

TRUSTING THE DAWN

How to Choose Freedom
and Joy After Trauma

MARY
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Introduction

It was more than five hours before I was rescued from my bathroom countertop, where I huddled, wet and pregnant, shaking from cold and fear, trapped by millions of gallons of mud. I didn't know how many hours I'd endure in this soggy, frigid tomb; I did know they seemed both interminable and fleeting. For much of that time, I thought my husband and four-year-old son had been swept away in a river of mud and debris and that my own death was imminent.

In mere moments, the tidal wave of mud had become too high and toxic for me to stand in, so I had crawled up on the countertop. Barefoot, in thin cotton floral pajamas, I looked out my bathroom window at my world, destroyed. I thought my life was over. There had been a deafening roar as boulders the size of tanks tumbled in a torrential river of mud down the mountain above my home. On my left, I had watched this river crumple a neighbor's house and hurtle it down the hill away from me. On my right, the majority of my house had twisted backward and washed away at twenty miles per hour. Not only was my living room gone but my panic surpassed anything I'd ever known when I realized the window looking back at me was that of my four-year-old son Ever's bedroom. And I thought he was in it.

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On the heels of the Thomas Fire, which burned 282,000 acres over a period of several weeks in Ojai, Ventura, and Santa Barbara, California, came the Montecito mudslide of 2018. Nearly 200 million gallons of rainfall dropped in fifteen minutes in a record-breaking, middle-of-the-night storm, and the mountain gave way.

The mudslide killed twenty-three people. More than 150 people were injured, four of them critically. More than 450 homes and structures were damaged. A thirty-mile stretch of the 101 freeway was closed for almost a month because it was covered in several feet of slick, toxic mud that had to be cleared. A toddler and a teenage boy were never found. Destroyed cars had to be plucked from trees. Enormous boulders had to be jackhammered and removed. Houses, businesses, groves of protected oaks, and historical landmarks had to be dug out of the mud and restored. Many were lost forever. The beaches along the whole coast of Southern California were toxic and debris-covered for months. Full restoration of all the creeks and roads in Montecito would take two years; rebuilding and repairing the structures continue to this day. And my home was right at ground zero.

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION

Can you imagine that the worst thing that has ever happened to you might turn out to be a gift in disguise? Do you know that trauma, in whatever form it slayed you—childhood abuse, betrayal, divorce, the loss of a child, a diagnosis of terminal illness, a natural disaster—could be your initiation into a fuller, more illuminated and joyful life?

Trauma results from a moment, or a series of moments, in which we feel vulnerable, helpless, and weak; in which no escape seems possible; and in which, at some level, we are terrified we will not survive. This can happen even when our own safety is not directly at risk, but we are witnessing someone else's trauma. According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, trauma "results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, emotional, or social well-being." To put it more simply and more inclusively, *trauma* is the Greek word for "injury." For our purposes, trauma is an event or injury that throws us off balance. An estimated 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women report having at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes.¹ These numbers are undoubtedly grossly under-representative because trauma includes all kinds of abuse, bullying, betrayal, near-death experiences, losses, combat or street violence, incest or rape, natural disasters, and pandemics.

Even as survivors carry with them the aftereffects of uncleared and unhealed trauma, many might not even recognize or define what has happened to them as traumatic. Some might know internally they were traumatized but don't feel safe to say so out loud. They might hold back because of shame (about sexual abuse, for instance), fear of repercussions or of being perceived as weak (as is common for men or for those traumatized in the line of duty), or lack of a safe person to tell.

I recognize that in the wake of trauma, during and sometimes even after healing, we can feel frustrated or even angry about considering the point of view that what we have suffered can lead anywhere good. It's okay if you don't feel that way yet. I've been there, and I empathize. Just know, if I've been there and can get here, so can you. It takes time, and it also takes healing.

As I sought my own healing, I found ways to heal from trauma thoughtfully and meaningfully, to return to harmonious well-being, and to find growth and resilience after a such an event. I found skillful and compassionate healers and guides, I discovered modalities proven by mainstream psychological and medical research, and I made leaps of faith with methodologies that at first seemed far-fetched but that sometimes led to profound posttraumatic growth.

In the weeks and months and years that followed the mudslide—although I was sometimes overcome with fear during bad weather, feelings of hopelessness that I would ever have my life “back together,” and pain both physical and emotional—I also experienced blessings, growth, and depth I never could have imagined. My connection to prayer and manifesting desires became increasingly powerful. Gifts, literal and figurative, appeared. My relationships became stronger and deeper or fell away. Ultimately, my appreciation for life and my mission to enjoy it all and uplift others was fortified and crystallized. I chose to stride into this complex and growing field to find my way not only to surviving and being okay but to thriving, growing, and transcending. I began to write about my findings as a way to help others not only find their way back from trauma but transcend it.

The reality that the destruction of my world as I knew it would be a triumphant epiphany and invitation to live more rapturously and dynamically was a seed that would not be revealed for some time. I wrote this book to share how I transformed the darkness into light in order to encourage and ignite readers to break free from the heavy residue trauma can leave behind.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In *Trusting the Dawn*, my hope is to offer tools, resources, and a framework for going through to come out the other side of trauma, to emerge transformed. This book is a companion for your journey from victimhood to initiation to a more dynamic and exalted life. I don't shy away from the realities of this path; it requires grit, toughness, vulnerability, and perseverance, and true healing takes longer than anyone wants it to. Ultimately, I seek to empower you not just to ask, "Why did this happen *to* me?" but also, "How did this happen *for* me?" Although the catalyst for this book was my acute traumatic experience, it is a call to action for everyone living in the modern age to see suffering as a call to identify, heal, and transmute trauma in order to appreciate the beauty of their lives.

With a bachelor's degree in English from Princeton University and a master's degree in clinical psychology from Pepperdine University, I had an intellectual understanding of the possibility for healing. My own transformative epiphanies outside of the classroom led me, along with my sister, Lucy, to found our company, Firestone Sisters, in 2012, with the aim of providing other people healing and growth opportunities. I have been producing and curating our Wild Precious Life Retreats for more than eight years and have led more than twenty retreats and workshops.

Through my own history and the stories of others I feature in this book, I found that trauma can crack open a new, intangible, rapturous, magical dimension of life that I never would have imagined was possible. There is potential for this kind of expansion through healing after the intense contraction of trauma. This dimension is always present, but our intellectual minds won't go there as long as we are safe, rested, coasting, and comfortable. As a result of experiencing extreme suffering—the loss of a loved one, a terminal illness, a near-death experience, any kind of abuse, the loss of a relationship or marriage, a betrayal—a sense of transparency between the physical world and the energetic/spiritual realms can become apparent. Through the initiatory experience of a traumatic event, life becomes more vivid and precious. This depth of power isn't something most of us can experience without the rawness and vulnerability of a crisis to drop us into it. As our rational intellect collapses, at least temporarily, we find greater ease in connecting to what lies beyond the physical limitations of the tangible world.

Trusting the Dawn combines my personal experience with input from experts ranging from medical doctors to mental health practitioners to

alternative healers, and stories collected from other trauma survivors, along with information about the many avenues available for healing and renewal. The book is designed to engage and support you on a journey with others who've been through something similar and emerged transformed. Integrated throughout are my real-life stories along with in-depth interviews with other survivors.

In part 2, I share each healing practice I have come across and found helpful. For each modality, I'll provide a brief description and then get right to sharing the experiential part: the story of the way it was experienced, both during and afterward. I also provide suggestions for what you might do at home on your own or how to find a practitioner in your area and within your budget. (Where cost is an issue, don't be afraid to ask about sliding scales or pro bono sessions.) Additionally, I'll share whom each treatment might serve best and whether any should be avoided depending on your situation.

In the end, you will have the tools, resources, and encouragement to know you do not have to walk through the rest of your life permanently damaged or cursed. You do not have to be an eternal victim. You are, in fact, more complex, multidimensional, connected, and powerful *because* of what you have endured. My hope is that eventually and with healing you will recognize that trauma can be an incredible gift that yields wisdom and strength. This book provides revelatory inspiration, motivation, and tools to take healing to this next level, to empower you to know that you have the ability to alchemize great and lasting change.

For me, perhaps the biggest gift of trauma is recognizing the impermanence of this life and therefore valuing it. So often, we put off doing things we love, having important conversations, or spending time on what matters most to us. We punt our dreams to *next year*, or *when I have more money*, or *when I have a partner*. . . . Emerging from our darkest moments into the light teaches us that *now* is the only guarantee. It motivates and empowers us to seize the moment and live and love like we mean it.

PART 1

Transformation

WHY NOW?

The research and writing of this book began well before the Covid-19 pandemic, but what it offers became all the more relevant as billions of us entered into an indefinite period of lockdown, economic stress, and turmoil. Fear has erupted on a global scale, married to uncertainty about the future, which is sure to leave many with posttraumatic residue to heal and clear.

The aftermath of trauma can feel isolating. It might feel like it is hard for others to relate to what we're going through. Other people might distance themselves from us because they don't know how to be with us or what we need. Or on some subconscious (or conscious) level, they fear the trauma is "contagious." There could be shame surrounding the event that might cause us to retreat. There might be grief we want to process alone. We might feel we are the only one this has ever happened to, or certainly the only one we know of personally. Trauma is shocking; it can perpetuate fear and judgment, and it can cause others discomfort because it reminds us all that life is precious and fragile.

Considering our recent history with Covid-19, we are more isolated than ever. When we are kept from loved ones, schools, teachers, routines that

offer us solace, people to connect with, support systems, and a sense of living life, these feelings of being alone are exacerbated. During this global crisis, the amount of trauma has increased. The collective fear alone is enough to make many of us, especially those of us who are more empathic, experience heightened anxiety. This communal fear can also be triggering for many of us with previous traumas. Domestic violence, sexual assault, divorce, depression, and suicide have all escalated during these periods of lockdown, uncertainty, and unrest.¹

Sometimes, trauma is caused by systemic abuses such as racism or sexism, and those forms of abuse affect some people more than others. Those systemic problems are not resolved quickly. For those directly affected by them, the trauma might seem relentless and endless; how can healing begin when the wounds are continually inflicted? Although this is an absolutely crucial conversation to have, especially at this time in history, it is beyond the scope of this book.

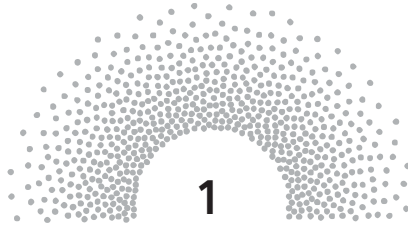
One of the main reasons I wanted to write this book was to help you not to feel so alone. I know how alone I have felt at various times in my life while recovering from different traumatic events. And I recognize that I felt isolated even when I was surrounded by people who could and did help me and even while having access to resources and all of my physical needs met. Living in the United States on the East Coast until the age of twenty-five and the West Coast after that, I was in environments that for the most part supported the idea of therapy and healing. I had access to alternative healing modalities, and I continued to seek friends who shared my passion and desire for growth. Although affluence and access don't spare you from disaster or trauma, my support system and the nature of my trauma (the aftermath of a natural disaster is overt, and there is no shame or blame around it, unlike there can be with sexual abuse, for example) meant that I had immediate support from family and friends. We were also well insured, so we had assistance rebuilding our lives. Because of this, finding places to stay, clothes to wear, and eventually a new home to live in, as well as access to healing therapies was easier than it could have been. For those with different circumstances, the recovery from this kind of trauma can be a much harsher, longer journey.

I recognize how incredibly blessed I have been, and even so I still felt such shame, isolation, and hopelessness at times. I am writing this book for those of you who might not have the benefit of financial or emotional resources or who live somewhere where healing is discouraged, where you don't have access

to the numerous healers and modalities available where I live. And also for those of you who, like me, have had the benefit of resources and access and still struggle. This book is an offering of healing resources and, ultimately, a community. I want you to know that you are not alone. You do not have to do this alone. You did nothing wrong. You are meant to grow and heal and live a joyful life full of love. Your hardest moments have provided you an opportunity for dynamic growth and contrast so that you can more fully appreciate all of the beauty, love, and goodness life has to offer you. What you have survived and are healing from has meaning. Your life has meaning.

This book and this community are here for you. You might be just beginning your healing journey by reading this book, or you might need some further inspiration and/or ideas on how to continue your metamorphosis. Wherever you are, this book is full of stories of other survivors, so you might find kindred spirits in these pages. There is no hierarchy of trauma. Each person's trauma is the worst because it happened to them. These pages are full of resources, tools, teachers, and practices to help you heal, thrive, and emerge resplendent.

With trauma being witnessed, identified, and named on an unprecedented scale in the world right now, healing work becomes even more urgent. Hurt people hurt more people unless they are healed; it is also true that hurt can be alchemized. As we do the work to heal and uplift ourselves, we help to heal and uplift others. There is a ripple effect in either direction: more hurt, anger, and fear or more love, acceptance, and unity. The world needs this kind of healing attention and love now more than ever. The time is now, and now is YOUR time. You are here. You are committed to your evolution. You are not alone.



My Story

The months leading up to the Montecito mudslide of January 2018 had been unsettling for me. I felt almost crazy with uncertainty, so much so that I sought the advice of a psychic, something I had done only for fun before. I was desperately grasping for someone to tell me that everything was going to be okay. The Owl, as she called herself, made it even worse by telling me the coming months would be full of chaos. As she mused about why my soul had chosen this, I felt my internal panic bubble even higher.

My then husband, Napper, and I had recently bought a dreamy white farmhouse in Montecito. Our son had an enchanted oak forest to play in, and a baby sister was on the way. Old rose bushes pumped out fragrant, brightly hued blooms. We were just minutes from the celebrated Montecito Union public school, the beach, and Oprah Winfrey. What could go wrong with her as your neighbor? We were thrilled to be home.

And then, in early December, the Thomas Fire broke out. Newly pregnant, I was all for heeding the evacuation orders sent out as the sky went hazy gray-orange, the air became dangerous to breathe, and white ash dusted our cars and brick patio. We fled north to an Airbnb in Paso Robles and then eventually flew back east to ride out the seemingly endless season of this devastating fire. In early January 2018, the fire was mostly contained, so we returned home. We had only slept in the new house twice before the fire evacuation.

The night of the mudslide started out calm and almost balmy. A mandatory evacuation order went out because of forecasted rain, but it didn't