I include some references from scripture or other recovery-related texts that also help with transformation. My encouragement to you is to keep reading. Will you consider the multiple pathways we may find along the road to healing?

In this book, for all my list-lovers out there, I also outline a series of five rhythms that help guide us to a greater understanding and acceptance of our past and toward a freer recovery. They can be transformational focus points. This framework can lead us to break free from past wounds or work to disrupt them.

This is a bold statement and a weighty promise, I know, but I truly believe these rhythms can help your life the way they have helped—and continue to help—mine.

The five rhythms are:

Protect the Temple—Honoring the Self
 Practice Forgiveness—Radical Compassion
 Lean In to the Struggle—Everyday Courage
 Get Real—Soul Honesty
 Let God—Living Open-Handed

These rhythms are grounded in the truth that's been woven across time and curls through the earth like the roots of an old oak. Healing can happen. No matter the weight of our past and no matter our monsters or the specifics of our trauma. The future is ripe with possibility. Transformation is possible.

Again, these steps aren't a gimmicky formula. For you, sweet reader, these rhythms create *movement*. They will help you inch toward freedom one day at a time. Progress over perfection. Throughout the stories in this book, I hope that you are able to feel this movement in your own story.

It's tough to understand why trauma exists. Over the years, I've had (and heard) so many questions like: Why do we have to experience suffering at all? How can we find purpose in the pain? What do we do with what we find?

I love what Joan Walsh Anglund, a children's book author, wrote in a poetry collection entitled *A Cup of Sun*: "A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song."⁵

We say in addiction recovery that our "experience, strength, and hope" can help another alcoholic or addict. I love this. It reminds me that I may not have all the answers about why

there is so much hurt and trouble in the world, or why you experienced what you did (or are experiencing now), but I do know that stories can bring healing. From a tiny seed can sprout magnificent trees that bear fruit.

It's a glorious and juicy thought. Whether it's shared around a circle of chairs in AA, NA, or another type of support group, told on the phone with a friend we trust, or found in the pages of this book. We don't have the privilege of keeping our healing to ourselves.

To help us understand how intergenerational trauma can affect us today, I've included excerpts from my mother's journal in this book. They appear as short interludes along the way. These excerpts, written by her hand, will not only shed light on my story but demonstrate the insidious nature of trauma and why we must work to disrupt it. It is an honor to include part of my mother's story in this book. I'm so grateful for her experience, strength, hope, and courage.

Finally, as a disclaimer, I'd like to add that my journey is not finished. What I preach, I practice (on good days) or strive to do (on rough ones). Though I write about rhythms, I'm not always living in them. I admit that readily because I know that in weakness lies my strength and the truth that God can do for me what I cannot do for or by myself.^{*,6} Together, we are on this journey toward healing and wholeness. Let's get to it.

* This alludes to the twelfth promise in the AA Big Book: "We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves."

Rhythm 1

Protect the Temple—
Honoring the Self

About the Author

Caroline Beidler, BA, MSW is an author, recovery advocate, and founder of the storytelling platform Circle of Chairs. She is also the author of *Downstairs Church: Finding Hope in the Grit of Addiction and Trauma Recovery*. With almost twenty years in leadership within social work and ministry, she is currently a consultant with JBS International, writing and creating content for federal agencies like the Office of Recovery and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and a correspondent with *Recovery Today Magazine*. She is also the founder and host of the annual International Women's Day Global Recovery Event. Caroline lives in Tennessee with her husband and twins where she enjoys hiking in the mountains and building up her community's local recovery ministry.

Diana Dalles, LPN, MSSW has been writing poetry and journaling since her teenage years, mainly for her own enjoyment and healing. She spent the early years of her career in the nursing field, then worked thirty-five years as a professional social worker. Her employment interests included hospice, medical social work, and gerontology. She has facilitated grief, trauma, and women's empowerment groups. Diana retired in 2015, and being with her family brings her the greatest joy. She also gardens for

herself and others, and stays active in nature. She volunteers at a local food pantry and is involved in her church's ministries. Diana lives with her cat in a small rural Wisconsin town.

Join Caroline's newsletter, *Circle of Chairs*, on Substack here:



