

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This memoir is an account of my life as I remember it to the best of my ability, given the nature of trauma and decades of severe alcoholism and drug addiction. Tracing the blurry timeline of events was difficult at best. Choosing what stayed in and what was left out was a heart-wrenching process. There are stories and details of great depth and weight that are sadly missing from the narrative. Some of the stops along the journey have been consolidated for the sake of brevity and thematic consistency.

Due to the intimate nature of my life's work, and for the safety and privacy of my clients and myself, many names and details have been changed or omitted. The underlying story and the mission of this book remains fully intact.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I ever took a hit of LSD was one of the most profound experiences of my life.

I was a sophomore at the time and living in a foster home with three other boys—all of us had been removed from abusive or otherwise untenable home environments. On this particular afternoon, I ingested a small square of gel I had picked up from a dealer at school and then hopped on a city transit bus on Mission Boulevard headed from Union City to Fremont, the city where I'd grown up.

A good hour later, just as the acid trip started to peak, I found myself back in my old neighborhood. I descended the bus steps and started walking. I rounded a corner to see the red-lettered Exxon sign above the gas station where I had sold candy bars for Little League to drivers lined up during the gas shortages years earlier. I strolled past an old friend's house where broken-down cars were perched on cinder blocks in the front yard. And then I found myself standing across from my own family's ranch-style house—my former place of imprisonment, the setting of my stepfather's merciless abuse, the environment in which my spirit was tormented and broken until the day I escaped to the safety of foster care.

On any other day, the sight of this place would have filled me with rage and longing and the sheer agony of remembrance. But my acid trip had escorted me into a new dimension. My mind had opened to an experience of

unending love and total forgiveness for everyone and everything that had ever harmed me. This love permeated the air; I walked in bliss. I felt as if a conscious being accompanied me, perhaps Jesus himself or what some call Christ Consciousness—a higher self that understands we are all connected and one with a universal force of love. In this sacred state of awakening, I could see forgiveness clearly, and I fully comprehended that every human being—no matter what they've done to others or themselves—is redeemable.

The idea that my stepfather could be forgiven for his cruelty overwhelmed me with relief. Even as I basked in benevolence and loving-kindness, I couldn't grasp the concept that any one of my abusers could coexist alongside humanity in this enlightened space—and yet there in my core I found absolute compassion. Beyond mere forgiveness, this feeling was one of pure love and the acceptance of that same love in everyone. I lost all sense of self—I was part of everyone and everything, a cohesive organism, a fantastic tapestry of incredible, overwhelming existence.

My brain opened up to this well of conscious awareness, and my soul sensed this deep, undeniable truth. The hours spent in this heightened state of being awakened an inner knowing, one as ancient as the cosmos. The world so filled with war, suffering, and division didn't seem ready for this profound message, and I certainly didn't feel worthy of spreading it. So, the belief descended into the deepest recesses of my being, and as this enlightened, colorful state faded, my brokenness reemerged, the skies perpetually overcast.

I took LSD many more times—some trips were cosmic and others hellish—but no chemical substance ever opened me again to that same divine, all-encompassing, unchangeable love. And I believe most of my drug use in the years

afterward—every drag on a joint, every snort of cocaine, every injection of crystal meth—was simply an attempt to get back to that place of higher consciousness. After some time, my drug use devolved into an ongoing mission to blot out the pain of not being able to find that freedom again and to escape living with the brokenness that I thought defined me.

Over the years following that peak experience, I descended into the deepest pits of helplessness and despair. I aged out of foster care and ended up homeless on the streets of San Francisco, not a penny to my name, no skills or education, no one to pull me up out of the gutter. I turned to sex work to survive. Outside the safety of a traditional family unit, I found my support in transgender street workers, gay hustlers on Polk Street, drug dealers, hookers, and misfits of all kinds.

I sought refuge in shelters such as the United States Mission and stood in food lines at Glide Church and Saint Anthony's. Most of the people who fed me or gave me a place to sleep are now dead and gone, but they live on in my memory as family. Sometimes I found temporary jobs filing papers, answering phones, or sweeping floors, after which I returned to the shabby and squalid Delta Hotel on Sixth Street, San Francisco's Skid Row. Many of these circumstances were of my own making; I was doing the best I could with the knowledge and maturity I had at the time.

My life pivoted sharply in September 2005, and after decades of struggle and failure, I found my way to freedom from my addictions, as well as an abiding gratitude for the wonder of my own existence. My spiritual journey revealed within me a state of grace—an inner peace and gratitude for each moment. The spiritual experience I longed for never needed to be “found” in the first place—I was already living it, but completely unaware.

My mentor and life coach, T. J. Woodward, reminds me to ask what else is possible. He says, “What if these years of destruction, drinking, and using drugs were a brilliant strategy that just finally stopped working?” He notes that our younger selves, who were brilliant thinkers fighting to survive in the midst of trauma, found ways to endure unspeakable pain. As adults, we continue to use something outside of ourselves to fix something that feels broken within. The pain of unresolved trauma and my belief in my inherent brokenness often blocked my ability to be in the present moment and find joy. It’s hard to imagine that a loaded syringe was a brilliant strategy, but the more I discover about myself, the more I see how true that was.

Some people addicted to drugs or alcohol use those substances to seek oblivion and escape from their inner pain. I find it interesting that the solution to many addictions prescribed by 12-step programs is a “fundamental spiritual change.” In other words, a spiritual awakening. I believe that all of us, on some level, are seeking a connection to something beautiful and whole, and at some point or another, we will wake up to the truth of who we are. When we do, we will see this pure, priceless, immeasurable beauty, which is our truth.

The recognition may come and go. We may transform, shift, and expand, but the truth is always there. Our true identity, our innermost being, has been covered up by what our teachers, parents, peers, society, and religions have taught us for years. Many of us find out that this is the road to unlearning the illusions. The path to healing or the journey to enlightenment is not the gaining of new, more profound, deeper information about our soul’s purpose, but the discovery of what has been there all along.

My story is not merely about addiction or for people suffering from addiction—it's for anyone trapped in loneliness and limiting beliefs about their worthiness. This story is also meant to illuminate and eliminate the shame and self-loathing that plagues communities across all demographics, borders, and socioeconomic lines. It's about liberating our minds and hearts to give and receive love. We all need true freedom from shame—especially the self-destructive and often deadly shame of our complex sexual experiences, traumas, and desires.

This story is not happening to me any longer; it's happening *through* me. I stand with it and carry it as my light. I believe we are all messengers, and we have come to share a message that brings us closer to love and closer to kindness as a way of life, where kindness becomes our first response instead of a reaction born of fear and self-protection. When our fears drive our actions, we pay dearly, passing on our toxicity and negative memories, our collective shame and learned behaviors, from generation to generation. The world is awakening to this realization. The shift has begun. I believe the essence of every individual is an immeasurable wealth of love and wholeness. It's the truth of who we are. Our worst traumas neither destroy us nor define us. As we wake up from the brokenness and begin to live from this incorruptible place of being, we heal. We begin to live out our dreams and our purpose on this planet. We finally find an empowering sense of peace.

My hope is that anyone who reads this book might find liberation from the illusions of brokenness. We don't always have to forgive the unforgivable or attain some unreachable ideal of empowerment, but we can come to a place of deep compassion and understanding for what happened around us during our storm—our traumas—and move it through us and

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out of us. We don't have to claim it any longer as our staff of righteous survival. I encourage those of you who have awakened and emerged from your own darkness to continue to carry your message by being just who you are right now. Keep shining your light so others can find their way home.