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The Efficacy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Positive Psychology in My Personal Journey into Wellness

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The Efficacy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Positive Psychology in My Personal Journey into Wellness

AN ACADEMIC MEMOIR

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS TO GRADUATE WITH HONORS

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MAY 2006
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Psychology

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This thesis, written in memoir style, would not have been possible without the input and encouragement of some very important people in my life. One can feel too open and exposed when writing about the negative events of one’s life. In my classes at Carroll College where writing about personal experiences has been encouraged, I have tested the waters. At no time did I sense judgment. My professors showed respect for my reflections and honesty, and encouraged me to continue exploring relevant experiences as they related to the subjects we were studying, whether they are philosophical, psychological or literary.

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Graduating from Carroll College and writing this honors thesis are two of the most significant, important events of my life. I will never forget the experience and my fond memories of my professors and fellow students at Carroll College, Helena, Montana.
Abstract

There has been much progress in the treatment of mental illness in the last few decades. Having been a patient of mental health professionals during the 1970’s, I know this to be true. This thesis explores the effects of significant events in my life that brought about a time of serious emotional illness. I write about the events in narrative form and use techniques of creative writing to bring the reader into the story. Although there have been authors who have been accused of using the memoir style as an occasion to fabricate and “embellish” in the name of literary license, it is my intention to relay my story as factually as possible. Some characters and events have been compressed for narrative economy, and although I remember the gist of conversations, I may not remember them word for word. Significant events, however, can be historically verified.

During my years of education as a psychology major at Carroll College, I have been able to see how present research has impacted treatment for emotional illness in a way that I did not have access to at the time I experienced my own problems. I believe that a decade of suffering could have been averted with these improved treatments and that ten years of anguish may have been reduced to ten months or less. This thesis not only tells my personal journey out of mental illness, but also reviews the latest research in therapy methods that could have made a significant impact on my recovery.
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It is never too late to become what you might have been.

~ George Eliot
(Pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans)
Introduction
The year was 1973 and I was twenty-two years old. I was living with my boyfriend and had two young children at home. I had been invited by my friend Theresa to attend a Tupperware party that night.

Now mind you, I hated Tupperware parties. Oh, I loved all the little squares and rounds with the matching color-coordinated lids. I just hated the parties. I hated it when the hostess looked me in the eye and told me how many points my friend would get if I would just host a party of my own. I also hated going home thinking about what a disaster my kitchen cupboards were, and how if I only had a spare $327 I could reorganize my entire food supply.

Weaving my way through the typical Los Angeles area work traffic, I checked my watch. I've had butterflies in my stomach before, but this is ridiculous, I thought. The radio seemed too loud so I reached over and turned it down. My ears felt too sensitive, as if they had popped during a descent from higher altitude. My hands were damp on the steering wheel. I began to think of excuses I could use to leave the party early. I calmed myself by imagining how I would explain to the hostess about a sick husband or kid needing me at home.

I tried to think soothing thoughts as I pulled into the driveway of the modest bungalow. I hoped my friend Theresa had already arrived. She had invited me to the party but I hadn't spoken to her in several days. She would be the only woman I knew there. With my excuses in order I walked up the path to the door, but the urge to run back to the car and leave got stronger the closer I got to the front porch.

The evening wore on with the Tupperware salesperson giving her presentation and the women all chatting happily. Theresa never showed so I decided to use one of
my excuses and leave. But I sat there as if glued to the chair, sure that anything I said would sound forced and the other women would stare at me, knowing I was not telling the truth. Finally, I gathered my courage. Glancing over to the hostess I tried to be as nonchalant as possible. “I’ve got to run, I’m afraid I’ve left a sick husband at home with the kids.”

As I climbed back into my car, panic continued to build. I felt overwhelmed by some foreboding unknown fear. I gripped the steering wheel and backed slowly out of the driveway. All I could think about was just getting back home.

The traffic on Hawthorne Boulevard had gotten worse. My hands felt damp and slippery. With each red light the feelings became more intense. My arms and chest began to feel numb. I wondered if I was having a heart attack. I felt trapped, and more alone than I had ever felt in my life. I wanted to pull the car over to the curb and ask someone to call an ambulance. I was tempted to stop the car in the middle of the road, jump out, and start screaming for help.

I made it home and fumbled for my key. My hands were shaking so hard I could hardly get the key in the lock. Once inside it was all I could do to kiss the kids goodnight and crawl into bed myself. I felt much calmer, just making it home. I was sure I would be fine by morning.

The alarm woke me at 7:15 A.M. I reached over to hit the snooze alarm and was immediately hit with the sense that something was wrong. I went through the usual list in my mind. Several seconds went by as I tried to figure out what it was that was bothering me. The evening before! The memory and feelings of the panic I
had felt washed over me again as quickly as water from a shower. It would be years before I had another day that wasn’t filled with it.

I asked my boyfriend to call my doctor and saw him later that afternoon. I was sure this was some physical malady and a prescription would be all I would need. “I think you may want to think about seeing a professional psychiatrist,” my doctor informed me. “What you are experiencing is extreme anxiety.”

Life became a series of sessions with a psychiatrist. My weeks were spent swallowing Valium and anticipating my next visit. I believed that my sanity hinged on my next visit. My therapist wanted to know about my childhood. What did my childhood have to do with the fact that I have quite suddenly lost my mind? I thought.

My first sessions were spaced two days apart as my psychiatrist probed and prodded me to tell him why I was “allowing” this to happen. Instead of helping me regain a sense of normalcy, this “talk therapy” made my symptoms worse. Within a week I could not be left alone and had to be “babysat” by my mother during the day. I felt I could not go anywhere alone. Each waking moment the panic was there, overwhelming my thoughts and body. Some days, I lay on the floor, hyperventilating and watching the clock, waiting for someone to come home and care for me.

The sessions that followed weekly lasted for six years. The downward spiral continued as symptoms multiplied. Three years later I hit rock bottom. Psychotic depression, depersonalization, derealization, agoraphobia, panic disorder all interacted at once and thoughts of suicide became my constant companion. One of the symptoms of depersonalization is the odd feeling of being outside of yourself. It is as if you are observing yourself. Time seems to slow down. The world seems unreal.
Derealization is another symptom of anxiety. A person suffering from this symptom may feel strange bodily sensations, withdrawn, spacey, and as though he or she is in a dream. It is very disconcerting. During this time I wondered if I would ever feel “real” again. I did not know it was a symptom of the anxiety and that it would pass as the anxiety level decreased. The more I thought about these strange feelings, the stronger they were. The stronger they were, the more I thought about them. I felt trapped in a sort of “twilight zone.”

I quit the psychiatrist after his behavior towards me became quite inappropriate. For the next four years I saw two different therapists, both of whom helped me with their support and caring, but neither of whom helped me make lasting gains in recovery. They simply didn’t know how. Working on their Master’s degrees in psychology, they were being trained in psychoanalysis. Six years of talking it over was not going to help someone like me. What I needed was a type of therapy that was just over the horizon. I needed cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Eventually I did get well. Through a series of coincidences I learned how to help myself. I am convinced that if these tools would have been put into my hands right at the beginning, I could have overcome the panic disorder within weeks or months instead of years. I may not have ever experienced the other symptoms at all. As I began to realize healing in my life, my desire to help others find that healing increased.

There’s an old saying. “If life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Well, life handed me lemons when I fell down a flight of stairs in May of 2000 and broke my neck. I became unable to work in the same capacity I had been working in and
thought about my old dream of helping others who had been through emotional illness. At 51 years of age, I relearned high school math (which, after getting kicked out of high school, I had never learned in the first place), and then applied for college. I am now a senior at Carroll College exceeding my highest expectations for success. When I graduate in May, I will move to Missoula to attend the University of Montana to obtain a Master’s degree in Social Work.

This thesis, then, is written in the memoir style. It tells of a journey in and out of mental illness and the hope that lies on the other side. It documents the mounting evidence that proves there is a way to help those with panic disorder, or agoraphobia, or depression, or even all three, which is quicker and more fruitful than psychoanalysis. Although my own personal journey out of mental illness bore many of the same earmarks as the therapy as it is done today, my education at Carroll College has been a treasure trove of information that I will be able to take to clients I work with in the future. Although some names have been changed unless used with permission, this thesis is the story of that journey.
Family Legacy
Every family has a legacy. Passed down through ancestors and on to us are continuations of family trusts, heirloom furnishings or even good solid surnames. My own family legacy was none of those things. It is a legacy of suicide.

Long before I was born my grandmother stumbled upon the lifeless body of her eighteen year old son, Bobby. He had somehow managed to pull the trigger of a rifle and kill himself within the small confines of the bathroom of their home. My mother named her own first born son after the brother she had lost. But within both my mother’s and father’s family line, suicide was to continue. Uncles of both my mother and father ended their lives within a few years of each other. And within my own immediate family the legacy would continue. But let me start at the beginning.

I was born in 1951. It was a great time to be a kid. My family had bought a brand new home in a new development located in Inglewood, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Two-parent families owned most of the homes in our neighborhood. Almost all families had at least two children. We knew just about everyone on our block. Kids ran free, from dawn until dusk, ending play only for the dinner bell or the bathtub.

We had milk delivery on our front porch, an ice cream man who toured the neighborhood daily ringing his chimes and tooting his horn, and a Helms Bakery truck that drove up our street each afternoon, full of delicious donuts, cakes and pies. We took free rides on the back of the truck if the driver didn’t catch us.

We didn’t have video games or even color television. We spent our days setting up makeshift curtains across the garage door to hold plays for the neighborhood kids. We served saltine crackers so the kids would get thirsty and buy our lemonade,
an idea we saw on “The Little Rascals.” We set up tents for playing army by throwing sheets over the clothesline. A favorite game for the whole neighborhood at night was “hide and go seek.” It seemed an idyllic setting to raise a family.

I considered our family life to be just as ordinary as the next kid’s. In the early years, my mother was very involved in our elementary school activities and was the secretary of the PTA. My older brother, Robert, younger sister, Debbie, and I walked to school together. We all gathered around the dinner table each evening to eat, share our days and listen to “Gunsmoke” or “The Shadow” on the radio. Every other Sunday we drove to West Los Angeles to spend the day with my great-grandmother. I believed she made the best fried chicken in town.

I can actually recall watching my parents work their way towards alcoholism. As a small child, the only alcohol I saw them drink was an occasional beer on the weekend. When we went on short vacations, they packed an ice chest and drank while driving, something I thought all adults did. But I can pinpoint my first anxiety attacks as taking place in the backseat of our car, as I watched the speedometer creep past 60 miles per hour and thinking that we would all die soon in some horrendous car accident.

As we got older, my parents’ drinking habits became more sophisticated. They started making martinis when company came over. Then they started making martinis each night before dinner. Eventually they made them before dinner, and again after dinner. Finally I noticed that they began Mikeping the vermouth, then the olive, and finally the water went out with the ice cubes. Straight vodka became their drink of choice.
With the drinking came the arguing. With the arguing came less and less of my father’s presence in the home. That didn’t bother us kids at all. We were all scared of Dad. Dad was the one who never talked to us unless he was mad. Then he’d yell at us and end every tirade with, “Savvy?” I always assumed that was the way it was with most families. The mom was the nice, gentle one who took care of the kids and the dad was the quiet, gruff one that went out and made the money.

I started seeking a relationship with God when I was about nine or ten years old. One day, from the backseat of our new, blue, Ford Fairlane 500, I looked with longing at the large white steeple of the Methodist church on the corner near our home. I wanted to get up some Sunday morning, put on my best dress and my black patent “mary jane’s,” and attend a service at that church. As we drove on towards the center of town I envisioned how grown up I would look as I walked in alone. I dared not ask my parents to take me. Although I didn’t really understand their belief or non-belief in God, I did understand that Sunday mornings were usually the time for making the Bloody Marys they drank to combat the rotten hangovers from Saturday night’s Vodka Martinis. So finally, one Sunday morning, I got up the nerve and decided to go alone.

The sun was out and the clouds were high in the sky as I made my way the five or six blocks to church. I made my way up the steep steps and through the massive dark double doors. No one paid attention to me, so I wandered over to a table by the wall. Pamphlets about God, Bible reading, Sunday School classes, as well as a stack of little black Bibles lay there for the taking. I picked up one of each and went to sit down in the sanctuary.
I don’t remember much about the pastor or the sermon. I do remember my walk home thinking about one thing he had said. “We need to be more like Jesus,” I remembered. I wondered how to go about doing that. One thing I knew. I would probably have to be nicer to my younger sister. And I should probably start talking more like Jesus talked. I imagined how that would sound.

“Good morning, Mother,” I said, in a most pronounced English accent when I walked through the front door of our home. “What a perfectly lovely day! Church was wonderful. You really should come with me next Sunday.”

Good job so far, I thought. Jesus would never use slang. Calling my mom “Mother” was a good start. My mother just stared at me increduously.

For the next day and a half, I used my English accent and attempted perfect diction whenever I spoke to anyone in the house. My older brother told me to “knock it off.” My younger sister began to imitate me. My mom and dad just stared at each other and smirked. Within two days, my new piety wore off and things were back to normal.

But normal in our household was anything but. Things between my mother and father were deteriorating rapidly. As time went on, my mother’s drinking got worse. Soon she was taking a combination of pain killers and Vodka. It was not unusual for her to be passed out in the kitchen chair or on the couch by 10:00 a.m. My Dad took his drinking to the corner bar near his work. He came home later and later in the evening, most nights arriving around 9 p.m. Soon, he was “working” both Saturdays and Sundays.
The house was in chaos. Our dog had fleas and although my sister’s legs were covered with flea bites and you could see fleas on her scalp, nothing was done about it for weeks. Housework didn’t get done and soon our house was overrun with cockroaches. Attempting to get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom was like walking through a minefield. We learned to turn on the lights and wait while hundreds of them scurried back into the dark walls. Twice I awoke to one crawling across my face. I began to be afraid to go to bed at night. At times like that I tried to imagine Jesus standing in front of my closet doors, watching over my sister and me as we slept.
Teen Angst
At first I banded together with my sister and brother. We looked out for each other and made sure we all got some dinner, even if we had to steal money from my mother’s wallet to do it. But soon we all dealt with the confusion and pain in our own ways. My brother and I began sniffing glue in the alley behind the shopping center. Truancy from school became a big problem. My father seemed to give up on the situation. Periodically he would come home and hand my brother and me a carton of cigarettes or a six pack of Colt 45 malt liquor. Eventually I began to run away from home.

I didn’t really want to leave my home or my parents. I wanted them to “wake up.” I wanted them to see that what they were doing was causing us all serious problems. On the third attempt to make my point, they called the police and had me thrown into juvenile hall. I was fourteen years old.

Selmar Juvenile Detention Facility, located outside of Los Angeles, was a fairly new facility, but overcrowding was already a problem. Street kids from East Los Angeles, young gang member “wanna be’s” from Watts, and youngsters like me, just beginning to get into minor infractions with the law, were all housed together. There was no room so we slept on mattresses on the day room floor for the first week. I felt out of place among the others, whom I thought of as hardened and mean. The first night there, I wet the bed.

Soon I found myself involved with a group of the Chicano and black girls in my “block.” They taught me how to dance and how to enjoy the soul music that was constantly blaring from their transistor radios. One of the main counselors on staff
taught us all how to smoke pot, pretending to inhale and hold her breath as long as possible.

Days were spent in a routine of visiting the nurse, doing laundry, eating bad food and going to school. We played music, did each other’s hair and makeup, and got into arguments. Those who had rooms were locked in each night. I wanted my own room. I wanted to be locked away from the fear I felt by being trapped in that place. Finally my turn arrived.

My room had metal furniture that was bolted to the floor. Each room had a large window with thick double paned glass and strong screening. Every night a searchlight would shine in the window every half an hour. One night I awoke about 2 a.m., needing to use the bathroom. I knocked at my door to be let out. Neither of the night duty counselors came to help me. I knocked over and over again. I finally started shouting. Finally, after about an hour, one of the counselors came shuffling down the hallway. As she opened the door to let me out, she let me know how much I was disturbing her and that I had better not let it happen again.

One day we were told to line up outside the infirmary. We were all given gynecological exams. I had never experienced this before and was scared, but I tried to act cool like the other girls. As my turn came and I lay on the table, I asked the doctor to please be careful because I was a virgin. She frowned at me and looked away without responding. She performed the painful checkup and told me I could go.

One morning, about a week later I had a preliminary hearing before the judge. This hearing was to determine if I could go home or if I would remain in juvenile hall. The judge depended a lot on what the parents had to say. I was sure I was going
to be going home that day and even said goodbye to some of my newfound friends. I thought that my parents must surely realize that this was their fault and things would be better now because of the sacrifice I had made to shake them up.

I was taken into the chambers and placed in a chair between my parents. I had not seen my mother or father since I had been brought in. My mother was shaking. I had never seen her like that before and I felt sorry for her. I put my hand on her arm. The judge then turned to my parents and asked what they thought should happen. My mother spoke first. "We think she should stay here." The hurt I experienced that moment was like a blow to the stomach.

A few days later I awoke with a terrible sore throat. I went to the nurse and she handed me some salt and told me to go gargle with salt water. For the next four or five days I went to the nurse each morning and told her I felt worse. She continued to tell me to gargle with warm salt water.

On the 4th of July the girls were going to have a party with the boys in the mess hall. Everyone was excited. I was feeling so ill that I didn’t want to go. They left me alone locked in my cell until they arrived back about 9 p.m. I didn’t feel like I could lift my head off the pillow. I began to realize that no one was going to help me, so the next morning I staged a personal hunger strike and I refused to go to school.

The counselor in charge finally took me by the nape of the neck and marched me down to the infirmary. The nurse there let me know that when she was in the Women’s Army Corp, she was not allowed to stay home for a measly sore throat.

"I think I have a fever," I said, starting to cry.
She shook the glass thermometer as she glared at me. Once in my mouth, the thermometer soon registered at just under 103 degrees. Reluctantly, she put me in bed in the infirmary and ordered some antibiotics. I had had strep throat for a week.

A few days later I had a formal hearing to determine if I would remain in juvenile hall for a longer sentence. As I was waiting outside the courtroom, a woman who was assigned to me as my probation officer took me aside. “You better admit to the judge that you have had intimate relations with your boyfriend,” she whispered.

“What?” I said. “I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“Well, your exam shows you do!” she said, as she glared into my face.

At first I didn’t understand what she was talking about. Why would the judge care if I liked a boy or not? I thought. I had not come close to becoming sexually active, and was a lot more naïve that most girls my age. I wore little white anklet socks while the other girls wore nylons. I wore white cotton undershirts long after the other girls wore bras. I played with dolls while others listened to their favorite records. I was speechless.

“You will not get out of here unless you tell the judge that you have had sex with your boyfriend,” she threatened me. “Sexual misconduct is on your record and he is going to want to know why.”

“I will not say that I did that and I don’t care if I ever get out of here then,” I cried.

As I entered the courtroom, my head was reeling. I felt humiliated and embarrassed. Sexual misconduct! Just two years before during a discussion on the sixth
grade playground I had decided that if sex was the way a woman got pregnant, I would adopt all of my children!

For whatever reason, the judge never brought up the sexual misconduct charge and I was allowed to go home with my parents. As soon as I got in the car I tried to talk to my mom about the bogus charge. She told me that there was an incident when I was a child where I had fallen on the bar connected to a glider on our swing set and that I had bled and she had taken me to the doctor. The doctor had told her that I had probably broken my hymen from the force of the fall. I begged her to call the judge and explain, but she didn’t think it important.

Being back home was great for awhile. The experiences I had in juvenile hall made me appreciate my freedom. The chaos at home was not as bad as the chaos of “the hall.” The neighborhood kids called me “jailbird,” but I didn’t care. I went back to hanging out with my old friends and doing things I shouldn’t be doing. I was just more careful not to get caught.

I was enamored with boys but I had never been on a date. I was so shy that it was hard for me to answer a boy if he said a casual “hello.” I was scared to death of them.

Time passed quickly and soon I was a sophomore in high school. I was flunking most of my classes and truancy was still a major problem. One day my friends and I were hanging outside of the school grounds, smoking cigarettes and talking before my long walk home. A turquoise blue ’56 Chevy pulled up beside us. There were three guys inside, all obviously older and not from our school.
“Hey, ya wanna ride home?” the driver shouted. He was looking straight at me. I turned around to make sure he wasn’t talking to someone standing right behind me.

“Sure,” I said, and casually walked around to the passenger side, as if I was used to strange guys asking me if I wanted a ride.

As he dropped me off at my house, he asked me if I wanted to go out on a date that Friday night. Without even asking my parents first, I said yes. I knew they would be oblivious as to whether I was even home or not.

I knew I wanted to go out with him the moment I laid eyes on him. I saw a handsome young man who really reminded me a lot of my father. Both were tall, thin, and dark-haired. Both had a lower lip that was fuller than the top. Ron was five years older than I, and seemed so grown up. He had a job and his own car.

There were things I did not know about this young man however. I did not know that he was on parole for car theft. I did not know that the car we rode around in on our first date was stolen. I did not know how involved he was in dealing drugs. I did not know that he had enemies, men who were out to kill him for ripping them off in a drug deal. He was always looking over his shoulder.

Over the next eleven months we were inseparable. We were always cruising around in his car, going over to Los Angeles or Watts to hang out with his friends. Some of his friends were members of a gang from East Los Angeles. Everyone had a nickname. The girls in the gang ratted their hair in order to hide razor blades in it in case they had trouble with a rival gang member. The girls seemed nice on the sur-
face, but I didn’t like being around them. I was the only white girl there and I was pretty intimidated.

Other friends of ours included pimps and prostitutes from the Watts area of Los Angeles. A pimp named Slim became one of our closest friends. One night while visiting him in his apartment, my boyfriend left to go to the store. I was left alone with Slim and five of his “girls.” They were all sitting on the couch. Slim and I were at the kitchen table talking. There was a knock at the door and one of the girls let in a man about 30 years old. He stood there looking at the girls on the couch, then turned towards us and noticed me sitting at the table. “I want to talk to her,” he said, staring in my direction. “She ain’t working,” Slim told him. “I want to talk to her,” he stated more emphatically. “I said she ain’t working,” Slim said, raising his voice a little and sliding his hand underneath the table. I could only guess what he had under there. The man left and the girls on the couch gave me dirty looks and told Slim that I had no business being there if I didn’t want to work for a living.

My parents liked my boyfriend but they couldn’t stand his parents. His mother was involved in some sort of religious cult. She seemed to believe that I could help save her son from a life of crime. She began to suggest we get married. I was only fifteen years old, but because of what was happening at home, the idea looked good to me.

My future mother-in-law insisted that we go to her church meetings that were held in a house. There we were taught that every scripture had a secret meaning that only those of the high calling, the 144,000 would know. We had to be there on Tuesday night, Saturday night and Sunday morning. If we missed a meeting, we had hell
to pay with her. She would lecture us for hours, insisting that demons were keeping us from doing what was right. If I didn’t want to go to church, I asked my mom to give her an excuse over the phone. She would yell at my mother, telling her that she was on her way to hell. She increasingly tried to separate me from my parents, manipulating circumstances and using scripture to get my parents to give in and sign the paperwork needed for her son to marry an underage young girl.

I was not getting along with my own mother at all. We fought constantly--when she was coherent enough. Because I looked and acted more like my father than my brother or sister did, she used me to vent her anger towards him. She gave my brother and sister privileges that she did not give me. She called me names, telling me she thought I was a whore. Nothing made me angrier than that. It reminded me of juvenile hall when my probation officer had insinuated the same thing. One day, during an argument with my mom, I accused her of being an alcoholic. She flung a half-full vodka bottle towards me. It broke against my legs, cutting my knee.
And Baby Makes Three
My parents finally gave in to the pressure to allow me to get married and move out. My father felt helpless to stop how my mother was treating me, and I think he felt this would be a way of escape for me. He was spending less and less time at home. They finally signed the paperwork, and I hid it in a safe place in case my mom found it and tore it up. Six months into my sixteenth year, I was married.

At first it was wonderful. It seemed like playing house to me. I had my own apartment to clean. My husband taught me some of the fundamentals of cooking. But six months after we got married I became pregnant. I had been taking birth control pills, but had quit when I started having some side effects. I didn’t care if I got pregnant or not. I had the romantic notion that caring for a baby would be the answer to my dreams. I was still so naive and immature. As I my belly grew larger, I awaited my husbands’ return from a long day at work by playing with my Barbie dolls on the bed.

One day there was a knock at the door. Our landlords were there to hand me an eviction notice. Unbeknownst to me my husband had not paid the rent in several months. When he arrived home that night, we packed our things and left.

Ron drove us straight to a motel on the other side of town. An older man and his son ran the motel. Some of the rooms had kitchenettes. There was a laundry room with an old-fashioned ringer washing machine. The only “dryer” was the clothesline outside. The place was old and dingy. Most of the people who rented the rooms actually lived there full time.
I was feeling more ill as the days wore on. All I wanted to do was sleep. I had the worst morning sickness imaginable and was sick all day long every day of the week. My husband did not have this in mind when he asked me to marry him.

One day he handed me a ten-dollar bill. He told me to put it away in case of an emergency. Later on that evening, he left for the store to buy a pack of cigarettes. He did not come back for three weeks.

We had no food at the motel. There was no one I could call to ask for help. I was estranged from my parents because I had left to get married and my in-laws had done such a good job of alienating them. I was not seeing my in-laws because we had quit going to my mother-in-law’s church. I was afraid of my mother-in-law. I had seen her anger many times and had witnessed her abusing her two adopted children. When I realized that my husband was not coming back, I knew that I needed to make the ten dollars last for awhile. Each day I lay in bed all day, trying to keep from being sick. At about 5:00 p.m., I would get myself up and dressed and walk the few blocks to the McDonald’s to order a hamburger and milk. After eating, I would go back to the motel to fall asleep on a full stomach.

As the months went by, my belly grew, regardless of how little I had to eat. My husband drifted in and out of my life, sometimes coming home for a week, then leaving once again.

My mom and dad had separated at this time and my husband and I found out that my mom was renting her own apartment while trying to sell the house. My husband deposited me over there one day, thinking that he would not have to worry about rent or food for awhile. My mom was drinking very heavily. I counted six fifths of
vodka, consumed in a day and a half. One day I found a half-full bottle and poured the contents down the sink. When my mom realized what I had done, she pulled me over backwards by my hair.

My husband came back a little while later and I related the incident to him. I begged him to take me with him if he was leaving again. He refused. As he walked back out to his car, I ran after him crying. I got down on my knees in the street and begged him not to leave me behind. He got in the car and drove off, never even looking in the rear view mirror.

I had not been to an obstetrician since the very beginning of my pregnancy and I now entered my eighth month. I finally went to my mother-in-law for help. She made some phone calls and found a clinic associated with Cedar Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles that took charity cases. Twice a week for the next four weeks she gave me just enough coins for the bus. I walked to the bus stop several blocks away to catch the 6:30 a.m. bus to downtown Los Angeles. Once there I would wait with about 20 other women in the stuffy waiting room to get weighed. Then I would need to hang around until 1:00 p.m. to see one of five doctors. Finally I would waddle back to the bus stop at about 3:00 p.m. to take the two hour bus ride back home. It was close to 6:00 p.m. by the time I walked home from the bus stop and finally got something to eat.

Home for me was now back at my in-laws’ house. I had finally realized that I had better get some help before the baby came. Even though my mother-in-law considered herself a Christian, there was no compassion or caring in her home. She had six children of her own and two she adopted as infants. Four of her children were
grown and had moved out to start their own lives. The ones who didn’t show up for services at her strange little house church were ostracized from the family.

There was also an elderly uncle who came to live with them, as he could no longer take care of himself. She was even less compassionate with him than she was with the rest of her family. He was senile and even though he tried to fit in with the family, he was unwanted there and he was made to know it. If he did anything to cross the thin line of my mother-in-law’s wishes, he would be made to get down on the floor on his hands and knees, and scrub the floor by hand while she whipped him with a belt.

The two youngest members of the family were adopted. She had babysat them as infants. When she learned that their father was abusing them, she went to court and took them away from their family. They were treated as servants, doing all the chores while other members of the family relaxed.

One day the fifteen-year-old adopted son came home from school a little late. I was sitting on the couch when he walked in.

"Where have you been," his mother shouted.

"Nowhere," he replied. "I just walked home a little slower, that’s all."

"How come you smell like cigarettes," she shouted louder.

"I don’t know," he answered.

Suddenly she took him by the hair and yelled at him to take his pants down. I was frozen to the couch. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I was only a year older than he was. I was so embarrassed for him, and wished I could do something to help. As I helplessly watched she whipped him with a belt over and over again.
Finally the day came for my baby to make his appearance. My husband had returned two days before, as if he knew the time had arrived. After twenty-four hours of labor, I gave birth to an 8 pound 3 ounce bouncing baby boy. My husband’s family was Native American, and our son had so much black hair that it covered his ears. My husband seemed proud of his new son, and I hoped that maybe this would be enough to keep him around. Maybe we would be able to get our own place again and I could leave my in-law’s home.

A few days after our son was born, his father took off again. I was getting desperate. I had to get out of that house. I decided to swallow my pride and ask my parents to take me back in.

Over the next few weeks I settled back into life with my family. My parents were back together and sharing an apartment in El Segundo, California, a tidy little community nestled within the boundaries of the Pacific Ocean, Chevron Corporation headquarters, and the Los Angeles International Airport. The newness of having their grandchild in their lives created a positive influence in the life of the house. They seemed happy to have me back home.

Soon though, I knew I needed to find a job and move out. My parents were still drinking heavily and fighting just as much as they always had. I was sleeping on the floor, with my son in a playpen beside me.

I was only seventeen years old, but I landed a job as a secretary of a local termite extermination company. After saving my paychecks for several weeks, I found a tiny bachelor apartment across town.
It Was the Worst of Times
Life was getting tougher. I was becoming increasingly depressed. I didn’t care about the job. I wanted someone to take care of me. I wanted to be a child again. I was nervous and afraid. I thought my son needed someone besides me to be his mom.

I had been taking tranquilizers since the baby was born. One night I decided to end all the misery by taking an entire bottle. I woke up at 5 a.m. feeling refreshed and ready to start again. At the time I believed that God had saved my life. It was the first time I had thought about Him in years.

Still my depression and anxiety did not go away. People around me began to notice that my hands shook and I was losing a lot of weight. I was still playing around with the idea of ending my life. I attempted suicide a second time, this time by slicing my wrists. I was careful not to go too deep. I really just wanted someone to notice and do something to help me. Over the next few days I cut myself several more times.

But I was making new friends and they had a big influence on me. I began to change the way I dressed and wore my hair. Gone was the heavy makeup. Like my new “hippie” friends, I decorated my apartment with thin cotton bedspreads from India and colorful candles. The apartment constantly smelled of incense. Over the next few months I became more entranced by my new friends and my new lifestyle. Although I thought I was happy, my actions told another story. I soon attempted suicide for the third time, this time swallowing an entire bottle of pills.

I was rushed to the emergency room of our local hospital and someone called my parents. They decided to get involved, and for the first time asked me what was
going on. They talked me into entering Metropolitan State Mental Hospital in Norwalk, California to get some help. My anxiety level was off the charts as we drove up to the gates of the hospital. I had no idea what was ahead. The staff seemed uncaring to me, almost hostile. They took my makeup mirror away from me and wouldn’t let me keep a picture of my son. As my parents drove away with my son in his car seat, I felt abandoned and trapped. Memories of juvenile hall played back in my mind and I wondered if I would ever get to go home.

Right away I was given a strong dose of Thorazine, an antipsychotic. For several days, I spent time in the intake section of the hospital, along with other patients. I felt so afraid. The Thorazine left me feeling defenseless. I alternated between falling asleep in the chair and hallucinating. Other patients, whom I thought of as “the crazies,” kept asking me for a cigarette. I would wake up with a start and try to pick up the cigarette I thought I had dropped on the floor. As I bent over to pick it up, I realized I didn’t really have a cigarette. This happened over and over again.

One morning I woke up and was immediately given another dose and told to get up and make my bed. I could barely function at all. Then we all got in line to get a chest x-ray. I literally crawled along the floor, unable to stand up under the medication. All the other patients seemed to have plenty of energy. Again, I thought it was because they were crazy that they could handle it.

Within a couple of days I was put in a ward with other kids my age, all with drug dependency problems. It was like a big coed college dorm. Friendships were formed as it was “us against him.” “Him” referred to the psychiatrist who came in each evening after dinner for group therapy. Group therapy consisted of picking one
of us out of the group and attacking us, apparently trying to incite enough anger to make us start talking.

The highlight of my time in the ward was when we took a field trip to Laguna Beach, California. Someone got hold of some type of psychedelic and most of us took some. We were allowed to wander around the boutiques and art galleries of the beach area and meet back at the bus at a certain time. When I arrived back at the appointed time, one of the kids had been tied to the bus seat with some type of fabric. He had been having what we called a “bad trip” and couldn’t handle the drug. His nickname was “Wizard,” and we all knew he had taken one too many of these “trips.”

We all felt guilty and became subdued on the way back. For several days, as Wizard lay in another ward strapped to a hospital bed, many of us went through depression.

I began to realize that this was not going to help me, and I wanted to go home to my son. One evening, the doctor decided to pick on me.

“Hey Linda, I want to ask you a question.” All eyes turned towards me. “If you were to get out of here tomorrow, do you think you could make it on the ‘outs’”? he asked me.

“Yeah, I do,” I answered confidentially. After all, I thought, how could being in this place possibly be helping anyone?

With a look of disgust he shouted back. “Well if that’s what you think than you’re living in a fantasy world!”

That night I made my plans to leave the hospital. Early the next morning, I walked into one of the offices in my wing and told the psychiatric nurse that I was going home. She immediately began to try to talk me out of it, and set up an
appointment with the doctor. I don’t remember much about the appointment with him, other than he told me that I would be leaving “AMA,” or “against medical advice.” That was fine with me. The medical advice I had been getting didn’t seem any better than advice I could get from some stranger on the street. I went home to my parents’ apartment.

For the first couple of weeks I spent time with my son and ran errands with my mom. I felt agitated and depressed. I didn’t know what was expected of me. I didn’t feel ready to begin looking for a job. I didn’t feel ready to be a mother. A wish to escape was always with me.

One day, my mom had me take her to the market. As we walked through the automatic doors, I noticed the tall, cute “box boy” at the end of the checkstand. He had smiled at me the last few times we had been in the store. As my mom grabbed a shopping cart and headed to the vegetable aisle, he came over.

“Hey, I was kind of wondering if you would kinda like to go out this Friday night,” he began. “That is, unless you’re going to spend it with your “people,” he smirked, referring to my parents.

“Sure,” I smiled back.

I gave him my address and phone number, and then left him to bag groceries while I located my mom. I was excited. As my mom and I drove back to the apartment, I lost myself in thought. In the fantasy I was spinning in my mind, the box boy and I were married, and he loved my son like his own. He was the Prince Charming who rescued me and took care of us for the rest of our lives, and we all lived “happily ever after.” Friday night couldn’t come soon enough for me.
The days passed quickly and soon he was picking me up in his candy apple red Corvette Stingray. I was definitely impressed. He was quiet, and I felt shy, so conversation was minimal. I wondered where he was taking me. I hoped we would go out to dinner somewhere and maybe to the movies. I felt too shy to ask. He finally broke the silence.

“Hey, do you want to get high?” he asked.

“Sure, watcha got?” I answered. Inside the warning bells went off. I just got out of rehab, I told myself. What am I doing? But I wanted to impress this guy and didn’t want to make trouble right at the beginning of the date. I felt the weight of disappointment as I realized that the box boy might not be husband and father material after all. Still, I decided to go along with whatever he had planned for the evening.

I had taken Seconal plenty of times. Seconal was a narcotic usually used as a sleeping pill. Pink Ladies were decidedly weaker than Seconal, so I felt it was safe to take a couple.

He took me over to his place. I remember sitting on the couch talking to him and thinking about how much stronger the drug was than I thought it would be. I began to feel as if I could barely move. His roommate came home and started talking with us. He asked me to come into the other room to look at the art he had on the walls. As I stumbled into the other room, he pushed me on the bed and began tearing off my clothes. I was defenseless to fight him off. My muscles seemed to weigh a hundred pounds each. After he was through with me, another guy came into the room. After he was through with me a third guy came into the room. I counted six. I
had no idea where the others came from or when they arrived. It seemed like it had all been planned ahead of time.

When it was over, the guy from the market who brought me there helped me to stand up and put my clothes back on. He asked me if I had fun. I couldn’t answer him. He took me out to the car and drove me home, back to the front of my parents’ apartment.

I can still remember where I was on the stairs walking up to the third floor of the apartment building when it hit me. In quick succession the words of my mother, my probation officer and my ex-husband rang in my ears. “You slut,” my mom said. “You are having an intimate relationship,” my probation officer repeated. “Sexual Misconduct is charged against you on your police record.” “That baby isn’t even mine,” my ex-husband accused.

Before I even got to the front door, I made a decision that changed my life for the worse. I decided they were all right about me. If it were not true, then what had taken place that night would not have happened. I believed I had deserved to get raped since I had agreed to take the drugs that made me incapable of fighting back. I might as well give up. I might as well live up to my reputation.

Shortly after the rape I began to stay out nights and not come home at all. For a year I literally lived on the streets of Hermosa Beach, California. I hung out with the hippies; the street freaks. The hippies seemed kinder and more giving than most of the people I knew. I slept on the beach or in a “crash pad,” a house that was open for anyone who needed a place to sleep. Many nights I simply stayed up all night on amphetamines and walked the streets talking to the many strangers I would meet.
I partied hard every night, taking whatever drugs I could get my hands on. During the day I “panhandled” change to buy myself something to eat. “Spare change?” I would ask people who passed by on the strand. I’d have enough for a hamburger and coke within several minutes. Sometimes I would ask until I had $6.00, enough to feed myself and buy a “pack” of reds, 30 Seconal capsules. I was out to destroy whatever self-worth I had left.

I traded sexual favors for drugs, prostituting myself to get enough in my system so I could forget about all the pain. One time a guy asked me if he could see me again. “What for?” I answered sarcastically. I couldn’t figure out why anyone would want to see me a second time. There were times when I didn’t think I could be with another man, but I couldn’t think of an excuse not to do it. I literally thought that I could not come up with a reason not to accommodate someone for a few minutes of my time.

One day I met another guy on the beach. “Have you ever had your cards read?” he asked squatting down in the sand beside me. “No,” I answered, in a way that suggested I knew what he was talking about. He pulled a pack of cards out of his shirt pocket and began flipping them one by one onto the sand. I was impressed. This guy was spiritual! We talked about reading the future and the difference between white witchcraft and black witchcraft. He insisted that he was a white witch, and that he only performed magic when it was doing good on the earth. We started to see each other every day, and we always got into intense conversations about God and life. We started to meet on the beach each day and talk. Eventually he invited me to move in with him and I said yes.
Things went well between us. He seemed to be all that I was looking for. He was interested in poetry and music, gardening and cooking. He seemed pretty intelligent and we never ran out of things to talk about. He sat on the floor in the traditional lotus position and chanted, telling me that he was attempting to slow his heart rate. He talked about astral projection, the belief that you can make your soul leave your body and visit around, returning whenever you wanted. I got very involved in transcendental meditation and began studying some of the “great masters.” I joined an occult book club and began reading books by Edgar Casey and other “seers,” learning about things such as automatic writing and “true” stories of hauntings.

About three months later, things started to take a bizarre twist. It seemed as though each time he would get a little too high on drugs, an evil side would turn up. He would start to talk about Satan, sometimes insinuating that he was Satan himself. One night he told me that he was actually Jesus Christ reincarnated. When I laughed at him he slugged me, giving me a huge black eye. At times he would go outside and literally howl at the moon calling out the names of demons, as if he were trying to get them to appear to him.

He had never hit me before, and I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Surely it would never happen again, I told myself. I was wrong. I felt helpless to change my circumstances. Steven would act so violent at times. Other times he seemed perfectly normal. Many times he beat me up and emotionally abused me, keeping me awake all through the night. One time he put on the music of “A Clockwork Orange,” the soundtrack to a violent movie about a sadistic young man who enjoys hurting people. He set the phonograph to repeat the record over and over and
began hitting me in the head as the music played, as if he were playing the part himself.

The longer we were together, the less sense he made. I realized that he had serious mental problems. Each time I would try to break away from him, he would find out where I was and make so much trouble for the people I was with that I would feel guilty and end up going back home with him.

One day he came home with two guys I had never seen. They seemed like nice guys, and I was happy he was making new friends. I soon found out that these two were heroin addicts, and they were providing Steven with free heroin, attempting to get him addicted enough to start buying from them.

As Steven became more addicted to the heroin, he became more abusive to me. I tried to fight the influence of the drug, but I lost out. One time I even told Steven that if I couldn’t beat it, I would join them all. I allowed him to shoot me up, almost overdosing in the process. I never tried it again.

I became pregnant with Steven’s baby. I weighed just over 90 pounds and I was using a piece of rope to hold up my size 7 jeans. We had no money, since it was all going to Steven’s heroin habit. The day the doctor confirmed my pregnancy, he also told me I was suffering from malnutrition. He helped me get on a food commodity program. Every month I would get myself to the town of Stockton, California, where I loaded up the trunk of my car with blocks of cheese, canned meat, and powdered milk. As soon as I knew I was pregnant, I quit taking drugs and would not even take an aspirin. I quit smoking. I wanted my baby to be as healthy as possible.
Steven liked to torture me by scaring me half to death. He would do things like turn off the headlights while we were driving on a dark mountain road, laughing hysterically as I screamed for him to slow down. He also loved to humiliate me in front of his new friends. If I crossed him too many times, he would start hitting me as hard as he could in the back of the head so my hair would cover the knots he left. Even though I was pregnant, he didn’t let up.

Finally my daughter was born. For a while things were better between us, and he left me alone. I tried to pretend that we were just a normal family like every other family. I included my young son in all the activities of raising a new baby so he wouldn’t feel left out. I wanted desperately to have a happy life. I just didn’t know how.

When my daughter was about six months old, her father and I decided to move back to Los Angeles and look for work. We moved in with Steven’s mother and grandmother. One night Steven woke me up in the middle of the night and started an argument. I tried to get him to go back to sleep and not wake up the kids. He wouldn’t stop, and finally slugged me, giving me another black eye. I felt as if my eye had popped right out of my face.

His mother was awake, listening to the argument and actually heard the force of the slug. She came running in, screaming at her son to stop. Suddenly he ran into the bathroom, grabbed a razor blade out of the medicine cabinet and slit his wrists. At this point, I had wished Steven were dead many times. I decided that I was not going to make a move to call an ambulance or try to get help. He could bleed to death as far as I was concerned.
His mother didn’t make a move to help either. She kept yelling at him to stay in the bathroom or kitchen and not make a mess on the carpet. He seemed to want to do what she said.

I was standing in the living room when he suddenly entered and started to come after me. A strong voice inside me told me, “Stand where you are. Don’t move.” I stood there and looked at Steven straight in the eye. I was sure his intention was to kill me. When he got within two feet of me, he got a surprised look on his face. Then the look of surprise turned to a look of fear. He turned on his heels and hurriedly walked the other way. I was sure that a very large angel had been standing right in front of me, and appeared to him just at the right time.

Finally, his mother called an ambulance and they came and coaxed him into going to the hospital. They told us that it was lucky she had called when she did. They estimated he had about ½ hour left before he was in a really dangerous situation from the loss of blood. He later told me that the ambulance driver told him that if he was really serious, next time he’s make the cut vertically instead of horizontally.

I knew I had to get out of there somehow. I weighed about 83 pounds and shook like a leaf. One day as I was walking down the street I overheard a man talking to his wife, “Look at the girl, she looks emaciated!” I didn’t really care about myself, but I knew it was a matter of time before Steven started to hurt my children. I also knew that if he ever did, I would kill him myself.

I got a job at a manufacturing facility that had gotten a contract from the government to make parts for airplanes. The only way you could get into the parking lot was to drive past the little wooden building where the guards kept close vigil, and
show a badge with your picture on it. I felt safe there. It was the only place in the world where Steven could not get to me. The problem was, I could not bring my children with me. I was going to have to find a way to escape for good.

I ate my lunch in the lunchroom, and ended up sitting across from the same young man each day. He kept staring at me. "Why are you so skinny?" he asked.

"I’m a very nervous person," I explained.

"Is that why you shake all the time?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, pleased to meet you skinny, I’m Mike," he laughed.

It didn’t take much to get me to start talking, and he was persistent. Over the next several days, I poured my heart out to the first person who acted the least bit interested. The more I talked, the angrier he got.

He finally told me that if I could arrange to get away, the kids and I could stay with him. I’m not sure he realized that I would actually take him up on it.

A week later, Steven left me alone with his grandmother to take my car in for repairs. I knew he would be gone for at least 45 minutes. He had to drive the car to the shop and then hitchhike home. As soon as I heard the car pull out of the driveway, I went into the kitchen. I got two big green 30-gallon garbage bags out of the drawer. I ran into the bedroom and started stuffing my kid’s clothes into the bags. I grabbed some of my own clothes. I loaded the bags into my son’s little red wagon, grabbed my daughter and told my son to follow me as fast as he could. With Steven’s grandmother watching in surprise, I headed out the front door. I was scared out of my wits.
I decided to head up a few blocks and turn the corner. We had never gone that way together, as the major highways were in the other direction. I knocked on someone’s door and asked if I could call a cab. The woman looked surprised, but saw the wagon and the look on my face and let me in. We waited on her front porch for the cab. I prayed that Steven would not arrive home and start looking for us. I was sure that if he ever found me now, he would kill me.

Finally the cab pulled up to the curb, and without making a comment, the driver loaded my son’s red wagon into the trunk. I could feel myself hyperventilating as I explained to my son that we were just going to a friend’s house.

My new friend Mike was surprised to see us. He took over the situation almost the moment we arrived, making plans for sleeping arrangements and planning something for us all to eat. I couldn’t stop shaking. I called my parents and told them what I had done, giving them the phone number. The next day they brought over a playpen for the baby.

Mike decided that it would be a good idea to move somewhere where Steven would never find us. By the next week we had moved to a large apartment in Long Beach. I never saw or spoke to Steven or his mother or grandmother again. Many years later, when my daughter was about twenty-five years old, she contacted Steven’s grandmother. “Do you remember someone named Leah?” she asked her.

“You’re my granddaughter!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been praying I would find you!”
Leah eventually drove to Los Angeles to meet her grandmother. Later that year, her grandmother called her to tell her that Steven had just died of a drug overdose in San Francisco. A few months later, Steven’s mother died of a heart attack.

Mike and I immediately began to act as if we were a family. It seemed convenient to act as if we were married. He started sharing in the care of the children, changing my daughter’s diapers, and babysitting them if I had to leave for awhile. I think he was just as lonely as I was. It was easy to act as if we had known each other for years. He seemed like my knight in shining armor, rescuing us from the evil king.

He was very concerned about my emotional health. He had noticed that when he attempted to put his arm around me, I flinched, waiting for a blow to the head. I slept in a fetal position and always kept my hands up to my chest. When he would try to get me to relax, and leave my arms down to my sides, I couldn’t do it. I felt the need to protect myself every moment.

He was the first person in my life whom I considered “normal.” He had a good job, his own car and a bank account. He took care of us and made sure we were safe, away from the danger of running into Steven.

Life went on at a fairly peaceful state for the next year. He worked while I stayed home taking care of the house and the children. My physical health was not good. I weighed about 82 pounds. My heart beat too fast and I was always out of breath. I broke out in a sweat even while walking across the room to answer the phone. My anxiety level was through the roof. A doctor finally diagnosed my thyroid disease and I started taking medicine.
Still, as a couple, Mike and I were doing fairly well together. He really seemed so "sane" to me. He never hit me or called me names. That was what I thought of as good husband material. I spent my days taking care of my children while Mike worked. Everything was going well. Then came the night I went to the Tupperware party and came home feeling that my life was coming completely unraveled. Life became a series of appointments with a psychiatrist, with nothing in between except a quick downhill slide into madness.

I was seeing a psychiatrist I had found by looking for names in the phone book. I only cared about one thing, and that was that the psychiatrist would allow me to pay on a sliding fee scale. This meant that we could pay what we could afford, according to our income. That wasn't much.

I arrived at the office about fifteen minutes early. I didn't feel I could go anywhere alone, so Mike took me and waited with me during my appointment. He didn't know it at the time, but he would be doing that at least once a week for six straight years. Soon the receptionist ushered me into the doctor's office. She showed me to a leather chair and then shut the door as she left. I noticed that there were two doors, so as she shut one, another door right in front of it with about an inch between the two still stood open. The doctor got up from his desk, walked past me without saying anything, and closed and locked the inner door. Then he walked back to his desk, sat back and put his feet up on the blotter on top of it.

He sat there, without a word, just staring at me. I had never been to counseling and didn't know what was expected. I stirred in my seat.
“I have a couch if you would prefer to lie down,” he said. He gestured over to a black leather chaise.

“No thanks,” I said, and again I stirred in my seat.

“So what brings you here?” he finally asked.

I explained things as best as I could. I knew how bad I felt; how frightened. I knew that a lot of it was physical. I frequently felt like I was going to faint, like I couldn’t breathe. I often felt dizzy. I thought I was having a heart attack much of the time. I wondered if I would die from this. My thoughts raced and I felt as if I were losing my mind. I thought this was something that came over me out of the blue, something that I had no control over and was in no way responsible for. The doctor didn’t tell me any different. Then the fifty minutes were up.

My psychiatrist saw me every two days at first. He prescribed tranquilizers. I continued to deteriorate rapidly. Each week I felt worse, like I would die or go insane. I quit going out of the house and felt extreme anxiety even in my backyard alone. Everything scared me. Television shows that showed even a hint of violence (and in the 1970’s there wasn’t much violence on television) were enough to send me over the edge. The blackbirds on the power lines in the backyard scared me. The noise from the jets landing at Los Angeles International Airport scared me. I was afraid every waking moment of the day and night. Some days, I lay on the floor for hours, just trying to catch my breath from hyperventilating.

Looking back on it now, I realize how bizarre my sessions with my psychiatrist were. We formed a routine. His receptionist would take me to his office and, once I was inside and seated, she would close the door behind her. There was a sec-
ond door, and the psychiatrist would go to that door and shut and lock it. Then he would go sit at his desk, turn on his recorder and put his feet up. Then he would stare at me until I spoke first. Usually, sometime during the session, he would stop and say, "How's the f------?" He disgusted me but I had no one else, no one whom I believed could help me. I fantasized about suicide often, and thought that if my psychiatrist couldn't help me, I would kill myself. Since the only other experience I had had with a mental health professional was when I was in the state mental hospital, I did not realize that his controlling, lascivious behavior was unprofessional and unethical.

In the meantime, my brother Robert had returned from Vietnam. He had gotten heavily into drugs while he was over there. He had married and had a two-year-old daughter, but he wasn't doing well emotionally either. He was suffering from extreme highs and lows, something I now recognize as bi-polar disorder. He and I had always been extremely close, and although I was going through my own private emotional hell, he began depending upon me to help him. He was living at home with my parents but they didn't seem to know what to do.

One day, I got a ride and I went with my brother to the Los Angeles County Mental Health Center. I had called the day before to make the appointment. At that time I told them that my brother had threatened suicide and had even overdosed one time. It took everything in me to make the appointment with him. I was having a panic attack, and the only thing that kept me from screaming and running out of the building was that I figured that if I really freaked out, at least I was in the company of psychiatrists. Surely someone could do something, knock me out with a shot or
something. Though I was always wondering why someone didn’t just put me in a hospital, I wanted to be strong for my brother.

Eventually someone met with him and he came out of an office with a prescription in his hand. “What are they giving you?” I asked.

“Elavil,” he answered. He snorted as if he didn’t believe anything was going to help the way he felt. Tears fell from his eyes as we made our way out of the building and to the car.

A week later I got a phone call at around noon. My mother asked me to come over to the apartment. She had been trying to wake up my brother for a few hours and couldn’t get him to wake up. In her mind, he was probably just “stoned” again and I would know what to do. I rushed over and went into his bedroom. He was lying in a fetal position on the bed, his arm flung over his face. I started shaking him and calling his name. He didn’t respond. Suddenly his body seized up. His eyelids flinched and it looked as if his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Robert! Robert!” I shouted. No response. I ran into the living room and called the paramedics. It seemed like half an hour before they arrived.

One of the paramedics stayed in the living room with us, trying to assure us that Robert would be alright. But I saw the look on his face. I also heard the other paramedics in the bedroom. One of them kept shouting, “Seizing! Seizing!”

Soon they brought Robert out on a stretcher and rushed him to the ambulance. I looked at his face. It was gray. I still didn’t know that it was the last time I would ever get to look at his face. The fear I felt was different. This wasn’t a panic attack. This time I had something to fear.
We had called my father and he came home to take us all to the hospital. We followed the ambulance down the highway, running all the red lights right along with the ambulance driver. At one point, the ambulance driver pulled over to the side of the road. One of the paramedics jumped out and ran to the back of the ambulance. As he threw open the doors, he tried to wave us on. We were not leaving my brother. I watched in horror as he jumped up into the back and began pushing on my brother’s chest. I could not believe what I was seeing. Someone came out of the ambulance and shut the back doors, and then they were off again.

By the time we arrived at the hospital, they had already rushed him in. We sat in the little waiting room and waited. All of us sat on the edge of the couch, unable to sit back and rest. I got up and walked down a hallway, turned around and started back. I saw my boyfriend coming toward me down the hall. He was shaking his head. I felt the blood leave my face. A thousand thoughts seem to go through my mind as I hoped he wasn’t going to tell me anything I didn’t want to hear. As he got closer, he began to cry.

“He didn’t make it,” he said, and he threw his arms around me.

“No!” I screamed. I wrenched away from him and ran back into the waiting room to see what my parents had to say. My mother was sitting, bent over, with her head in her hands. My father was just sitting in the same position as when I left him. He was just staring straight ahead and he wouldn’t look at me.

The next months were the worst I had ever experienced in my life. Every time I left the house and saw other people, I wondered how they could be acting so normal.
Didn’t they know my brother died? Didn’t they know life had changed forever? Why is the sun still shining? I didn’t understand.

I spent my time at home, just sitting, staring out the window. I would fantasize that the hospital had made a mistake. After all, I had not seen my brother’s body. Maybe he would come walking up the path as I looked out the window. Oh, what rejoicing there would be! We would laugh together over my fear that he had died. We would never let each other out of sight again.

The funeral was brief. My brother’s wife set up a stereo and played my brother’s favorite song, “Time in a Bottle,” by Jim Croce. One by one, my brother’s friends stood and talked about an incident they remembered about my brother. The minister said a few words. Then it was over. The moment the service was over felt like a death all over again. I again began to scream at the top of my voice. Everyone hurriedly got up and left the room, including my parents. My counselor took me in his arms while I sobbed, unable to control myself. I wished, at that moment, more than anything, to just cease to exist.

Of course the panic attacks became worse. The grief was heavy, and my depression became deeper. I was immobilized with the pain. I wanted to die, but I didn’t have the energy to plan how to do it. Each morning, I awoke; then I cried. This lasted for two years.

But in the meantime, I thought about God for the first time in a long time. Is God really there? Does he know my brother died? Does he care? Does he feel compassion for the mentally ill? Will he help me? If he doesn’t exist, then I could kill myself and not go to hell. These were my thoughts.
I had gotten to know a Baptist minister who was donating his time to the Salvation Army to counsel young people like me. He had been counseling my brother and I had been seeing him once a week while I continued my visits with my psychiatrist. He had not told me about God, but I knew that he believed in him. I decided to ask during my next appointment.

"Wilber," I began, "I want to ask you something important. Do you think God cares about my brother?"

"Of course he does," he answered tentatively.

"Well, do you think he cared that he was mentally ill?" I said.

"Yes, Linda, of course he did."

"So, do you think he’s in heaven?"

"Linda, God is merciful and full of love," he told me. "I’m sure he takes all things into consideration."

"I’m thinking I should start going to church," I told him.

"Let me think about this," he said. "I’m thinking you would like a church a few blocks over from here, but I want to talk to the pastor first."

It had not occurred to me that he wouldn’t want me to come to his church, First Baptist Church of El Segundo, California. But he was very wise. He knew that the prim and proper ladies of First Baptist would not know how to respond to a skinny, poorly dressed, stringy haired, mentally ill young woman.

A week later we met again.

"I talked to Pastor Don Long over at El Segundo Foursquare Church," he told me. "He is hoping to see you this Sunday."
A New Beginning
I was excited, but extremely apprehensive. For one thing, I didn’t believe I could go anywhere alone these days. Every waking moment was a continual panic attack. To think about going to a strange place and sitting there for an hour was frightening. But I talked my sister-in-law, my brother’s widow, to go with me the first time.

It was a beautiful sunny Southern California day when we arrived at the small stucco church building, tucked into an older neighborhood of craftsman style homes in one of El Segundo’s pretty historic neighborhoods. We sat near the back, so I could be near the door. I never knew when panic would get so strong that I would have to flee.

The pastor and his wife were young, just my age. The pastor was handsome and his wife looked so pretty beside him in her yellow dress. The other people in the congregation were dressed up too. I was wearing the dress from the funeral--the only dress I owned.

Soon, as the pianist began to play, the congregation sang songs out of the hymnal. I stood and tried to join in, but I had never heard these songs, and I didn’t know the melodies. I felt my legs shaking. I felt good about being there, but I wondered if the people there would want someone like me in their church. I was living with my boyfriend. I was mentally ill. My brother had committed suicide. These people seemed better than I. Maybe I would be asked to leave at the end of the service.

The service ended with an older woman taking her place at the piano. As the soft strains of the hymn drifted over the sanctuary, the pastor quickly walked down
the center aisle and took his place at the door. As each parishioner passed by, he greeted them, hugging some and shaking hands with others. I tried to slip out through the crowd, hoping I could leave before I was asked to not come back. The pastor’s attention seemed to be on an older gentleman who was complimenting him on the service. But as he glanced my way and noticed I was leaving he stepped out and grabbed me around the shoulders.

“Linda!” he began. “We are so happy you came. Please come back again next Sunday. We would love to have you.”

“Thank you, I will,” I murmured. I was shocked. And I was pleased. Maybe these people would accept me after all.

The next Sunday I went again. It was scary. I was braving anxiety attacks and rejection. I had nothing nice to wear. But I went anyway. As the pastor concluded his sermon, he asked if there was anyone who felt that they wanted to make sure they were right with the Lord. He explained how we are all separated from God by sin. He told us that it was only through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross that we are able to have a relationship with God again. I felt as if he were speaking to me alone. When he asked those wanting to receive Christ into their lives to come forward, I practically ran down the aisle.

But doubts and fears assailed me during the next week. I didn’t feel any different. I still felt fearful and depressed. Maybe God wasn’t going to accept me. Maybe I had done too many things wrong. Maybe my sin had been too much, even for God. One afternoon, I got down on my knees in my bedroom and began to beg and plead with God to save me. Suddenly, it was as if I were watching a movie of my
life on a screen. In my mind I saw all the bad things that I had done. I saw all the
times I had made decisions that put others or myself at risk, all the times I had be-
haved immorally. As I thought about these things, I felt regretful. I knew if I had it
all to do over again, I would never do those things. I knew that if I had known about
Jesus Christ, I would have lived a different life. As I pondered that, a weight that I
had been feeling seemed to lift right off of my shoulders. I got up from my knees,
and somehow I felt cleaner. I felt accepted. I believed I was getting a new beginning.

The next few years were both wonderful and terrible. Things didn’t change
right away. Sunday after Sunday I went forward for prayer for my fear. Many Sun-
days I couldn’t even leave the house to go to church. My panic was too strong. On
those Sundays, once the pastor’s wife looked over the congregation and noticed I was
gone, she would leave the church and drive over to my apartment. She would wait
until I dressed, and promised to sit with me once we got there. The people in that
congregation became the family I never had. It didn’t matter to them what I wore,
whom I was living with, what I had done. They accepted me as Christ accepted me,
unconditionally.

Slowly, I learned from the Bible how people ought to think and behave, and I
began to change. My pattern of dysfunctional thinking was being replaced with a
“new” pattern. But it took time, and there were many obstacles, including the coun-
seling I was receiving from the psychiatrist.

I continued to see the psychiatrist on a weekly basis. I felt closer to him since
my brother died. He seemed a little more caring somehow. But he still made me
very uncomfortable.
He still ended our sessions with the question… “how’s the f------?” One time, I told him that I just didn’t feel very sexy with all that I was going through.

“Well, I’d bet you’d feel sexy real fast if your husband got interested in the neighbor down the street!” he said with a sneer.

During one visit, I began to complain about a pain I had been having in my leg.

“Come over to the couch and lie down,” he instructed me. I did as I was told. The doctor was my authority figure, the one who had the key to my sanity in his hands. He took down my pants and began feeling around for my “femoral pulse.” I lay there, stiff and unresponsive. He stared at my face for several seconds, seemed disgusted and got up to go back to his desk. He told me to go to my doctor and have it checked. I thought he was serious, so the next time I saw my physician, I told him about it and asked him to check. I noticed immediately that he seemed disgusted too, and I could tell he disapproved that my psychiatrist had been giving me physicals. It was the first time I wondered about what kind of help I was really getting.

At this point I had been seeing the psychiatrist weekly for about a year and a half. During that time we talked about everything from my birth, my childhood, my early marriage, the rape. Still I continued my slide into serious mental illness. The symptoms seemed to be multiplying. Going to church was helping. The support there was wonderful. But I continued to feel like I was just hanging on.

Eventually I was advised by my pastor and my friends to get a new psychiatrist. I found out that there were Christians who were also professional counselors. I could talk to them about how I felt about God and they would understand.
So, although I was afraid, I switched therapists. I now saw a Christian therapist, and, again, I went on a weekly basis.

Although I felt more comfortable and safer with this therapist than with my psychiatrist, the counseling style was the same. I had to repeat of my history. We talked about my childhood, my marriages and the rape. He was sure all these things just added up to contribute to my breakdown. But I felt even more confused.

“There’s really nothing wrong with you, Linda,” he told me. “Your thinking processes seem fine.”

Inside I was full of fear and depression. My thoughts came so fast that trying to keep them straight literally wore me out. I couldn’t keep a thought in my head for more than a minute or two, and found myself writing down anything that I thought was helpful so I wouldn’t forget it. I felt as if I were outside existence, without a body. I felt alienated from all other people, as if I were invisible. With all my heart I wished to die. How could there be nothing wrong with me? But I continued with the counseling, as I had no other hope. I also continued to attend church, and learn more about how normal people lived their lives. Although I wasn’t aware of it at the time, how I was beginning to think about life, about relationships, and about forgiveness, was making an impact on my mind. These were concepts I was learning in church rather than in the counseling office.

Some of my fears were imaginary, but I had one fear in particular that was very realistic. I feared that one day my father would kill himself too. He seemed extremely depressed to me. I kept trying to tell my mother that she needed to watch out for him; she needed to get her affairs together. And every day I prayed.
The Legacy of Suicide Continues
It was a few days after Thanksgiving in 1998. Southern California was drenched in sunshine and the scent of the ocean lingered in the air over the small coastal town of El Segundo. My children and I were deciding what kind of dessert to take to my parents’ house for dinner that night.

“Let’s make chocolate chip cookies this time,” my nine-year-old son piped up.

“But you know Grandpa loves chocolate cream pie!” chimed in Leah.

I knew she was right. My dad loved chocolate cream pie. He would eat it every night of the week if he could. We spent the morning baking piecrust, cooking the pudding-pie filling and whipping the whip cream. I loved to surprise my dad. Since no one in our family ever said the actual words, “I love you,” this was my way of telling him how I felt about him.

We were to arrive at the apartment around 5:00 p.m. About 3:00 p.m. I got a call from my mom. She said that she wanted me to come over right away. Hearing the sound of panic in her voice, I demanded to know what was wrong. She said that my dad had gone downstairs to the garage a while before. When he didn’t return, she went down to see what he was doing. She saw that he was lying on the ground in the garage, and she was afraid to find out what was wrong. We both thought he may have had a heart attack.

We drove right over, and when I got out of the car, I noticed that a small crowd had gathered across the street. I saw a paramedic van pulling away from the curb, but I noticed that there was no one in the back. The police were there. I walked to the area by the garages and realized that my dad was still in there, but they had the door partway closed. I went into the apartment. My mother was sitting on the couch
with a look of fear on her face. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to know what happened. I wanted to turn back the clock. Please God, I thought.

There was a knock at the door and a police officer asked me to come out onto the porch, not wanting my mother to hear him. He asked me how old my dad was. He said it that way, "How old was your dad?" I noticed that he was using the past tense. "Fifty-one," I replied. "Was he left handed or right handed?" he continued.

"Right handed," I said. I didn't want to ask if my father was dead. My husband took over from there.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked.

"We found a gun in his right hand," the officer answered.

I felt myself collapsing. My mom just sat there on the couch, staring straight ahead.

For the first time in my life I was angry with God. I couldn't believe He would allow something like this to happen to me again. How could He expect me to accept this? Why didn't He answer my prayers in the way I wanted them answered? I wanted to see my father saved, healed, and attending church before his death. Was the Lord really in control of anything?

Of course I could never tell Him that directly. He may reject me for my anger and hurt. I was supposed to be a Christian, full of faith. So I pushed and shoved my feelings of anger as far down as I could. Of course they didn't stay put for long.

I sank farther down into the depths of depression than I had ever gone before. My mind became so weary from trying to think about everything that it quit thinking at all. The worst part was that I had begun to hallucinate. I felt I could "see" the
world coming to an end. Trees and bushes looked like they were dying right before my eyes. Stairways seemed to crumble, as if I were seeing time pass into the future at some terrific rate of speed. I had developed psychotic depression.

During one of my next few appointments with my therapist, I felt I needed to let him know how utterly desperate I felt. It was late. Most people were home having dinner with their families. I sat in the black leather chair across from him.

“I'm thinking that I'm going to have to go ahead and kill myself,” I said tentatively. “This isn't going to get any better and I can't take it anymore.” I wanted him to know ahead of time so he would know that I felt he had done all he could, and I didn't blame him at all. He asked me if I thought we should call my husband in to tell him. I told him that I didn't want my husband to know, because then he would be worried and hovering over me all the time. At first he just stared at me, as if wondering what to say.

"Linda, I have a funny feeling in my stomach," he finally started.

"I do too," I replied.

We sat across from each other, not knowing what to say. I knew he wanted to say something, to somehow keep me from actually doing it. I also knew he felt helpless. And I knew he was scared. If he felt helpless and scared, then I really didn't have any hope. I left his office wondering if that night would be the last time he saw me.

There was something else going on. This happened during a time in the life of the evangelical church when everywhere I turned people were talking about the second coming of Christ. Many were excitedly reading and discussing Hal Lindsey's
book, "The Late Great Planet Earth." Bible study groups were focused on the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Christian Bible. I personally knew those who decided against having children, remodeling their homes, or going off to college. "What's the point?" they would shrug.

The God whom I loved became the God I feared. This God had some bizarre plan for mankind that culminated in the "Great Tribulation" and the "Mark of the Beast." I observed those around me. I could not figure out how those who knew that this horror was on our very doorstep could go on living as before? Why weren't they on their knees day and night, or snatching poor souls off of street corners and away from death's grip? I literally could not figure it out. It never occurred to me that they didn't really believe what they were saying.

Once in awhile, I would have a thought and, to quote Tolstoy, "life rose within me." Then, like my hallucinations, that life would melt away and I'd be left with nothing but a desire for death. Over and over this happened. Exhausted, thoughts began to disintegrate as fast as they would come. I eventually had to write down any hopeful thought I had, just to remember it a few minutes later.

One day, a spark of hope lasted longer than usual. I realized that in all my railing against God, I had never felt his presence more sweetly. In all my anger and confusion, I had not succeeded in pushing him away. The opposite was true. Instead of allowing me to turn my back, he seemed to be relentlessly pursuing me.

Almost a year went by. As the months dragged ahead towards the following Thanksgiving, my grief and depression began to lift. Although anxiety attacks were still an issue, it seemed as if my heart was beginning to heal.
I was still seeing my new therapist on a weekly basis. We still talked endlessly about my past and current problems as I took one step forward and two steps back. But at the same time, I was learning a new way to think. I was listening to new ideas about living week by week as I sat on a pew on Sunday mornings. Not only that, but I was getting even more information as I read my Bible at home during the week.

Some of the most important teachings of the Bible are those that teach forgiveness, mercy, and God’s understanding of human weakness. As I learned of God’s forgiveness of me, I was able to let go of unforgiveness towards my parents and others who had hurt me. As I began to understand human weakness, I was better able to understand those people and realize that they were no stronger or better equipped for life than I was.

I also learned to think about others. Although I knew I had to take care of myself before I could possibly help anyone else, I began to notice the needs of others more. This change of focus began to help lift my depression.

Scriptures in Philippians, a book in the New Testament, taught me to pay attention to my own thoughts. “Finally brothers,” the verse begins, “whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there be any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, meditate on these things” (Philippians 4: 8-9 NIV). Little by little, I began to change my negative pattern of thinking. If I caught myself thinking about negative things, I forced my thoughts to something for which I could be glad. As this raised my mood, I felt better, and the better I felt the easier it
was to change my thought patterns. If I noticed that my thoughts might be irrational, I purposely refocused my thoughts until I believed I was thinking more rationally.

I now know that this cognitive therapy technique is called rational disputa-
tion. Within the framework of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the “therapist actively [disputes] the client’s irrational beliefs” (Corey 2005 p. 279). Psychologist Aaron Beck used similar techniques by having clients “become aware of the distortions in [their] thinking patterns by examining [their] automatic thoughts” (Corey 2005 p. 289).

A major change for me came when I began to believe that life had meaning. I came to believe in a God who cared about me, who had a plan for my life, and who wanted to make my life mean something. This was a huge realization.

But it was still difficult to leave my house without someone with me, and my list of phobias had grown to about twenty. If I drove a car at all, I had to stay in the right hand lane. That way, if my panic got too overwhelming, I could make a right turn as soon as possible and drive back home. I never drove farther than a half mile from my house. I couldn’t stop at a gas station. In those days, an attendant pumped the gas while you waited in your car. Once the nozzle was in the gas tank, I couldn’t drive away, so panic would build since I felt trapped. I couldn’t go to a store to buy groceries. The shelves looked to me as though they were about to topple over. The florescent lighting made me feel dizzy. And if I did make it to the checkstand, once the checker began to ring up my purchases I felt I couldn’t leave the store. One time I told the checker I had left my checkbook at home and fled, leaving her with a cart
half filled with my groceries and a puzzled expression on her face. That would be the last time I went to the market for about a year.

Getting onto elevators was too scary to even think about. Driving on the freeway was unthinkable. Escalators were frightening. Bright lights, motion, loud noise, too many birds on the telephone wires, all these things and more scared me. I felt fragile, alone and afraid, all the time. Then, one day, something happened that radically changed the course of my illness. I happened upon a particular book in our local public library.

The title seemed silly. *Hope and Help for Your Nerves*, by Dr. Claire Weekes was the name of a little paperback in the small “self-help” section of the library. I got it home and read it cover to cover in about two days. I was astounded. Here, in this little book, was a thorough and complete explanation of everything I had been going through for the last six years. Never had I heard any of this information during the six years of weekly counseling. For the first time, I learned what was happening to me on a physiological level that was causing my symptoms of fear and panic. I learned that my fear of the symptoms produced stronger symptoms that would produce more fear that would produce stronger symptoms.

I looked to see whether Dr. Weekes had written any other books. Surely enough, she had written one entitled *Agoraphobia*. Reading that book was like reading my own life story. I felt understood for the first time in a decade. I couldn’t believe that my therapists had not given me any of this information. In this astonishing book, Dr. Weekes mapped out a program to overcome agoraphobia and panic
attacks. I typed up the instructions and carried it in my wallet. And, as I began to practice the steps each day, panic began to slowly fade from my life.

As I found out later, Dr. Claire Weekes was a renowned Australian pioneer in panic disorders and had helped literally millions by the time of her death in 1990. She was the first woman Doctor of Science at the University of Sydney and was recognized by Queen Elizabeth II for her contributions to medicine. Unfortunately, none of the therapists I had been seeing had heard of her or her work with panic or agoraphobia.

One of the steps she outlined in her book is one I will never forget. “Your salvation resides in the doing,” she wrote. I learned that a phobia would never just spontaneously disappear. If I wanted to be able to do something without feelings of anxiety, I had to do it often. Once I had a good experience, I would be bolstered to try it again. The more good experiences I had, the less panic I felt. At the same time, I learned how to walk through a panic attack and wait it out. I found it would always subside and would never kill me or cause me to go screaming into the night. These new ideas revolutionized my life. I was ready to work hard to get my life back.

One of the first things I did, and a good example of how I used Dr. Weekes’ advice, was to wait for a day when I was feeling a little strength and then drive to the supermarket. I started out buying just two or three items. As I stood in line, my mind worked constantly to keep panic at bay. You can do this...just breathe deeply...just a few more minutes...it’s just physical sensations...you are not going to die. I told myself all these things and more to get through the few minutes it took to check out
and get back to the car. I did this over and over again until I could do it without panic. Then I would add a couple more items to my grocery list.

I followed this format with all my other phobias, testing them out when I was having a good day. I built on these positive experiences until I could do each thing with little or no panic. To this day, years after my last panic attack, there are times I'm standing in line at the grocery store when I find myself daydreaming. I feel incredibly grateful.

Little by little, over the course of the next several years, I added more and more to the list of things I could do. I went into stores, visited fast food restaurants with my children, drove in the left lane, and took the elevator--things I found impossible to do for many years. And all because of a little book from the library.

In 1982 I signed up for a class at the University of New Mexico. This was a huge challenge as I still did not drive very far from home. The University was one mile away, the farthest point I had driven in years. But the goal was worth the effort. My desire and dream was to go back to school. I deeply regretted getting kicked out of high school and never finishing. I wanted an education, and I was willing to go through panic attacks to get one. I still had my typed piece of paper with the steps from Dr. Weekes in my purse, and there were times when I would start to panic in class. I would pull that out and read it carefully, willing my mind to concentrate more on the words than on my feelings, and soon the panic subsided.

Over the next decade I experienced more stress as my husband became an alcoholic, we eventually divorced, and I lost my mother to cancer. But I continued to work hard to get better. I took more classes at a local community college.
Eventually, I stepped out of my comfort zone and got a job outside the home. Amazingly, I beat out 200 applicants for a job at Superior Court of Santa Barbara County in California. I began my job as Deputy Clerk in 1986, two weeks after my mother’s funeral. After a year I was sworn in as Commissioner of Civil Marriages and performed wedding ceremonies all over the Central Coast of California, giving me extra income with which to raise my children.

I pushed myself hard. I knew I might have to be the sole financial support of myself and my children, and I couldn’t do it if I continued to have panic and depression. I still dreamed of getting an education, and as a single mother with a full-time job, the best I could do was one night class at a time. In 1991, I got a job as a secretary with Den-Mat Corporation, the company that manufactured Rembrandt Toothpaste. I thrived in the environment of marketing and business, and I was soon promoted to Marketing Assistant, then Product Manager and Project Coordinator.

I was having a blast in my social life for the first time ever. I met many new friends at Den-Mat, and when I was forty years old I learned to windsurf. This became my passion. I also took my mountain bike out into the hills almost every weekend. I was more physically fit than I had ever been and the constant physical activity helped to lift my depression even more.

In 1993 I met a wonderful man. At first I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to remarry, and I almost lost him in my indecision. Two of my children were grown and off on their own, but they loved him and so did my youngest son. I decided to take the leap. As he had accepted a job managing a small business in Missoula, Montana, we soon moved away from all our single friends. It was good for us. It caused us to
lean on each other and bond much more quickly than may have happened otherwise. I consider my decision to marry my husband the smartest decision of my life.

By this time, I was 42 years old, and my dream of getting an education seemed to lie in the distant past. I felt I was too old to begin again. But I did meet a couple of wonderful women who had begun their education later in life and they were very inspiring to me.

In the year 2000, life took another fateful turn. My husband had gone to California to visit his elderly mother. One night as I was alone in the house, I began to walk down the stairs. I stepped onto the second stair from the top and my feet slipped out from under me. I fell all the way down the stairs until I hit about the fourth tread from the bottom. Then I pitched forward, hitting my head on the opposite doorframe. I picked myself up immediately and felt for the damage. The right side of my body felt numb and shocked. My neck hurt. I stumbled over to the next door neighbor’s house. She took me to the emergency room. Once X-rays and a CAT scan were completed, the diagnosis was in. I had broken my neck and severely injured my upper back.

For months I was in a cervical collar and for a year I took my doctor’s prescription for Oxycontin. Unbeknownst to either of us, I was heading into full blown addiction. Every night before I lay down to sleep I put two little pills on top of the table. As soon as I woke in the mornings, pain seared through my body, from my head to the bottom of my feet. With shaky hands I grabbed the medication and glass of water. Then I rocked myself for about half an hour while I waited for the pain to subside.
I started to get suspicious that the pain wasn’t from my neck anymore when I noticed that as the pills wore off I would get very nauseated. Taking more pills took the nausea away. That didn’t make sense to me. I believed that taking medication would cause nausea, not withdrawing from it. Not unless I was addicted. I put off discussing it with my doctor. I was afraid of what would come next.

Finally, at the beginning of December I decided to tell him. “I have two things to tell you,” I began. “One, I think I’m addicted to the Oxycontin, and two, I never told you this but I took drugs for 10 years when I was younger.”

My doctor immediately stopped the medication. I was on Oxycontin, Ambien (sleeping pills), Sarafem (prozac derivative), and muscle relaxers. I stopped it all, in one night. Everything I had left I flushed down the toilet. I was told to expect that the first three days would be the worst. Nothing prepared me for the horror of withdrawal. I assumed I would be fine by Christmas. I was expecting my youngest son to visit and all I thought about was the fun we would have. Instead, three weeks later, I was still experiencing nausea, shaky leg syndrome, cold sweats and the feeling I had ice water running through my veins. I took five to ten baths a day, to try to relax and get through it. I wanted to die. One morning, lying in the hot water, I prayed. I asked the Lord to take me to heaven once Christmas was over. I didn’t want my children associating my death with a major holiday. I was serious. Luckily, God decided against that idea.

Two weeks into January found me beginning to feel better. I was so happy to be through withdrawal, but the pain in my upper back was unbearable. I couldn’t even lift my head or arms. Each day I wondered if I would be lucky enough to get
some terminal disease and die at a relatively young age. I could no longer take pain medication because of the addiction problems, so I took ibuprofen, but it wasn’t enough to really help. One day, I got down on my knees and cried out to God for help. Either take me home or tell me what to do to get rid of this pain, I prayed.

The word “chiropractor” had been popping into my head every few days or so. I had been resisting the thought. I had gone to a chiropractor a few months after I fell down the stairs, and each visit brought worse pain. I quit after the fourth visit and was afraid to try it again. One morning I watched out the front window as two does grazed for bulbs in my front yard. The word “chiropractor” came again. For the first time I paid attention to it. I stood there and wondered if the Lord was trying to tell me to go to a chiropractor again.

A couple hours later the phone rang. It was my massage therapist. She had really helped me with muscle spasms, but I had not gone to see her for months. The treatments were costly and my husband had learned enough from her to be a great help.

“Linda! I’ve been thinking about you,” she began. “I want you to go see someone I know that I feel sure can help you...he’s a chiropractor!”

I felt excited but I was afraid to hope. I looked him up in the phone book and made an appointment for the following day. Within four visits, that chiropractor took away about 80% of my pain. I was so ecstatic, I literally could not calm down for weeks. I heard myself talking faster as I told everyone I knew about the miracle I felt God had given me.
A few months later I began to think about my dream of getting an education. I could no longer work in the capacity I had before the accident and staying home seemed so unproductive.

In May of 2001 I enrolled in Helena Adult Education and spent several weeks relearning (mostly learning for the first time) high school math. Then I went to the University of Montana--Helena College of Technology and took the entrance tests. At the end of that summer, I enrolled in a course about study habits and another refresher course in math. Then I jumped in with both feet. I enrolled in college full time.

The first semester I shocked myself by getting straight A’s on my report card. This spurred me on. I then accepted the Presidential Scholarship at Carroll College and began my sophomore year there. I am now a senior and ready to graduate in May of 2006. The time has gone by so quickly and I have learned so much.

My psychology classes at Carroll have given me a lot to think about. What I have learned academically about cognitive psychology has really resonated with my personal experience. I can’t help but realize that if more therapists had been aware of the advances in treatment for depression and anxiety using cognitive techniques, I could have recovered years earlier. I have also become very interested in a more recent school of thought, Positive Psychology. The next section of my thesis will concentrate on the latest research in Cognitive Therapy and Positive Psychology, and will also include a literature review on religion and spirituality in the treatment room.
The Research

Religion and Spirituality in the Treatment Room

The Role of Positive Psychology

Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques
An area of special interest to me is how spirituality and psychology can combine to help bring healing to a person’s spirit and mind. For me, a large part of my own healing came about because of both spirituality and psychology. Spiritually, the concepts of forgiveness as well finding meaning in life helped tremendously. There were also times when I felt sure that God supernaturally and quickly healed deep hurts, such as the depth of grief I felt over my brother’s and father’s suicides. Psychologically, learning to monitor my cognitions and change the way I thought was key. I think of it as reprogramming. Positive Psychology, from what I have read, fits both of these perspectives.

Karen Kersting, a staff writer for the magazine Monitor on Psychology, wrote an article entitled “Religion and Spirituality in the Treatment Room” (2003). In her article she quotes Christian psychologist William Hathaway, Ph.D., of Regent University in Virginia. Dr. Hathaway was counseling a Jewish couple about problems with their son, who had uncontrolled attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It was so bad that they had stopped attending services at their local temple. They did not broach the subject until Dr. Hathaway asked them about their religious beliefs. Then they tearfully explained that they had stopped attending but had not thought it was a subject they should talk about in counseling. Dr. Hathaway opened the door by bringing up the subject himself. As he explained,

> Just being sensitive to a possible role of religion in a client’s life can broaden your evaluation and provide different solutions. Being able to help a person connect with the variable of spirituality in their lives can
be a beneficial and important therapeutic accommodation (as cited in Kersting, 2003, para. 4).

While he acknowledges that some techniques are controversial, Dr. Hathaway believes that reinforcement of spiritually healthy mental and emotional habits can help change punitive images of God (as cited in Kersting, 2003, para. 6). For example, he uses spiritually guided forgiveness to help clients who have been harmed by others. It is important to assess each client carefully to make sure a therapist is not bringing further harm to the client, something that Carrie Doehring, Ph.D., a psychologist at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver believes in strongly.

During an assessment, I ask about religious and spiritual backgrounds, ask the client if they pray and if it helps or not. And if they do have a belief in a personal God, I ask them what they think God wants from them right now, and that leads them to talk about their experience with God, Doehring says. It’s the sum of that conversation that helps me to understand what religion’s impact is on their life (as cited in Kersting, 2003, para. 9),

Doehring believes that a willingness to be open to a client’s spirituality can help him or her to trust the therapist. She goes on to say that some people describe the “beauty of spiritually guided therapy as experiencing a third presence in the room…” But she also acknowledges that specific training programs need to be available for psychologists who are seeking to develop spiritually effective practices. An eye needs to be kept on possible countertransference problems, and the therapist must
continue to rely on traditional psychological techniques (as cited in Kersting, 2003, “Precautions to Ponder,” para. 3).

Research into the efficacy of spirituality in the treatment room is being conducted by several institutions. According to psychologist Kenneth Pargament, Ph.D., of Bowling Green University, evaluations of using therapeutic techniques such as forgiveness interventions, spiritual meditation, rituals and religious coping resources is underway. Pargament says that there is ample evidence that the “sense of hope, meaning and spiritual support that clients gain from being able to discuss religious issues helps them cope better with their situation” (as cited in Kersting, 2003, “Building the Research Base,” para. 5).

Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Pargament formed a faculty/student research team on the campus of the University. The group is still meeting and has recently been named, SPiRiT. The group includes all major religions, and Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Jews, Christians, Muslims and atheists are represented.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a pioneer in the area of Positive Psychology, agrees with the importance of introducing spirituality into the treatment room. In an interview with Wendy Schuman published on the website, Beliefnet, Dr. Seligman states that there has been long-term evidence that people who are seriously religious are less depressed, happier and more optimistic (as cited in Schuman, para. 17). He also correlates spirituality with what he called the “third kind of happy life, the meaningful life.” People who are strong believers in God believe in using their strengths, or gifts, for the service of something larger than they are, and, according to Seligman, that is a “tried and true route to life satisfaction” (as cited in Schuman, para. 17).
If I could put into words the difference in my life (post mental illness) and my way of living it, I would have to say the main difference is that all that was negative became positive, and has a lot to do with my relationship with God. I now have a sense of well-being and even satisfaction about the past. I have a sense of flow, joy, constructive cognitions, future optimism, hope, and faith. My life has been filled with meaning and purpose. I have a new capacity for love, vocation, and courage. I have interpersonal skills I never had before my “breakdown.” I have a strong ability to persevere. I have gained a sense of forgiveness for those who have hurt me, I have goals for the future, and I have gained a new ability to use my talents, or the gifts that the Lord has given me. I care more about citizenship and I’m more responsible. I have gained an ability to nurture my children and others and learned how to give. All these things are what the field of Positive Psychology is all about (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

According to a chapter from the Handbook of Positive Psychology reproduced on the University of Pennsylvania website, the aim of Positive Psychology is to change the focus of the field from repairing damage to building qualities and strengths. This was not a new idea. “Before World War II, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of people more productive and fulfilling and of identifying and nurturing high talent” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, para. 1).

After the war, economic events changed these missions. Psychologists realized they could make a living treating the mentally ill. At the same time, the
National Institute of Mental Health was founded and psychologists at universities found that they could get research grants to study pathology. Although many positive outcomes for treatment of mental illness have come from this focus, two of the missions, making the lives of people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent, were all but forgotten (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, para. 9).

A major problem with the focus on repairing damage is that prevention of damage is left out of the equation. Working towards building strengths in young people who are at risk can help change personal futures. This in turn can change the future of our country and our world. We can learn how to foster virtues such as "courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow and insight, to name several" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), and change the face of therapy.

To help facilitate that, Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson developed and published Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification (CSV; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The CSV is the counterpart to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 1994), which is used by almost all traditional psychotherapists. Clinicians use this manual to diagnose clients and to obtain billing codes for insurance companies. The DSM focuses on "disorders that disable human beings" while the CSV "describes and classifies strengths and virtues that enable human thriving" (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson 2005). It is not meant to replace the DSM-IV, but to enhance it.
But what makes people happy and how can we measure it? In order to study happiness scientifically, the authors developed a description of happiness that included (a) positive emotion and pleasure (the pleasant life); (b) engagement (the engaged life); and (c) meaning (the meaningful life) (Seligman, et al., 2005). This working definition of “happiness” was used in their research projects. An important fact has emerged in the last few years: According to the authors, happiness is causal and brings more benefits than just feeling good. Health, success, and being more socially engaged are all included and the causal effect runs in both directions. These benefits cause happiness and happiness causes these benefits (Seligman, et al., 2005).

If this is true, can interventions produce lasting effects? In other words, can not only treating disorders but also building strengths help clients to become lastingly happier in the three dimensions of positive emotions, engagement, and meaning? In a 6-group randomized controlled study, the authors tested happiness interventions. They included one control exercise. Of the six exercises, three lastingly alleviated depression and increased perceived happiness (Seligman, et al., 2005). The authors recruited 577 adult participants who were willing to do the exercises via the Internet. Of those who completed the exercises, 71% completed the follow-up assessment. The five exercises follow:

**Placebo Control Exercise: Early Memories.** Participants were asked to write about their early memories every night for one week.

**Gratitude Visit.** Participants were given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.
Three Good Things in Life. Participants were asked to write down, every night for one week, three good things that went well each day. In addition, they were asked to provide a causal explanation for each good thing.

You At Your Best. Participants were asked to write a story about a time when they were at their best and then to reflect on the personal strengths displayed in the story. They were told to review their story once every day for a week and to reflect on the strengths they had identified.

Using Signature Strengths in a New Way. Participants were asked to take an inventory of character strengths online and to receive individualized feedback about their top five ("signature") strengths (Seligman, et al., 2005a).

They were then asked to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for one week.

The exercises for "using signature strengths in a new way" and "three good things" increased happiness and decreased depression for six months. "The gratitude visit" caused large positive changes for one month. Also, participants who chose to continue the exercises on their own had more long-term benefits (Seligman, et al. 2005).

What caught my attention about this study is how closely it reflected my own experience in the things I did that helped in my journey out of panic and depression. As I learned more from the Bible about how God sees me as a human being with a purpose, I began to change. I read about how it is God who gives us each individual gifts in order to benefit other people. I realized what those gifts were that resided within me and I began to use them in ways I had never thought about before. I have a gift for counseling and for encouraging others. I'm intuitive and can "read" others
easily. Through the years I have noticed that those gifts draw people to open up to me about personal issues in an easy way. As I grew in the use of the gifts, doors began to open for me in the area of public speaking, and I have been asked many times to give motivational talks before groups of women and teenagers. Considering the many years of panic attacks and agoraphobia, the fact that I love to speak before groups is something of a miracle!

Another concept I learned from the Bible is gratitude. As I fought my negative thinking patterns, I learned to purposefully think about things to be grateful for. If I was having a particularly bad day, I would think about the fact that I had wonderful children, a roof over my head, and enough to eat. As life got better and better, I found I had more and more to be grateful for and I incorporated that knowledge into my thinking patterns on a daily basis. I now feel a strong sense of gratitude for the littlest of things. The sight of a bird or a butterfly can bring a tear to my eye. If I am able to spot a bluebird on a springtime outing I feel as if God brought that bluebird right into my path, just to make the day complete. Of course I don’t always feel this sense of “good things,” but I have learned how to use this technique when I feel the slightest bit down in the dumps. It never fails to bring me right back up again.

One of the things that helped me the most through those dark years of mental illness was when I began to realize that I needed to change the way I thought about things. This is not a concept I was ever taught by a therapist. As I stated before, my therapy during those years was all undirected “talk therapy.” None of the counselors I saw ever suggested ways of combating the anxiety, phobic responses or depression
by any way other than to talk about my past or present relationships. I had talked about them for six years. During those six years I made little progress in relieving the panic and agoraphobia, and there were times when the depression was so oppressive that I wished to commit suicide. As far as I am concerned now, it was God Himself who helped me to figure it all out. He helped me to “retrain” my thoughts, or cognitions.

According to one study, many people who experience panic attacks feel that they are in immediate danger of “dying, going crazy, or social embarrassment triggered by the bodily sensations of anxiety” (Hicks, Leitenberg, Barlow, Gorman, Shear & Woods, 2005). That was certainly my personal experience. I was sure I was going to have a heart attack and die on the spot. I felt a slight lessening of anxiety if I knew I was near a hospital. My thoughts became so distorted and exaggerated that I was sure I was going insane. Since I believed I might start screaming at any moment during these attacks, my fear of social embarrassment was overwhelming.

One study suggested that fears of social or behavior consequences predicted agoraphobic behavior, whereas fears of physical catastrophe did not (cited in Hicks, et al., 2005, para. 3). It seems that thoughts about being embarrassed or ashamed in public, if left untreated, interfere with successful relief of panic disorder or agoraphobia. A client may be able to believe that he or she is not really going crazy, or be assured by a medical doctor that there is absolutely nothing wrong with his/her heart and he/she won’t have a heart attack. But it is harder to convince clients that they will not make fools of themselves if they scream or run from a store or hyperventilate and faint in front of strangers in a crowded room. I can remember being
sure that those around me could tell by the look on my face that I was panicking, and if I started to hyperventilate, I was sure I was giving myself away. It was embarrassing to think that others could tell you were afraid when there was no real threat. Recent new therapies can help clients overcome fears before clients attempt to go back into real life situations they may feel phobic about.

According to a study done by Vincelli, Anolli, Bouchard, Weiderhold, Zurloni & Riva (2003), Experiential Cognitive Therapy, using virtual reality, may help clients overcome panic in fewer sessions than those receiving traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy. The controlled study involved twelve consecutive patients aged 35-53. They were divided into three groups: Those who received Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy along with Virtual Reality therapy; those who received traditional Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy; and those who were put on a waiting list control group.

In Session 1, patients were interviewed to find triggers. The goal was to find what increased the patient’s anxious feelings and then put those triggers in a hierarchy list. The patient was then taught how to use a head-mounted virtual reality display with a joystick. While viewing the screen the patient felt as though he or she was in social situations, closed elevators, rooms with and without exits, supermarkets, etc. The patient was exposed to increasingly uncomfortable environments. At the same time, the patient was educated as to the role of avoidance and the importance of regular exposure to feared situations (Vincelli, et al., 2003). I learned this many years ago in the book by Dr. Claire Weekes I got at the public library. As outlined in her
book on agoraphobia, "your salvation is in the doing." This was exactly the path that I had taken to overcome phobias and agoraphobia on my own.

The complete treatment in the virtual reality study included eight sessions and "booster sessions," which included follow-up sessions after one month, three months, and six months. It also included review and reinforcement of patient’s tasks, and management and prevention of future relapses (Vincelli, Ph.D., et al., 2003).

The result of the study showed that ECT (Experiential Cognitive Therapy) delivered results similar to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy alone, but did it in 33% fewer sessions. Eight sessions! It is sometimes hard to think about the fact that I suffered for over eight years. I can’t help but believe that I could have been helped much sooner. It feels like lost years. But I choose not to focus on the negative aspect of that and realize that all experiences, whether positive or negative, worked together to form the person I am now. The Bible has taught me, "All things work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes" (Romans 8:28 NIV). I truly believe that.
In Conclusion
I have not visited a mental health professional for almost twenty years. I know there have been advances in the study of panic disorder and agoraphobia, as well as depression, but I have done so well that I have not felt the need. Attending classes in the psychology department at Carroll College has given me a new perspective. I have been extremely excited to learn about the latest research in both fields of Cognitive-Behavioral and Positive Psychology. There are so many correlations between what research has found to help and what I found helpful on my own. Now I feel like a horse, biting at the bit. I want to be through with school and out there working with those who are struggling as I was. But my time at Carroll College has been invaluable, and I have really enjoyed the process.

I have especially been inspired by my professors at Carroll. Each one has come from a different perspective, and brought his or her own experiences and personality to bear on teaching style and content. I have truly loved all of my classes. As I have sat under each professor, possibilities for my own life changes have opened like crocuses popping through the snow. I want to be just like her, I would think, or him! But through the four years I have been here, I have come back to an understanding of what I am supposed to be doing. It hasn’t changed.

My goal is to help those who are hurting. My desire is to gain expertise in the field of Cognitive-Behavioral and Positive Psychology, and use that expertise to help those who are struggling with panic disorder, agoraphobia, and depression. Giving presentations in my classes has cemented my desire to speak before groups. I hope to give seminars and produce materials that clients can use at home to facilitate management and prevention of the return of symptoms. My literature and writing classes
at Carroll have renewed my dream of writing books. But if I never got to do any of that, I would still consider my education at Carroll College worth every penny I have spent. It seems that even at fifty-four years old, I still had some growing to do. I have gained a well-rounded education and become a much more open and critical thinker. Because of Carroll College, and the staff and professors who pour themselves into the students, I have changed. I will be forever eternally grateful for my alma mater, Carroll College, Helena, Montana.
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