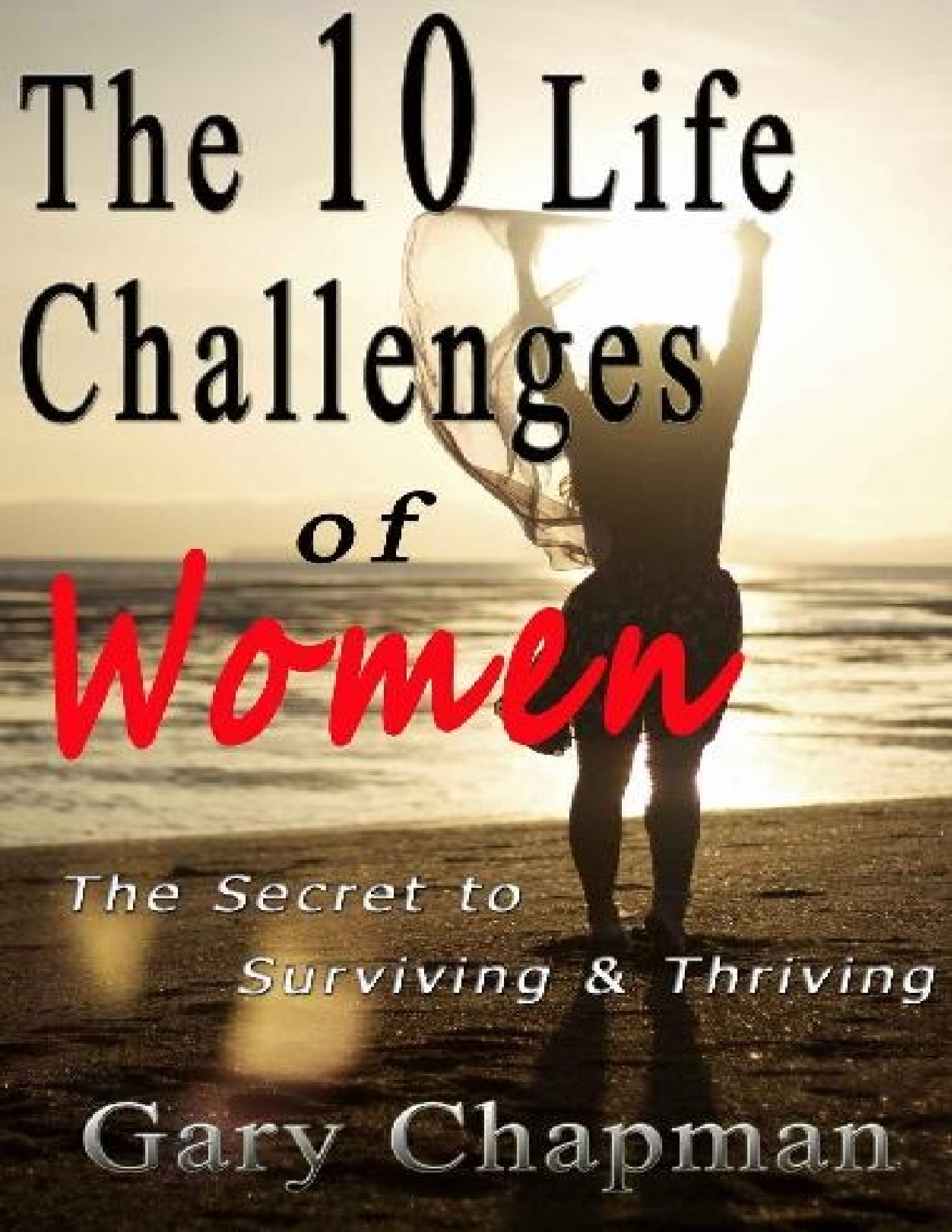


A woman stands on a beach at sunset, holding a large, translucent, shell-like object above her head. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The woman is silhouetted against the bright light. The ocean waves are visible in the background.

The 10 Life Challenges *of* **Women**

*The Secret to
Surviving & Thriving*

Gary Chapman

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INTRODUCTION

In our highly competitive, youth-oriented, lookist, consumerist, success-obsessed society, women of all ages and backgrounds are struggling to form and maintain authentic, accurate self identities. The sense of disrupted identity that a job loss brings, for example, can be disorienting, destabilizing and overwhelming, but therein lies the problem. Basing one's identity on what job one performs or what role one plays in society is what philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre referred to as "bad faith." Your social role is not equivalent to your human existence, and by defining yourself by your social role, you are deceiving yourself and not living up to your full potential.

Sartre believed that when you pretend to be someone you're not or live according to values that aren't true to your own, it has the same effect as putting a kink in an electrical line – it cuts off your flow of energy. When you are true to yourself and live authentically, you unkink the line and connect with others and the world with 100% energy. That quality is what gives truly authentic people their magnetic appeal and draws us to them.

If you have ever felt that you are on the wrong path, that you are living according to the values of others rather than your own, or that your life has no purpose or meaning, you have likely been playing roles rather than living your true identity. The consequences of perpetuating a false identity include depression, anxiety, unsatisfying relationships, career indecision, and lack of direction or purpose.

You are not your job, your clothes, your age, your weight, your marital status, your looks, your zip code, what you drive or what happened to you as a child. Your true identity is composed of your interests, passions, skills, talents, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, reflections, opinions, wants, desires, goals, hopes and dreams. The first list represents the many ways in which your real, authentic self can be expressed, but in an effort to gain acceptance and love, many women sacrifice themselves and let the opinions of others, media and advertising dictate what they do and how they present themselves to the world. They spend their lives pretending to be what society tells them they should be rather than being who they genuinely are.

We conform so we will not suffer rejection, but in the act of mindless conforming, we reject our real selves. The result is a sense of living an empty, superficial life devoid of meaning. American media's infantilization of women and its emphasis on youth, beauty, and the superficial is an effort to sell you products to make others wealthy, not to help make you happy or fulfilled. Only when you see through the propaganda and get to know who you really are can you begin to step out of the mold and live your life honestly and fully. It is the difference between living life with a passion that both drives and defines you, and living life as a puppet controlled by a consumerist society.

How you live your life is entirely your choice, but the extent to which you are capable of living honestly and authentically is dependant upon your knowledge of yourself, what you value, what drives you and what your innate potential is. Do you know who you are? Or do you just think you know based on the labels and stereotypes society has assigned you?

This book examines the ten most challenging sources of identity disruption and destruction for women, and provides insight into errors in thinking that lead women to pursue false, unfulfilling identities. The book also provides recommendations for forming a strong, authentic self-identity that will be resistant to influence by external forces.

Living your life the way you were meant to rather than compromising yourself to meet the expectations of others is the path to joy, connection, meaning, purpose and fulfillment; and it is all within your power.

1

JOB LOSS

Teresa and Sarah

Teresa knew from the time she was a small child that she would to be an attorney when she grew up. Her mother and father were attorneys, as were both of her grandfathers. As an only child, her destiny was written on the wall the moment she was born, and her parents groomed her to be the most talented and accomplished in her field.

At 36, Teresa was at the top of her game at the family's prestigious intellectual property law firm. The grueling hours and intensely competitive work environment left her drained and bordering on burnout most nights, but she liked the money and was proud of her accomplishments and accolades, so she burrowed through each day and each case with the same focus and efficiency she was taught as a child.

Teresa's life was her job and her identity was her job, until it wasn't anymore. A settlement from a sexual harassment lawsuit filed against the firm's partners depleted its coffers and destroyed its reputation. Devastated but not deterred, Teresa promptly began applying for positions at other firms. With her education, background and accomplishments, she was certain she would be back to her former identity/job in no time.

Unfortunately, she had lost her job during a recession and there happened to be a glut of unemployed attorneys. *Atlantic Magazine* reported that in 2012 only 56% of graduating law students had found stable jobs in law nine months after graduation. Not only was she now competing with younger, cheaper talent in a tighter market, she also carried with her the negative reputation of her family firm as a result of the sexual harassment lawsuit.

Teresa sank into a deep depression four months into her job search. She felt

worthless, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep and avoided people for fear of having to tell them she was still unemployed. She felt old, used up, useless, despite her still-young age and potential. Her search for another legal job seemed increasingly hopeless but she saw no point in trying a different line of work at this age since she had always been a lawyer. She dismissed any suggestions that she should pursue her natural talent in and love for interior design because she considered it frivolous and unimportant. Being an attorney was the only identity she had known, and she couldn't fathom letting it go to become something else.

One of Teresa's former co-workers from her family's firm, Sarah, came to visit her in the hospital after Teresa attempted to overdose on prescription pills and alcohol. Teresa was surprised to see Sarah so seemingly happy, healthy, relaxed and content and asked Sarah how her job search experience had been. She surely must have found a good position considering her obvious happiness.

Sarah explained to Teresa that she had not found a new job, and that she had given up looking for another law position three months into her fruitless search. When she was an attorney, she relieved her work stress by baking creative pastries when she got home. As the stress of not finding a new job wore on, she baked more and more. Friends and family loved the fruits of her misery and offered to buy her treats, so Sarah got the idea to stop looking for work and sell her baked creations through an online storefront instead. She did not allow her past job as an attorney to define her or dictate how she would live her life in the future. Sarah pulled from her own internal talents and passions and, from them, made her job conform to her identity rather than the other way around.

Convincing yourself that you have to work in a certain field to meet family expectations, have to be super successful to impress your friends or need a prestigious title to have self-worth is dooming yourself to a lifetime of anxiety, depression, sadness and emptiness. Those are all external goals created to validate what can only be validated from an internal source. Each of us has unique, individual talents, whether we recognize them or not, and we are more engaged, authentic, connected and happy when we use those talents in service of our career.

It is an extraordinarily common mistake for people to take their natural talents for granted, diminish them and refuse to recognize them. Do not take for granted what comes easily to you and assume that it comes easily to others.

Explore and develop your natural talents and gifts, follow your true interests, and you will become content, fulfilled and driven by internal passion rather than controlled by external forces.

Labor Department statistics indicate that 2.1 million women lost their jobs during the Great Recession between 2008 and 2014. Considering the first thing one usually asks when meeting someone socially is, “What do you do for a living?” these statistics mean that there are many women out there struggling to not only find an answer to that question, but also to the larger question of who they are. The error in thinking occurs when they feel that they as a human being have changed or are of less value because they do not have a job. What do you value? What do you love? What do you enjoy doing more than anything? What inspires you and makes you feel alive? These things all define who you are far more than any job title ever will, and they are where your sense of identity should derive and reside.

Writer and philosopher Alain de Botton said, “The difference between hope and despair is a different way of telling stories from the same facts.” Two people lose the same job title. One despairs under the mistaken belief that her identity has been swept away from her and that her value as a human being has diminished. The other sees hope and finds happiness in pulling from her own interests and talents to pursue a more fulfilling and meaningful path than the one she was on. Which would you prefer to be? The choice is yours.

2

PAST ABUSE

Kate and Amy

Kate grew up in a typical middle class American household and lived the life of a typical American pre-teen, except for the fact that an adult male neighbor sexually abused her on a regular basis. He told her they would both be in trouble if anyone found out and people would think she was a bad person, so she kept their secret. She didn't like what the neighbor was doing to her, but he was otherwise kind to her, gave her gifts, listened to her and gave her attention she wasn't able to find anywhere else.

As an adult, many of Kate's actions are driven by her unconscious belief that the price she has to pay for love and attention is her body. She works in a professional field but dresses provocatively, is openly seductive with inappropriate men and sexualizes conversations every chance she gets. She casually sleeps with men thinking they will love her in return and is repeatedly disappointed when they don't. She is too competitive with other women to form genuine relationships with them, and is dismayed by the fact that all the work she puts into appearing sexy and appealing to men isn't paying off in terms of the love and affection she seeks.

Amy grew up in a similar household to Kate's, but her abuser from age five to twelve was a family member. The attention was painful and violent, but she was too fearful of what would happen to her and the family member if she told anyone, so she kept the secret to herself.

As an adult, Amy has difficulty controlling her diet and weight, dresses conservatively, doesn't date or go out often, and although she would like to have relationships with others, she is too anxious and fearful to make serious efforts. She escapes into books, movies or television and blocks the rest of the world out

whenever possible.

Kate and Amy are both deeply lonely and lost women who appear to be very different on the surface, but who share a common influencing source. Studies led by David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, have found that 1 in 5 girls has been a victim of child sexual abuse, and it's estimated that 1 in 6 women has been raped in her lifetime. Such abuse has a significant and lasting effect on not only a woman's self identity, but her entire world view. It distorts her perception of relationships, destroys her ability to trust, and diminishes her capacity to see herself as a valuable human being.

Some abuse victims, like Kate, equate the attention they received from their abuser to love, and operate under the false belief that they can only be loved for their bodies, not for who they really are. They devalue their true selves and are left empty and disappointed when the love they sought doesn't materialize. Other abuse victims, like Amy, perceive their abuse in the opposite light. They equate closeness with pain, and they have difficulty trusting men or anyone who could hurt them. They are avoidant and so fearful of being hurt, physically or emotionally, that they prefer to remain in their lonely, isolated worlds than seek the love and affection we, and they, all naturally desire.

Sexual abuse victims are known to be at far greater risk of developing depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcoholism, drug addiction, heart disease, chronic pain and a number of other physical and mental ills. The suffering doesn't end when the abuse ends. It lasts a lifetime, but only if one lets it.

Becoming aware of how the abuse has affected you and shaped your perceptions of yourself and the world is the first step to putting an end to its long-term adverse effects on you. Understanding that the actions of your abuser had nothing at all to do with who you are as a person, and everything to do with who they were, is also crucial. Many abuse victims have a sense that they are dirty, damaged or flawed; but notice that those terms describe the abuser, not the victim. Any feeling of being dirty or flawed as a result of your abuse needs to be the first thing you take from yourself and give back to your abuser, to whom it truly belongs.

There are many women who have been sexually abused or raped and who

have found happiness, self-value and fulfillment by successfully refusing to allow it to define them. Playwright Eve Ensler (*The Vagina Monologues*) disclosed in her 2006 book, *Insecure At Last*, that she had been raped and beaten by her father from age five to ten. Famed author Anaïs Nin revealed in her second unexpurgated journal that she had been molested by a male relative for years as a child. And Linor Abargil became Miss World in 1998 after being kidnapped, raped and stabbed in Italy. An outstanding documentary that examines Linor's story, her subsequent activism, and the stories of other rape survivors is *Brave Miss World* (www.BraveMissWorld.com). The film is highly recommended for anyone who has endured rape or sexual abuse and who is looking for answers, support, understanding and inspiration.

These women and many others are proof positive that it is possible to overcome sexual abuse and rape and live a full, authentic, meaningful life if you focus on developing your true identity rather than focusing on what happened to you. What happened may impact how you express yourself in the world, it may cause you to be more passionate about helping others and supporting victims' rights, but it should never be allowed to impact you in a negative way that places limits on who you are or who you can become. The key is for you to define the experience, not to let it define you.

When victimized as a child, a person has no control or power over what is happening. As an adult, a person has no control over what happened in the past. What we do have control over is how we choose to perceive and understand what happened and the extent to which we are willing to allow it to influence our current life. Holding onto the shame and feelings of low self-worth, repeating the pattern of abuse in a vain attempt to find love, and shutting yourself off from the rest of the world because you are afraid to trust are all ways you continue to victimize yourself long after your abuser is gone.

If you have trouble getting over past abuse or you find it difficult to find and love your true self behind the lingering shame, try this task: Buy a stuffed animal that appeals to you and make it your own personal companion when you go to bed at night. When you are lying in bed, hold onto it and think of it as you as a child. What would you say to yourself if you were able to go back in time and hold and protect the little girl that was enduring the abuse? Tell her you are there for her, that you know she is suffering, but that you know she's good and that her heart and strength will see her through. If you are unable to imagine saying kind words to your younger self for lack of self-love, imagine it is a girl of the same

age you were but who you don't know. Eventually you will be able to say those comforting words to yourself, recognize their validity and begin to heal.

Jean-Paul Sartre said, "What is important is not what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens to us." The moment you come to understand this important truth is the moment you open yourself up to healing and finding your authentic self.

3

DIVORCE OR BREAK-UP

Diana and Stacy

Diana fell hard for Mark the first time she saw him playing basketball in college. A first-string guard playing on scholarship for the school's team, his good looks were as dazzling as his jump shot. They dated, Diana attended all of his games, they traveled together in the summers between school years and grew closer every day. They shared so many things in common and enjoyed each other's company so much that they were convinced they were the other's soul mate. They married the day following graduation and embarked on what they were sure would be a lifetime of marital bliss.

Three years into the marriage, Mark left Diana for a woman he met at the gym. Diana still felt love for Mark and had been under the impression that everything in their marriage was fine, that they were the happy couple they had always been. She never saw the betrayal coming and no matter how many times she pleaded with Mark to tell her what she did wrong and how to make it right, he just shrugged and offered no real answers. He simply didn't love her anymore, that's all he knew or would say.

Her hopes, dreams and plans for the future all shattered, Diana fell into a deep depression and struggled to make sense of her new, single, identity. She felt as though she had been discarded, thrown away because she was no longer good enough for some unknown reason. She convinced herself that some flaw or flaws that she possessed made her unworthy of Mark's, or anyone's, love. She followed him on Facebook and Instagram, and every photo of him and his new girlfriend together was a dagger in her heart and a blow to her self-esteem. She sunk deeper into her malaise, and no matter how hard family and friends tried to help, she could not be consoled. Her untreated depression led to increasingly heavy drinking, which led to the loss of her job and to rehab.

In rehab, Diana identified with the story of one of her counselors, Stacy. Stacy's trajectory of falling in love, committing body and soul to a relationship that she thought would be forever, then being left for someone else matched Dianna's in every way except for length of marriage. Stacy had been married to Ted for 12 years before he left. But rather than dwell on what may or may not have made her husband leave, she instead focused her attention on what steps she could take to make her own life happier without him. Although she still loved Ted and wished that he still felt the same for her, Stacy recognized that before he or anyone else would want to be with her, she first had to enjoy being with herself. She had to get to know herself again as an individual who existed separately from the person she was as part of a couple. She returned to school, obtained her master's degree in psychology, became a successful therapist, and found herself being the one to reject Ted when he left the woman he had left Stacy for to come back to her.

Stacy experienced the same intensity of pain as Diana when her husband filed the divorce papers, but what differed was her perception of her own identity in the situation. Diana dwelled on the presumed fact that she was somehow hopelessly flawed and unworthy of a relationship while Stacy focused on finding and developing her own strengths as a newly single individual. What you give your attention to is entirely your choice, and it will make all the difference in the world in what results you ultimately get in life.

In 2012, the National Survey of Family Growth estimated that 40-50% of all marriages end in divorce. As a result, a significant number of women have, or will have, to reassess who they thought they were. Often, "wife" was more than just a title or a role, it was their central identity. It provided meaning, purpose and a place for them in the world. It is the same sense of meaning, purpose and place that unmarried couples in long-term, committed relationships feel, and their break-ups are no less painful and difficult than those of married couples.

Anytime we lose a role we were used to playing, the adjustment is disorienting and unsettling. But it is especially difficult when that role was as spouse or lover. The reason for this has to do with the fact that the mere presence of another person forces us to look at ourselves and our surroundings differently, through their perspective, and we do this to such a degree that we create an extended, new part of ourselves. When we are alone, our thoughts are entirely

subjective and our focus is exclusively on our own perspective. But when we encounter someone else, we automatically incorporate their consciousness into our awareness so that we see the world from their point of view, as well. For example, when you bump into a mannequin in a clothing store and initially confuse it for a real human being, you instantly make a mental shift from focusing on your own conscious state of awareness to incorporating the supposed other person's perspective. You imagine that they feel offended by your bump, and you begin to apologize to them. Upon realizing that it was merely a mannequin, your mind shifts back into your own individual consciousness and perspective.

When you get to know someone and begin to fall in love, a shared consciousness grows to an extent that it creates another "you:" the you that shares that mental space with your loved one. Inside jokes, shared opinions and the finishing of each other's sentences are all part of this new person you become separate from your individual self. When the relationship is over, you not only mourn the absence of your loved one, but also the death of the person you were with them. Ending a relationship is more than just losing a role or a title, it is also witnessing a beloved and valued part of you die. That is what makes it so distinctly painful.

The reasons why a lover stops loving or a spouse files for divorce are usually the primary focus of the rejected, but they should not be. The fact that the divorce rate hovers around 50% should be enough evidence that it is not necessarily personal. People change; they get enticed by shiny objects and promises of greater happiness elsewhere that may or may not materialize; they fail to realize that love is more than the euphoria they experience in the honeymoon phase of a relationship and go around chasing that euphoria over and over again. Having an honest awareness of the frailty of love and relationships is crucial to accepting and moving on from broken romances.

This is not to say that one should be jaded. One should always love passionately and fully and work toward the goal of lasting love. But it is important to also be both realistic and centered enough in your own identity as an individual that you aren't destroyed by a break-up. You are more than the person you become with a lover or spouse, and it is when you lose sight of this fact that you feel as though you are dying along with the relationship. Get back into your own consciousness, know your strengths and develop them.

Below is a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar that succinctly captures the essence of the message of this chapter.

Then and Now – by Paul Laurence Dunbar

THEN

He loved her, and through many years,
Had paid his fair devoted court,
Until she wearied, and with sneers
Turned all his ardent love to sport.

That night within his chamber lone,
He long sat writing by his bed
A note in which his heart made moan
For love; the morning found him dead.

NOW

Like him, a man of later day
Was jilted by the maid he sought,
And from her presence turned away,
Consumed by burning, bitter thought.

He sought his room to write--a curse
Like him before and die, I ween.
Ah no, he put his woes in verse,
And sold them to a magazine.

4

THE SHAME-SHAPED

Michelle and Emma

Like Diana in the previous chapter, Michelle fell in love with the person she was sure was her soul mate in college. For two years she reveled in the joy of their shared intimacies, their deepening connection and their genuine adoration for each other. When she revealed to her family, however, that the object of her affections was a woman she had met in her Art History class named Emma, everything changed. Her father told her that she was an embarrassment to the family and that if she didn't break up with Emma and date a man, he would remove her from his will. Her mother told her that she would be destined for a life of poverty and sadness if she remained with Emma because "women have it harder in life than men, so two women together will have it harder than anyone." Her sister told her that she felt betrayed because when they were growing up, they had frequently talked about having kids as adults and about how their kids would play with each other and be friends the way they were with their cousins.

Michelle was devastated by her family's response to what she thought was wonderful news. Her family was liberal-leaning and she had heard her parents speak in support of gays and gay rights in the past. She shared the experience with Emma and both remained silent in their pain as Michelle's family's feelings hardened on the issue over the ensuing months. The breaking point came when her family refused to speak to her; an implied ultimatum that she either choose them or choose Emma.

Michelle was young, and she loved and needed her family. Her mother's warnings about the difficult path that lesbian couples faced and her growing shame about an identity that warranted rejection by her own family led Michelle to question, then devalue, the quality of her relationship with Emma. She began to downplay her romantic feelings and tried to convince herself that what she

had experienced wasn't really real, but was rather "just a phase." She drifted emotionally away from Emma and told her parents she had just been confused. She left Emma and immediately began dating a man.

Michelle buried any homosexual feelings or thoughts that ever might try to make their way to her consciousness and placed her focus firmly and exclusively on her career. She dated men periodically, but never again developed the same bond or depth of intimacy she had found with Emma.

On the cusp of turning 40 and on the verge of becoming the proverbial "old maid," Michelle, at her mother's insistent urging, married the man she had dated after breaking up with Emma almost 20 years prior. She wasn't in love with him, but her mother was getting older and she wanted to make her happy, and what would people think of a woman over 40 who's never been married? Those concerns took priority, so she did the socially appropriate thing. Now, at 41, she appears to all who see her from the outside to be a happily married heterosexual woman. From the inside, she is profoundly lonely, cut off from the source of her true joy, and is sacrificing her real identity to act in a role designed to please the audience rather than herself.

Emma, on the other hand, vowed to never let others determine how she lived her life or who she loved after Michelle left. She moved to San Francisco for grad school, fell in love with a fellow student and, at 41, is still living happily and deeply in love with the second woman to win her heart. They run a successful art studio together, and although her family had a difficult time accepting Emma's lifestyle, they eventually came around and now fully support her after seeing how happy, healthy and loving Emma and Camille are together.

This chapter is titled "The Shame-Shaped" in reference to those whose false identities were not shaped by their own internal nature, but rather by family and/or societal shaming. This extends beyond homosexuality into behaviors and career choices that are considered gender-inappropriate. For example, women who do not wish to have children are often made to feel selfish by family and friends who unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) enforce the stereotype of women as born caregivers and mothers. And many women have succumbed to the belief that their only real value lies in their appearance, becoming anorexic, bulimic or addicted to costly and dangerous cosmetic procedures in pursuit of self-worth.

When a gay woman pretends to be straight to protect the family name; when a woman who does not want children has them anyway for fear of being called selfish or unfeminine; when a healthy woman becomes anorexic after constantly receiving the message that her value is based on her looks, each woman becomes someone else's puppet and ceases to live the life she was meant to. She is merely a conduit of other people's wishes and a tool used for someone else's purposes; not an individual living her own life. Depression, anxiety and substance abuse are common among such women. They have heard from society and from family that what they are naturally is not acceptable and not good. They learn to hate what they are, so they do everything they can to hide it and to become what they are not. They trust the judgments of others more than their own hearts and minds, so they sell themselves out in hopes of becoming what others wish them to be.

When you allow gender stereotypes to dictate how you live your life and what you value, you are epitomizing Sartre's concept of "bad faith." You are deceiving yourself into believing that you are the character you play. The problem is, no matter how good your act, the acting never changes the real you. Actors play roles, sometimes extraordinarily convincingly. But at the end of the day when they take off the costume, it's their own skin they are in and have to live with. In playing a role to satisfy family or society, you take power away from yourself and hand it over to others. You deprive yourself of fully expressing who you were born to be and instead live a life of internal conflict and self-sacrifice.

We all want and seek love and acceptance, and no one is immune to some form of social pressure to conform or present themselves in one way or another to attain those things. But the extent to which you sacrifice your true self, your true wants, desires and needs to please others or satisfy their expectations, is the extent to which you devalue your true self and destroy your hopes for real happiness.

Many people live in fear that others will not be accepting of the real them, but what they fail to understand is that people will love them to the extent that they love and value themselves. In the above example, Michelle finds herself living an unsatisfying, unfulfilling life of perpetual compromise twenty years after her decision to let others dictate how she should live, while Emma is living happily and authentically in a loving relationship with family and friends who

eventually came to accept her for who she really is. If you are strong and centered in your identity, and you know it is one that is positive and healthy, then family and society cannot help but recognize those qualities in you and accept you over time, if you give them the chance.

An excellent example of a woman who has successfully overcome our cultural tendency toward female body-shaming by placing 100% faith in her own values, beliefs and self is Lena Dunham, creator of acclaimed cable television series, “Girls.” Anyone who has seen the show or seen Ms. Dunham interviewed knows that she is not the typical woman in the entertainment industry – an industry that is known for demanding almost impossible physical perfection from its female participants. She is chubby, but she not only doesn’t care, she flaunts it. Make-up, clothes and her hair are of minor concern in comparison to her talent, wit and passions.

Lena Dunham is the perfect example of a woman living fully authentically in defiance of stereotypes and oppressive gender-related expectations. She is not afraid to show you herself, all of herself, because she loves and accepts herself fully. And guess what happens when she does that? Millions of people love her back. It is the authenticity they are attracted to. What she lacks in a slim waistline or large breasts or perfect bone structure, she more than makes up for in just being her true, real self.

The key to living a life of Lena Dunham-like genuineness and openness is refusing to accept the stereotypes in the first place. Anyone who tells you that you can’t or shouldn’t be what you know in your heart you are is handing shackles to you. If you accept what they say, you are placing the shackles on yourself and living according to their rules. If you refuse to accept the shame or guilt their words seek to induce, you are handing the shackles back to them and walking freely down your own path.

There are many people in the world who seek to control others for their own reasons. Sometimes those reasons are based in religious beliefs, sometimes they are based in fear of what others will think and sometimes they are based simply in the fact that misery loves company. Whatever the reason, if you are feeling pressure to compromise significant parts of yourself to conform to how others believe you should live your life, you must find the strength to trust enough in yourself to be the true you. You are here to realize your potential and share your gifts as fully as you possibly can, and gender-based stereotypes that seek to

thwart that process are the enemy. There is no shame in being the real you. The real shame is in sacrificing yourself to be someone you are not.

5

PARENTHOOD

Laura and Debbie

Laura had been looking forward to the birth of her daughter since the moment she found out she was pregnant. She read as many parenting books and magazines as she could so she would be fully prepared to care for and guide her child. She and her husband, Ray, baby-proofed their house, installed a video and audio monitoring system next to Chloe's new crib and spent months buying clothes, stuffed toys and eagerly anticipating her arrival. The child they had hoped so dearly for was finally a reality.

So why, Laura wondered, was she having difficulty bonding with Chloe six months after her birth? Why did she not feel the powerful, loving maternal instinct that all her friends with children told her they experienced? Why did she find her child's cries irritating in a way that sometimes inspired feelings of rage and anger? Laura was depressed, anxious, had difficulty sleeping and feared she made a mistake in having a baby, but she did not share her thoughts or feelings with others out of concern that they would think her a bad mother. When speaking with friends or family, she pretended to be happy, and if any of her depression or angst began to slip to the surface, she blamed it on being tired.

As time wore on, Laura became more gruff and irritable with Ray. She felt incapable of attending to Chloe's constant demands, which led to increased feelings of guilt and self-loathing. She was unhappy with herself, her husband, her daughter and her life, and she began seriously contemplating suicide. After a particularly emotional and dramatic night spent screaming and crying with Ray, Laura agreed to seek professional help. Her psychiatrist referred her to a group for women suffering from postpartum depression, where she met Debbie.

Like Laura, Debbie had been a very hopeful, happy first-time mother until

after her son was born. From the moment the doctor handed him to her, she was aware of the absence of the strong maternal bond she had been anticipating. She felt no particular affection for her son and was horrified by this lack of connection. Concerned that she was somehow deeply flawed as a woman and mother, she told no one what was going on inside her. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't feel close to her son and instead developed feelings of resentment toward him. Her resentment turned to guilt, which turned into self-hatred and led her spiraling deeper into a tunnel of depression from which she saw no escape.

After nine months of trying to love and bond with her son to no avail, Debbie, thinking he would be better off without her, attempted to kill herself with carbon dioxide poisoning in her garage. If her husband had not come home early from work, she would have been dead.

What Laura and Debbie discovered in speaking to each other, as well as to others in their group, is that they are not alone in their feelings. Their closely held secret is one that is and has been shared by millions of perfectly normal, loving women worldwide. Postpartum depression has nothing to do with your character, integrity or capacity to be a good mother. It is a form of clinical depression that is thought to be caused in large part by the dramatic drop in estrogen and progesterone after childbirth. Studies estimate that between 5% and 25% of new mothers experience postpartum depression, but actual prevalence rates are uncertain due to the studies' differing methodologies. Considering that many women who suffer from postpartum depression refuse to tell anyone what they are really experiencing for fear of what it means about them and their identity, the prevalence estimates are likely low.

The birth of a child is one of the most profound of all identity-altering events, particularly for mothers. One day you are your own person in the world, responsible only for yourself and your own needs. The next, you are "Mother," a revered and often idealized new role that carries with it tremendous expectations and few immediate rewards. The reality of caring for a newborn is often far different from the fantasy that we are exposed to in movies, television and other media. This helpless new being is now an extension of you and your life, and it needs constant care and attention to survive. But this is rarely a pleasant process in reality. Dirty diapers need regular changing, crying jags need to be understood and soothed, feeding and bathing and entertaining require additional time and energy. A new mother can and will find that all of the energy and time that she

used to have for herself are now devoted almost entirely to this new person who has little capacity at this early age to give much back.

There is nothing as needy and demanding as a human baby, and inaccurate portrayals of motherhood in the media often lead to unrealistic, superhuman expectations for new mothers. Mothers who struggle to attach to their newborns are not as flawed as our expectations of them are. Not only are mothers expected to sacrifice their own lives, needs, wishes and goals to care for a new being, but they are also expected to be happy and content while doing it. If they are not happy and content, they are made to feel guilty for not being so. This is simply unrealistic. No matter how much a mother loves her child, it is a fact that newborns are not always the most pleasant to be around. It is not their fault, we were all that way. When I was a baby, my older sister wrote in her journal, "I wish baby Gary was dead." That doesn't make her a terrible person. It makes her human. If she had actually killed me, she would have been terrible, but experiencing those feelings around a newborn is common and deserves understanding rather than derision.

Motherhood is difficult, messy, often thankless work that requires tremendous sacrifice and maturity. The first few months after birth when hormones are thrown off balance and the child's needs are more demanding and insistent than they will ever be again, are the hardest for many new mothers. The negative feelings that arise are often scary and challenge one's identity, but it is important to understand their source and know that you are not alone in experiencing them. Find a group for sufferers of postpartum depression and discuss your feelings openly so you can process them, recognize why they are there, and move on. Discuss your symptoms with your doctor so he or she can help regulate your hormones and get them back in balance, if necessary.

Even women who do not suffer from postpartum depression have their ups and downs raising children. In many ways, children are like wild animals that need to be tamed and civilized, and this is rarely an easy, problem-free, fun-filled task. It requires a shift in identity for mothers that is more profound and significant than for fathers. The weight of the world rests on the shoulders of mothers, from whom we expect unconditional love, understanding, warmth, comfort, guidance and saint-like selflessness. Mothers, too, need understanding, care and guidance, but society holds them on such a high pedestal that we often lose sight of that fact.

All mothers experience stress, but studies indicate that mothers of special needs children feel depressed and anxious far more often than other mothers. The financial strain of various specialized therapies, the difficulty of obtaining appropriate support services and worry over the child's future all impact a mother's mental health.

A recent study by researchers at Vanderbilt University (Dykens, E.M.; 2014) found that six weeks of training in mindfulness techniques resulted in significant reductions in depression, anxiety and stress among mothers of developmentally disabled children. Engaging in breathing exercises, meditation and qigong practices to hone mental focus provides mothers with some of the self-care and centering that is essential for coping with the ongoing stress of caring for a special needs child. Manuals detailing the techniques used in the study have been made available online through the Parent Stress Intervention Program, and can be found and downloaded at <http://vueinnovations.com/psip>.

In your identity as a mother, let go of expectations of perfection and allow yourself to feel and process all of the emotions, good and bad, that motherhood brings. Reach out to friends, groups and professionals who can help you through the inevitable rough patches, and, most importantly, never lose sight of the fact that you are a separate, unique, worthy individual outside your role of mother. Find time to give yourself the love and respect that you give to your child and family.

You are still the same person you were before you gave birth, just more tired and with less time for yourself. With the time you do have, find ways to treat yourself; "baby" yourself, if you will. A mother's own needs are frequently the last to be taken care of, but they are important to attend to if you want to be fully capable of caring for your child. If you make time to continue to do the things you love, your own happiness and fulfillment will give you more reserves of love and happiness to share with your child. It may sound selfish, but, within reason, take care of yourself first, then your child. It is the same concept as when an airplane decompresses and parents are told to place an oxygen mask on themselves first before placing masks on their children. If you don't give yourself what you need to live and thrive, you can't give your child what he or she needs to live and thrive.

In addition to the relatively common experience of postpartum depression,

and the increasing numbers of mothers raising special needs children, motherhood is challenging to women's identity in many other ways. The moment you become a parent, the world views you differently and you have a whole new set of responsibilities and expectations to live up to. Your children are extensions of your life, and how they behave and are in the world reflects directly back upon you. The fact that they are often difficult to control makes this a sometimes frustrating aspect of parenthood to deal with and accept, and is the source of much conflict between parent and child. Kids have no awareness that you are being judged by your friends and family through them. All they know is you are their parent and you are supposed to love them no matter what, so they don't understand why you are so angry that they threw a mud pie into your boss's hair, for example.

Accept that parenthood will have many downsides, will challenge your sense of self and even your sanity at times. Perfection is not an option. Any parent who appears to be perfect is only perfect at pretending. Kids simply are not designed that way. Have patience with both yourself and your child and recognize that the way various media portray parenthood and childrearing is a fantasy. It is entertainment, not reality. And, most importantly, know that the bad will pass and that there will be many good, fun, loving days in the mix, too.

Motherhood is a roller coaster of good and bad experiences and emotions whether you have postpartum depression, special needs children or the seemingly sweetest kid on the block. Prepare for and accept the fact that there will be moments when you want to toss your child into the back of a passing hay truck. Then give yourself the love and care you need, so that you will have it to share with your child.

6

EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

Barbara and Mary

When the last of Barbara's three children left home for college, instead of relishing the extra time and space she had, she found herself longing for the days when the kids were small and the home was full of activity. The silence in the house seemed unnatural and foreign. When she mentioned to her husband, Bill, that she felt lonely with the children all gone, he encouraged her to find a hobby to fill her time. Although she appreciated his advice, she felt he didn't fully understand what she had meant by lonely.

Barbara felt deeply sad, anxious, directionless and she questioned her purpose. The time and energy that it took for her to raise three kids as a full-time mom left little time to contemplate what she would do or pursue once they were adults. She was a mother. "Mother" had been her identity for over two decades and now, seemingly overnight, she felt useless, not needed, finished. The interests she had before becoming a mother in her early twenties were no longer compatible with the woman she had become in her late forties, and she had been so focused on her children's needs in the intervening years that she neglected to develop new interests along the way.

Barbara's depression deepened as she dwelled on the fact that her children were so busy in their new lives that they rarely found time to call or e-mail. She carefully assembled and mailed special care packages, left loving messages of encouragement on their voicemail and e-mailed every day, but her feelings of purposelessness and despair grew.

One afternoon, Barbara's friend, Mary, ran into her in a coffee shop and mentioned that she had seen a photo of one of the care packages Barbara had sent to her son in college. Mary's two children had recently left home, as well,

and she told Barbara that she had been looking around for something to do. She was good at math, bookkeeping and accounting and suggested that they go into business together selling Barbara's elaborate care packages online. Hesitant at first to embark on such a seemingly complicated venture, Barbara eventually agreed to give it a try and see where it goes.

Barbara and Mary worked day and night and put their hearts and souls into getting the business up and running for three months before they began to see real profits. Once the business took off, they moved operations out of Barbara's garage, rented local office space and hired four employees. Barbara still misses her children, but the contact by e-mail, phone and occasional visits feels more emotionally satisfying to her than it did before she began the business. She takes pride in the care packages she creates and the joy her work brings to others, and she is fulfilled in a similar, but different, way than when she was a full-time mother. Her new identity evolved from skills she developed within her previous role; skills that she had taken for granted and undervalued until Mary pointed them out to her.

Empty Nest Syndrome refers to feelings of depression, loneliness, loss of purpose, worry and grief experienced by parents or other caregivers when children leave the home. It is especially common among full-time mothers. Mothers who make their parental role their identity are no different than people who do the same with their job titles. Doctors and lawyers who lose their jobs ask the same "Who am I now?" questions as mothers whose children leave home.

People frequently confuse their roles for who they are, when in reality, the roles we play in life are merely parts of our identity. When you become a mother, it is not the only thing you are or ever will be again, just as when you become a carpenter it does not mean that is all you are in your entirety. You have interests, values, talents, desires and goals that exist completely independently of the various roles you play in life. The trouble begins when you believe that your life ends when any of those roles end. When a role comes to an end, it creates space for you to develop or expand upon another role or interest.

A frequent complaint among women experiencing empty nest syndrome is that they do not really have any interests of their own because they spent all or most of their time serving the interests of their families. This is a legitimate and

understandable complaint, but we all, without exception, have interests and talents that could be developed if we took the time to honestly reflect upon them.

Women are typically raised to be caregivers and pleasers and to put the needs of others first, so as adults, they often have difficulty identifying their own wants and needs. In the mother role, it may have seemed almost selfish to focus on themselves and their own wishes, but that is what is required to discover your true identity and purpose. Chapter 11, “Who Are You?” provides a list of identity-probing questions to ask yourself and reflect upon to get to an understanding of who you really are and what you are meant to be and do.

Do not despair if you don’t know who you are and what you want in life. You are in good and plentiful company. Roles are constantly shifting and messages from media about who we should or could be are confusing, but remember that no single role defines you. Your true identity lies beyond the labels of mother, daughter, coach, employee, neighbor, friend, etc. Answering the questions in Chapter 11 is the first step to uncovering the real you and finally rising above the roles you play.

7

CARE OF AGING PARENTS

Jennifer and Marisol

At 48 years old, Jennifer had worked her way up to senior vice president of the advertising agency she joined after college, she was financially stable and the years of long, grueling hours in the office to prove herself were over. She and her husband, Greg, were enjoying their extra time together after their son left home for college, and they finally had enough money to travel and pursue their own interests. It was as Jennifer was booking a vacation to Kauai when she received the call. Her 82-year-old mother had fallen and broken her hip and was in the hospital.

Jennifer canceled her travel plans and rushed to be by her mother's side. Her mother's insurance covered the hospital stay but did not cover the cost of care she would need after she returned home. Due to her limited mobility, someone had to assist her in getting up and down from a sitting or lying position, dressing and undressing, using the restroom, cooking and other chores. Jennifer initially hired a full-time nurse's aid to assist her mother while Jennifer was at work, but her mother complained of having a stranger in the house, and the costs for 24 hour care were more than even Jennifer's senior vice president position paid. Placing her in a rehabilitation facility would be even more costly, and was out of the question.

As her mother lost weight and her condition deteriorated, Jennifer had a discussion with her husband about the necessity of leaving her job to care for her mom. Greg opposed the idea, but because she had no siblings to care for her mother and Greg was too busy in his work as a college professor, she had no other choice. Jennifer resigned from the advertising agency, moved her mother into her and Greg's home and provided her the around-the-clock care she needed. There was no time or money for vacations and Jennifer found herself

feeling resentful toward her mother. Her love for her mother turned the feelings of resentment to guilt, then depression. She stopped seeing friends and began neglecting her personal hygiene. She would only leave the house when absolutely necessary and lost interest in her former activities and plans.

Jennifer worried about what would happen to her mother, and about what would happen to herself. She loved her mother dearly and would do anything for her, but she mourned the lost identity and life she had as a respected and accomplished executive, and she bore her malaise in stoic silence.

As she sat in the waiting room during one of her mother's visits to the doctor, a woman about Jennifer's age began chatting with her. Marisol was there with her elderly father who was being treated for prostate cancer. Like Jennifer, Marisol was his sole caregiver, and had left her career in software development to help him full time. She told Jennifer about a group of women in their situation who met in the park twice-a-week to commiserate about their experiences and challenges in their new roles, and made Jennifer promise to show up at one of the meetings. On Wednesdays the group consisted of just the caregivers, and on Saturdays the ones whose parents could leave the house brought them to the park for a picnic.

As Jennifer began meeting with the women regularly, her spirits slowly lifted, the resentment and guilt dissipated, and she began to find meaning and purpose in her new role. She perceived her time with her mother in a new light. She found ways to make it quality time, time to bond and time to get to know her mother in ways she never had before. Her change in roles required a change in her perception of both herself and her place in the world, and taking the time to see the world through the eyes of others who had successfully made that transition was essential to her enlightenment.

According to Labor Department data, between September 2008 and April 2014 the number of working women between ages 45 and 54 dropped by over 3.5 percent. About 1 million women in that age group who were employed in 2008 are now unemployed. These statistics reflect unprecedented numbers of women leaving the workforce during their peak earning years. It is estimated that a significant proportion of these women are doing so to care for ill and aging parents. Since life expectancies are now longer than ever, healthcare costs are higher than ever, and women are more often parental caregivers than men, this

trend is likely to continue.

Just as middle-aged women are reaching the heights of success in their chosen fields, they are having to turn their backs on those accomplishments to take on the new, less prestigious role of caregiver. Their sense of identity is shaken and there is often a deep-seated fear that their new role is their new identity, is who they are. That is the false equation that is discouraged throughout this book. Whether Jennifer is acting in the role of mother, senior vice president or caregiver, she is Jennifer first and foremost, and those roles are secondary, not the other way around.

Caring for an ill or elderly parent is a loving, compassionate, admirable thing to do and should never be dismissed as a step down from a more respectful or prestigious way of life. If you value family, loyalty, love and compassion, then you will not find yourself a more respectful role than caregiver for a parent.

Perception is powerful, and how you perceive your role is entirely up to you. The truth is, meaning, purpose and fulfillment can be found in any role if you just release your mind from its narrow definitions of success and let your inner identity shape the role, rather than the other way around.

8

ILLNESS AND INJURY

Tandra and Meghan

Tandra loved sports more than anything and played tennis and ran track for her college teams. She had always been physically active as a child and her athleticism was a central part of her identity as an adult. She planned to go into coaching after graduation, but for now she was focusing on winning as many tennis and track titles as possible.

One night after a tennis tournament, Tandra was struck by a hit-and-run driver while crossing the street. She was rushed to the hospital where quick-acting doctors saved her life, but they had to amputate her left leg below her knee in the process. Tandra was devastated and required substantial sedation in the days following her surgery to prevent her from being overwhelmed by her grief and loss.

Although Tandra had many friends and family who visited, supported her and assured her that she would still live a happy, fulfilling life, she couldn't escape the thought that she was destined for misery. She had been living an authentic, passion-driven life fueled by her innate love of sports and, in an instant, her ability to continue to pursue that life was forever altered.

For days, Tandra cried as she lay in her hospital bed looking out the window and watching people walking freely about outside. She felt envious. They took their legs for granted, and she desperately wished she could be one of them again. She was always an athlete, an active person, and had no idea who she was now in this vulnerable state.

One afternoon, the hospital nurses wheeled Meghan's bed into Tandra's room as they waited for a room to become available for her in the cancer unit.

Meghan was a couple years younger than Tandra and had a warm, friendly nature. She asked Tandra what she was there for, and Tandra pulled the sheet back to reveal her missing leg. “So are you going to get a bionic one now?” Meghan asked, and it was the first time Tandra found herself laughing since she had arrived at the hospital. She asked Meghan what she was hospitalized for, and Meghan told her she had leukemia. When Tandra’s facial expression relayed her sadness at the news, Meghan quickly assured her, “Don’t be sad. I would rather be me than my doctor.”

“Why?” asked Tandra.

“Because, the day after he told me I don’t have long to live, he died from stepping on downed live power lines that fell from a light pole,” Meghan answered. “At least I know and can say goodbye to my family and be really present in the world and value every minute I have left. Many people die never having had the chance to do any of those things,” she explained.

Meghan did not want to die, and she was determined to fight her leukemia and beat it, but the experience had given her insight and understanding of life that she otherwise may have never developed or appreciated.

Tandra, too, eventually came to see that changes to her external, physical self did not change who she was inside, they merely changed how she expressed who she was. With the help of a prosthetic leg, she became a tennis coach for kids with missing limbs and physical disabilities. She found a way to be true to herself and her long-held values despite her injury, and enriched the lives of countless children who may have otherwise felt that they, too, were limited in the extent to which they could pursue their passions.

It can be extraordinarily difficult to preserve a sense of self following serious trauma or illness. Our perception of ourselves changes in light of our exposed vulnerability and it takes time and effort to psychologically adjust to our new reality. When healthy, we sometimes have a feeling of invincibility that is really just an illusion. In reality, we exist on a thin wire of survival. If it gets too hot, we die; if it gets too cold, we die; if we go without water for too long, we die; if we inhale invisible toxic fumes, we die. We are fragile creatures who only exist because current environmental factors allow us to, and it is impossible for us to escape injury and illness in life. But it is also impossible to endure illness

and injury without developing a deeper understanding of life and our purpose.

Coping with significant illnesses and injuries can be extremely difficult beyond the physical pain and suffering, but there are techniques that can help ease the process. Allow yourself space to grieve the loss of your pre-illness or pre-injury abilities. Your sadness and grief are valid, and it is normal and healthy to express your deep emotional pain over what you have lost. But do not stop there. Spending your life dwelling on what you have lost is unhealthy under any circumstances, and especially so under these.

Once you have allowed yourself to fully grieve your losses, it is important to refocus your attention from what is gone to what is now. There is a difference between having your attention “placed” somewhere and letting it be “pulled” somewhere. Your illness or injury will try to pull your attention to it, and it is very easy to sit back and let it be passively pulled around in this manner. Instead, make a concentrated effort to place your attention on all the things you can still do despite your illness or injury. Focus on ways you can use your illness or injury to bring more meaning to your life, and ways that you can pursue your goals in spite of it.

Finally, create a game plan. Make lists of what you are still capable of doing and what you enjoy doing and find ways to maximize your skills in those areas. Focusing on your strengths rather than your weaknesses will not only alleviate depression, stress and anxiety, it will help you thrive and survive in the face of your physical limitations.

The loss of control that is felt when one is ill or injured is a source of tremendous pain and psychological suffering, and finding ways to use the illness or injury to bring meaning and purpose to your life is essential to regaining that control.

Our circumstances matter far less than our perception of them. We do not always have control over our circumstances, but we do always have control of our perceptions. Use this power to rewrite your own story and your own life. Do not let what happens to you dictate who or what you become; rather, become who you are in spite of what happens to you. As Sartre said, “Freedom is what you do with what has been done to you.”

9

AGING

Tracy and Sasha

Tracy had always been an outgoing, social person and led an active life full of friends, parties, dancing, exciting vacations and wild adventures. As her 35th birthday approached, however, she felt a sense of dread and loss. Her twenties had gone by so fast and as she looked back, she felt she had wasted time when she should have been building her future. For years, her mother had encouraged her to get married and start a family, but she and her boyfriend weren't committed enough to take that step yet. The economy was in bad shape and she was having to work as a barista rather than in her chosen and much preferred field of engineering. She noticed fine lines developing around her eyes and became hypervigilant to any new spot or sign of aging on her skin.

Tracy became so obsessed with staying young and maintaining her looks that she went on extreme diets that left her with an anorexic appearance, and went into debt buying beauty products that promised perfect preservation. Even though she did not have the money, she began researching cosmetic procedures and struggled to think of ways to pay for them.

The more she obsessed about her dead-end job and her looks, and the more she compared herself with younger women, the more despondent and miserable Tracy became. She felt worthless, and her life seemed pointless and meaningless. She couldn't help thinking that all she had to look forward to was more aging, struggle and misery.

Tracy's 78-year-old grandmother, Sasha, came to check on her one afternoon after failing to hear from her for several days. She found her curled up in bed, unshowered, dehydrated, with dark circles under her eyes and asleep. Tracy was clearly depressed and Sasha sat down to find out what was wrong.

After sharing her woes with her grandmother, Tracy was surprised to hear Sasha say, “Is that all?” Sasha had been anticipating some kind of terrible revelation or disclosure of a horrific incident.

“How does your getting older change who you are?” Sasha asked.

“It changes everything,” Tracy replied. “It changes the way people look at you. Guys look at girls who are 25 and under, and women my age are considered old maids if we’re not married. I’m no longer desirable or wanted or valued the way I used to be. I don’t know how to dress. I still like to wear the cute outfits I wore in my twenties, but you hear all this stuff about ‘You shouldn’t wear this after 30, you shouldn’t wear that after 30.’ I have to worry about dressing age-appropriately. My job isn’t even age-appropriate. I work at a job a teenager should be doing while other people my age are established in their careers and building families. I don’t have any direction. I’m just drifting and getting older and there’s nothing to look forward to.”

Sasha responded, “I asked you how getting older changed *you*, but everything you mentioned had to do with how other people view you: they might not think you’re attractive because you’re not under 25; they might think your clothes are not age-appropriate; they might not think you’re successful enough in your job. But how does your getting older actually change you, personally, in a good or bad way?” Sasha asked again.

Tracy stared blankly at Sasha and said, “I don’t know. I just feel like I’m getting older and more useless.”

“I felt the same way you did, dear,” Sasha confessed. “It’s hard not to feel that way when all the messages we receive from advertisements and entertainment tell us that we’re only as valuable as we look and that youth is superior to old age. But I didn’t really change, Tracy,” Sasha told her. “I’m still the same ‘me’ I was at 20, and I still love my family, friends, hobbies and life and everything it has to offer as much as I did then. The only thing that’s really changed is my knowledge of myself and the world. The best things about getting older are that you know who you are, what you really value, you feel more confident and comfortable in your own skin, you’re more experienced and capable, and more aware of yourself and the world around you. You learn to see things for what they really are, to read between the lines, to see through all the bullshit to the truth. There’s more clarity about what drives other people, what

the real world's about, and what your place in it is. Getting older has taught me a lot of things that have made my life far more fulfilling than it was when I was young and naïve, but the most important thing I learned was that the opinions of others have nothing to do with my happiness, unless I let them. You've got to stop letting them, Tracy."

Aging doesn't change you as much as the perceptions of others do, if you allow them. We all want love, affection, acceptance and approval, but many women deny their authentic selves in an attempt to play a role that others will find pleasing. They are willing to compromise and sacrifice themselves to create an appealing image to the outside world. This becomes especially pronounced as they age and as more and more must be done and sacrificed to maintain the image. The multi-billion dollar cosmetics and cosmetic surgery industries fill the airwaves with propaganda in the form of advertising that convinces women that their value lies entirely in their looks, and that maintaining a youthful, attractive appearance is what every woman should strive for. Women who take the bait are forever chasing love, meaning and value through superficial pursuits that leave them wondering why they feel so empty.

Many women deeply mourn the loss of their youth and dread getting older, but the wisdom and understanding that come with aging bring much more personal satisfaction and meaning than the more superficial aspects of youth. The positive aspects of aging are not as celebrated in our culture as they are in many others, but that does not mean they don't exist. The French and Italians, for example, are known for celebrating and valuing the allure of older women. Unlike the U.S. penchant for pairing twenty-something starlets with fifty-something male leads, French films frequently feature older, strong, self-assured women in leading roles, portrayed by actresses such as Juliet Binoche, Ines de la Fressange and Catherine Deneuve.

The American obsession with youth, especially as it pertains to women, is very damaging to the psyches of American women as they age. No matter how strong and self-assured, it is difficult to not be affected by the constant stream of messages via billboards, television, Internet ads, etc. that tell us youth is the ideal. The fact is, it is not. Intelligence, understanding, compassion, presence, wit and other qualities women develop as they age make them far more attractive and valuable, to themselves and to others, than line-free skin and a dewy complexion.

Do not allow advertisers to tell you who you are or should be; they simply want your money. Answer the questions in Chapter 11, reflect on them, and get to know the real you. Remove your focus from external influences and expectations about how you “should” be, and instead, be who you really are.

This sounds like an oversimplification, but it is not. If we have lived to please others all or most of our lives, as many women have, it can be very difficult determining our true identity and what we want from life. It takes much reflection and soul-searching, but it is well worth the time and effort. Once you know who you are, you will come to understand how overrated the emphasis on youth in American culture really is.

There is nothing to fear in aging, and much to look forward to, if you can let go of the false preconceptions you have been fed through the years and fully embrace the unique path you are on. Your forties, fifties, sixties and beyond can be the happiest and most fulfilling years of your life if you allow yourself to be you instead of trying to force yourself to conform to American media’s narrow, superficial definition of what an older woman should be. Watch some French films and see the strength, wisdom and beauty older women possess, and notice how highly valued and appealing those qualities are.

Write your own rules for your own playbook. There are as many ways of being as there are beings, and you should not limit yourself or allow anyone else to limit you in any way. Do not let American media’s obsession with the infantilization of women dictate how you feel about yourself and how you live your life. Do not consign yourself to the cookie-cutter way of being sold to you by cosmetic surgeons and clothing designers with mortgages to pay. If you do the work to step out of that mold and into the authentic, real you, your aging problem will be a problem no more.

10

DEATH OF LOVED ONE

Samantha and Rachel

Samantha sat next to her father's headstone and cried as she laid fresh flowers on his grave. It had been a year since he had passed, but the pain of his loss was as fresh as the moment she found out. She was very close to her dad growing up. He coached her in sports, taught her magic tricks, played with her, protected her and was her hero. She missed their inside jokes, the way he talked to her about her future and all the things they used to do together. No one could ever replace him, and she couldn't fathom living the rest of her life without him. She wasn't even sure she knew how.

After her father's sudden fatal heart attack, Samantha was consumed with grief. She had difficulty focusing on anything besides his death, had trouble sleeping, had no appetite, lost a significant amount of weight in a short span of time, became withdrawn and reclusive, and seemed lost to friends and family. On the anniversary of his death, she felt just as despondent as she had all year. There was no end of her grief in sight and Samantha was losing hope.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she heard, and as she looked up from the grave, she saw an older woman dressed in black. The woman introduced herself as Rachel, and explained that she had come to visit her daughter's grave. Her daughter was 12 years old when she was killed by a drunk driver while riding her bike three summers prior.

When Samantha asked Rachel how she found the strength to go on living and how she got through all the mundane, meaningless everyday tasks of life without breaking down, Rachel said, "I didn't think I could for a long time. I came close to ending it all. I didn't see a reason to live anymore, and couldn't conceive of ever being happy again. For almost two years I struggled with the

meaninglessness of her death, and struggled to find a reason to stay alive myself. The only reason I continued living was because I knew my death would cause more suffering for my family, so it wasn't an option. It was the worst pain I've experienced in my life. There is no magic key," she confessed. "There is no easy way to move on, but it has to be done. What helped me to do it was the realization that if I had been the one who had died, I wouldn't want Keri, my daughter, to live her life in misery over my loss. I would want her to be happy and healthy and live a full life while still keeping me in her heart and remembering the good times and all the things I taught her. I would never want my passing to destroy the life and happiness of someone I love. If it happened, it would make both my life and death a tragedy. That's no way to honor the person who passed. Your father would not want you to be sad and destroyed. You give meaning to his life and honor him by pursuing your own life to the fullest while keeping his memory and teachings close to your heart. That's the best we can do for anyone who passes, and it's the best we can hope for when we pass."

As in divorces and break-ups, when we lose a loved one to death, we not only lose the person we were close to, we also lose the person we were with them. We literally lose a part of ourselves. With that loss, our identity is altered and we feel off-balance and uncertain about who we are in the midst of our grief. The closer we were to the person who has passed, the more we question who our new/remaining self is. We have difficulty moving out of our deep grief in part because we do not know how to without that person, and do not want to do it without them.

As Rachel explained, letting go is not leaving behind or forgetting. You honor the person and their life by being mindful of the positive impact they had on you, the lessons they taught you and the times you shared. We cannot be here for each other for eternity, we all just have a limited amount of time, and the best we can hope for when we pass is that our lives had a positive influence on those we loved. By never letting go of your grief and never trying to be happy again, you fail to give that gift to the person who has died. When you do give it to them, you will find that your bond with them is still there in your memories, and they are still, and always will be, a part of you.

11

WHO ARE YOU?

You are not your job, your age, your marital status, your clothes, your looks, your car, your zip code or what happened to you as a child. You are a unique individual with innate potential, and you are here to discover and fulfill that potential. When you define yourself by the roles you play or by the opinions and values of others, you compromise your real self, bury your true identity and limit your capacity to fully connect and thrive in the world.

Your true identity consists of your interests, passions, skills, talents, thoughts, feelings, reflections, opinions, wants, desires, goals, hopes and dreams. If you continually downplay or discount any of these aspects of yourself in service of a role you feel you have to play, you will find yourself disengaged, dissatisfied, empty and directionless, and you will wonder why.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Sartre believed that when we fail to recognize our true, authentic identity and instead live our lives according to the expectations and values of others, it cuts off our flow of energy in the same way that putting a kink in an electrical line does. We are not able to connect authentically and honestly with others; not able to fully realize our unique talents and skills; not able to accurately and meaningfully express ourselves; and not able to reach our goals because we are blunting our own power by pretending to be someone we are not.

The first step to getting to know the real you is taking a full inventory of all the things that make up your identity and spending time reflecting on what they mean; what they say about who you are behind the roles you play. Below the next paragraph are a number of questions that will help you explore and uncover your true identity, and define the kind of life that you would find most fulfilling. The picture that your answers paint will show you who you are if you examine them closely.

When you are finished answering the below questions, use what you have learned about yourself to write a Mission Statement that addresses what you really want and desire out of life; what you value most; what your skills and talents are; and the ways in which you can develop those skills and talents to meet your goals. Write at the bottom of the Mission Statement where you want to be and what you want to be doing at this time on this day next year. Keep your Mission Statement somewhere safe, remember what you have written, and remember to check your progress this time next year. You will be amazed by how far you can go and how happy you can be when you truly know yourself and your intended direction.

Identity Questions:

What was the defining moment in your life?

What do you do for a living?

How did you get into that line of work? What circumstances led you to chose it over others?

What would you do for a living if you could do anything?

What do you do for fun?

What was the last book you read?

What is your favorite book?

Who is your favorite author?

What was the last movie you saw?

What is your favorite movie?

What character in literature or film do you most identify with?

If you could change places with anyone else in the world, who would it be?

What's your favorite kind of music?

Who is your favorite band or musical artist?

Who was your first crush and what was it about them that attracted you?

Who was your last crush and what was it about them that attracted you?

When was your last relationship?

How long did your last relationship last?

Why did your last relationship end?

Who else have you dated and for how long?

Why did those relationships end?

What do you look for in a romantic partner?

What do you have to offer a romantic partner?

What kind of relationships are you interested in?

Where are you from originally?

What was it like growing up there?

How would you describe your family?

What is your favorite art form?

Who is your favorite artist?

What do you do for fun?

What's the one thing you do that makes you the happiest?

If you could have any talent in the world, what would it be?

If you never pursued or attempted to develop that talent, why not?

What are your politics, and why?

What is your philosophy on life?

Where do you see yourself in five years? In ten years?

What do you value most?

What would you consider the perfect holiday or vacation?

How would your friends describe you?

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

What does your typical day consist of?

Are there other things you would like to be doing, but aren't? If not, why not?

What are you most proud of?

What historical figure would you invite to dinner if you could? Why that person?

If you had one wish, what would you wish for?

What's the one topic you don't want to talk about?

Who are your friends?

Who is your closest friend?

What kind of friend are you to others?

When were you the happiest, and what were you doing then?

What do you consider your best qualities?

What character traits do you embody?

What character traits would you like to embody?

What are you most grateful for in your life?

What woman do you find most inspiring?

If you had only one year to live, how would you live it?

If you had only one day to live, how would you live it?

Where do you want to be and what do you want to be doing at this time on this day next year?

What steps do you have to take to ensure you will be where you want to be and doing what you want to be doing on this day next year?

What would you do if you won \$100 million in the lottery?

If you could change your life in one way, what would it be?

What's stopping you from making that change in your life?

What would it take for you to begin to make that change now?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Chapman has a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology and has been a therapist and life coach for over 20 years. He specializes in abuse recovery, life transitions and personal growth.