

# Chapter 2

## YOU'RE INVITED TO REFLECT

*“For it’s our grief that gives us our gratitude,  
shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.  
So ensure that this ache wasn’t endured in vain:  
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.”*

—AMANDA GORMAN

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So who the heck were you before they called you mom? It’s a simple question with a pretty complicated answer. For me, it’s sometimes hard to remember who I was before I became a mom . . . because so much has happened since then. When we become “mom” our hearts, responsibilities, and mental and emotional loads expand SO greatly that it can be hard to remember what we did yesterday, let alone who we were just five or ten years ago.

But at the very start of this journey together, I am going to challenge you to dive into the question of who you were before. Because if we don’t look behind us (even when it’s uncomfortable or downright painful to do) we might miss the pieces of the puzzle that help us understand who we are now, what we have right here in front of us, and what direction we want to be heading in. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard some version of this in the therapy room: “You aren’t going to ask me about my childhood, are you?” or “This is the part where we blame everything on my mom, right?” or “I’ve been in therapy before, and all we talked about was my past and it wasn’t really helpful.” I get it . . . all of those sentiments. It is true that solely focusing on our past, or why we are the way we are, won’t help us solve the here-and-now struggles we face and/or move forward. But it is ALSO true that we need to be willing to look at where we’ve

been in order to understand what has helped us develop the stories we tell ourselves, how we created the beliefs we hold, and why we have developed the positive and negative coping mechanisms we use—to put it more simply, why are we the way we are and why do we move through the world in the way we do?

The work of growth and evolution starts with being willing to take a look at where we've been, determine what we TRULY care about right now (what we cared about in our twenties is likely very different than it is now), and then make the changes we need to make so that our time and energy are being poured into the things that we most value. Before I go hating on the haters—I recognize that fear and misunderstanding have a big role to play in this schema. So many people are afraid to take a deeper look at their own lives out of fear of what it will unleash or uncover, and they sure as shit don't want to risk you doing the same because they fear they'll get left behind in the dust as you evolve. Remember, we aren't doing this work for the haters—we are doing this work for ourselves, for our children, and for our own unique big “why?!”

### MY INVITATION IN . . .

So I'll start the very overwhelming task of trying to summarize some of the most impactful moments of the last thirty-seven years of life like this: I am Kaitlin . . . well, at least most of the time. Sometimes I go by Katie. When I was a child it was mostly “Katie,” and it wasn't until later, somewhere between college and the “real world,” that I decided I wanted to go by Kaitlin. I never felt sure about it, and I still don't. Some days I feel more Katie than Kaitlin, and some days I feel more Kaitlin than Katie. I don't know why that

is; I feel insecure about this sometimes, because I feel like I SHOULD prefer one name over the other (or just pick), but I go back and forth around which one feels more like “me.”

I grew up on a winding road with lots of room to roam and play, and I was blessed (and still am) with two incredible parents who encouraged me to dream big, try new things, and prioritize education. I am the youngest of three. I have two brothers and most of our childhood days were spent using our imagination to create worlds that didn't exist in the pastures and creeks. We'd spend all day “digging to China.” Why there? Who knows. My first love was figure skating. I'll never forget the way it felt to glide across the ice, or the way the blades sounded cutting through it. I quit figure skating in eighth grade because I came to the hard realization, with the help of my dad, that I was giving up way too much of my time and freedom to be a “so-so” figure skater who was on a fast track to developing the “wrong” body type (or at least that's what I was made to believe). There are few things more awkward than having your first period arrive during a competition weekend where you had to squeeze yourself into a skintight costume, especially before you knew about tampons. I didn't feel proud that I was becoming a woman; I felt betrayed and even angry at my own body.

Letting go of figure skating would be the first truly “hard” choice I ever had to make. Maybe even before figure skating, my first true love affair was music. My father would play the guitar for us most nights and sing everything from the Beatles to Johnny Cash. I remember, even as a young girl (maybe eight or so), my eyes welling up with tears when he would play one of my two favorite songs: “Sad Little Girl” or “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” I know, you're probably thinking that's pretty sadistic and a bit strange for an

eight-year-old to love such depressing songs . . . but I did. I hung on every word and felt all the feelings, almost forgetting that the song was a story separate from my life, instead it was as though I was them, and they were me. I was an empath (for better and worse) from the start. As a young child, and still today, music was the pathway into my emotions, allowing me the private space I needed to learn to feel and deal. Here's the thing though (as any "good" empath knows), you don't want to inconvenience others with your big emotions or feelings. So when the music moved me to tears, I did my best to make sure nobody else noticed. I can see now that music was my first invitation into being curious and moved by what other people decided to make of their own life's story.

So I decided when I grew up I would, without a doubt, either be a songwriter or a screenwriter. In high school I got decent grades, played sports, and had a solid group of friends, some of whom are still in my life. My maternal grandma passed away when I was seventeen years old, and it was my first experience with grief and loss. You know those moments in time that never leave you? Well, finding out the news of my grandma passing, while standing in the hotel lobby with my mother in the college town I was about to move to, was one of those moments. We had made the trip all the way to Colorado solo, and were excited, almost even gleeful, at the prospect of getting a taste of the opportunities ahead. I'll never forget the sound of my dad's voice when he called my cell phone that day and said, "Can I talk to Mom?" In his voice was the knowing that he was about to break our hearts with the news. Another image forever etched in my mind is my mom slowly and calmly walking herself over to the lobby

couch, having just received the news, so she could sit down and let out a quiet sob. Just the night before we were all eating Chinese food together, grandma was drinking her bourbon and soda water, laughing, and we were listening to my oldest brother play the guitar. My mother and I held hands and sat in silence for most of the flight home. I remember feeling confused around whether I was most sad that my grandma passed or that my mom had lost her mother . . . now I know it was both. It wasn't until that moment in time that I realized how finite and fragile life is, and that it can go from joyful to gut-wrenching in the matter of seconds.

When I started applying to college, I thought becoming a creative writer felt too far-fetched, or not concrete enough. I decided I would study journalism, and I would become a writer of other people's stories, a truth teller. Then the path got a bit twisty, in some really good and hard ways (as it does), and I decided to take my first internship at a local news station in San Francisco. From there, more opportunity arose—including one of a lifetime, where I got to go to Italy to work as a production assistant at the Winter Olympics. I lived it up . . . as one does at age twenty-two living in a once quaint (until we arrived) village in Italy in a five-star hotel. That internship led me down a career path in TV, where I moved to LA and would go on to work around some really powerful and (some) shady people in the entertainment industry . . . including Donald Trump on the show *The Apprentice*. I mean, I could probably write an entire book about what it was like to work in such close proximity to the Donald (I was the production assistant to his daughter Ivanka), but for now I'll leave that one up to your imagination. But before I move on, can I just say . . . he presented

EXACTLY as sexist, narcissistic, and problematic then as he did as our president.

A lot happened in LA—I worked for some of the richest people on earth, got paid pennies, hustled to work in an industry that seemed hell-bent on using people (TV), and fell in what I thought was “real” love for the first time. Sure, I had been in relationships before (ish), but this time it felt different. I reconnected with my second-grade crush on MySpace (yes, remember that?) and in all that loneliness and searching for myself, I was intent on making a relationship that was unhealthy and out of balance—I gave too much of myself to somebody who was in a lot of turmoil and pain, and broke my own heart when it didn’t work. This is probably where I should mention that I had a real strong propensity to try and “fix” other people without yet understanding that people don’t change unless they’re ready or willing to. I could have saved myself a lot of pain if I understood that earlier . . . but isn’t that just the way life works, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. “I reached out so far, but I couldn’t find your hand.” Those were the words that I wrote down in the midst of my post-breakup depression. That breakup led me through the doors of a therapy room for the first time ever. Do you know that statistically most people only go to one session of therapy and don’t return? Well I, the future therapist, became a part of that statistic. I thought I just needed a space to cry and share my feelings with somebody who wouldn’t judge me, or tell me something along the lines of “told you so.” I needed a container for my sense of loss and pain . . . and that it was, for one session. Who knows why I didn’t go back . . . maybe I got exactly what I needed, or maybe I just told myself I did. Later, I would find my way back into therapy and realize I needed and deserved so much

more than just that one session—not because I was broken and needed to be fixed, but because I was (am) worthy of healing, and I needed to learn to stop listening to the noise, and learn to listen to my own inner wisdom.

After all that searching for myself in a la-la land (which was fun but not my place in the world) I was homesick, not for the home I grew up in, but for San Francisco—a place that felt familiar, a place that I felt had opportunity without façade. So I packed it all up and moved to “the city,” where I decided I would take some time to figure out what was next for me . . . because reality TV wasn’t it! I realized that while I loved story, those weren’t the stories I wanted to tell. Then it was random jobs in advertising (not a good fit), a few new boyfriend situations (also not great fits), lots of barhopping, apartment rentals, and trying to find my place in the world often in very counterintuitive and messy ways.

Enter Tony. My husband, and the man I get to call my children’s dad. I won’t bore you with all the details, but I’ll just say this . . . after all the BULLSHIT you deal with in your twenties as a young woman, he was a breath of fresh air. It was easy, he was (and still is) my soul mate, my rock, my best friend, and my reason for wanting more. For the first time ever, I didn’t take on the role of the “fixer” in the relationship, because he wasn’t broken. I didn’t hide the parts of myself that I felt ashamed of, because he celebrated them. From the moment I met him, I felt whole—not because I needed him to “complete” me, but because he held up a mirror, reminding me of my wholeness. He loved me as I was—which, of course, felt both vulnerable, foreign, and so good. Perfect? No, not by a long shot, but he and I had (and have) what it takes to stand the test of life’s ups and downs, twists and turns, and all the stuff in between. As a firefighter

*As we move through  
this journey of  
imperfect evolution,  
we must start with  
our own story and  
a willingness to  
look back so that  
we can better  
move forward.*

who loved his job, Tony inspired me to get into a helping career, and so I figured maybe I could finally learn how to use my “fixing” skills on people who actually wanted to be fixed. And then shortly into my career I would learn, in some challenging ways, that therapy is about so much more than “fixing.” I would learn that even people who feel broken are already whole, and that while we can equip people with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to change or heal—it (still) has to include a willingness to take a look at the parts of ourselves and our lives that we often feel too ashamed or scared to look at.

I completed my graduate program in 2013, got married two months later, started working on the ungodly number of hours needed to get licensed (3,000), and had two babies in fifteen and a half months . . . I mean no big deal, right? I got licensed in 2015, started my private practice, and had our third, and last, baby two years later.

Now here I am, in this life with three kids, an imperfect and beautiful marriage, with a full practice, and still the sense that there is always something bigger ahead. I started writing this book in the middle of a global pandemic because I was bored trying to homeschool three kids and manage a full work schedule . . . just kidding, in all honesty, the pandemic gave me the kick in the ass I needed to stop waiting for the perfect time to say the things that were in my heart to say. So while I’m leaning into my creativity more than ever these days, and that feels good, I find myself needing a lot of reminders (some from myself and some from the universe) to slow the hell down and just be content where I am. You see, I have a propensity to “do” my way out of my feelings (we’ll talk about that lovely maladaptive coping mechanism in the

feelings chapter) but I am learning to pause, take stock, and just “be” in the messy middle of life these days.

This, of course, isn’t all of my story, but it’s the highlight reel and CliffsNotes version. I have to be honest in saying there are some painful parts that I have left out, because I too am imperfectly evolving, and doing my own healing work. I hope this will remind you that, when it comes to your own story, it’s important to be tender with yourself and to meet yourself where you’re at. Vulnerability is incredibly powerful, and all the rage these days . . . however, we don’t need to be vulnerable at the cost of our well-being and mental health. In other words, we don’t actually have to be an “open book” and share all the tender parts of ourselves on Instagram in order to have a stake in the vulnerability game. Sometimes, when we tell our story too soon, too fast, or to the wrong person—it isn’t held as tenderly as it needs to be and we can feel flooded, overwhelmed, and worse off than we were before. When it comes to vulnerability, what’s most important is that we’re willing to be honest with *ourselves* about all the parts of our experience . . . and if we have a few people in our life who have earned our trust enough to get to know our “truth,” well, that’s a beautiful and powerful thing.

So what does my story have to do with yours anyway? Well, this is the part where I can help you learn to unpack your story and the way it has informed your beliefs by unpacking my own. When I took a deeper look at my own story, I can see where I formed some beliefs that might have served to protect me when I was younger (or at least I thought they did at the time) that no longer serve me as a grown, healthy adult. Let me connect the dots from one part of my story to a limiting or negative belief (I’ll use those

terms interchangeably) that I have had to learn to change in service of my own growth and health.

Remember the period story? Well, when I got my period for my first time, it wasn’t that I didn’t know it would come or what it was. It was just that it was treated as “gross,” or an inconvenience—something not to be talked about, or bothered with, and something that would hinder me from doing the things I enjoyed comfortably, like sports. Especially since I went to a Catholic school where celebrating a woman’s body wasn’t a top priority (or a priority at all), it also wasn’t talked about as a positive part of female development in health class. So there I was, at eleven years old, stuffing my curvy and muscular body into a skintight costume with light beige tights, feeling disgusting and praying that no blood would come through and out the fact that I was (heaven forbid) becoming a woman. In my mom’s defense, she didn’t know I was feeling this way, and if she did I believe she would have supported me, but I didn’t speak of it. I just kept it all inside and kept on skating. Like so many young girls do, I choose to stay stuck in my own feelings of shame so I wouldn’t risk making other people uncomfortable or feeling hurt by my experience. The negative belief that I started to formulate as a result of the period incident, and would later reinforce time and again, was two-part: “Your body is not something to be celebrated, and instead of tuning in to uncomfortable physical sensations, tune out and avoid.” While it made sense to hold that belief at the age of eleven, given the experience I had, it didn’t serve me to bring that belief into being a teenager or an adult. Because I’m at therapist, I’ve gotten pretty good at drawing the line that connects my beliefs and my behaviors, and I attribute my unhelpful beliefs about my body to many instances of

betraying my own body, not listening to its cues, and CERTAINLY not honoring or celebrating it. But you know what was most powerful in shifting my (shitty) beliefs about my own body? Becoming a mother. Giving birth to three babies, and enduring a few miscarriages, showed me what my body was capable of . . . the amazing things it could do, and how it could heal.

Looking back and putting my own life story on a time line (i.e., what impactful events happened at what age), and then identifying what belief I formed from that event, has been the place from which I invite myself to grow. If we want to grow, we don't just stop at identifying the unhelpful, hurtful, or total bullshit belief that we formed along the way and then sit in them . . . no, we do the work of unlearning it and relearning beliefs, or taking perspectives, that are more true and more helpful. I am still in the process of unlearning the beliefs and behaviors that keep me stuck and healing the past wounds that hold me back from living as all of me . . . and I think it's a forever journey.

## YOUR INVITATION IN . . .

Sometimes it's hard to know the exact impact that a limiting or old belief has had on you or your life, and that's okay. It's not important that you connect all the dots or find a "reason" for all of the missteps, wrong turns, and past hurts. At the end of this chapter, you'll find a prompt to help you do the work of mapping out the most impactful pieces of your story so that you can better understand how and why you handle things the way you do, and give yourself the invitation to change that patterned response. But first, without using a ton of outdated psychobabble (lingo created by the white male founders of most psychological theories), let's

dive a bit deeper into what limiting beliefs are and how they impact us. Limiting beliefs, sometimes called negative beliefs or the stories we tell ourselves, are created by the automatic and uncensored thoughts and feelings that we experience.

At the very basis of CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) is the idea that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected. It goes like this: something happens, we get triggered, we have some kind of automatic thought about the triggering event, and then we have feelings about it (including physical sensations), and then we act in a way that lines up with the way we feel.

Let's use an example of a client I once worked with, to help us better understand the concept of how limiting or old beliefs can keep us stuck. Janet was a client who came for help with her social anxiety and her struggle to have what she called "healthy" relationships. She told me a story of a recent incident on a girls' night that made her feel incredible embarrassment and even shame. Janet, after a glass of wine or two, told a group of fairly new mom friends that she had been abused as a child. She made a fairly flippant comment about her abuse, and when the women didn't respond she felt her skin flush, and the panic set in. The intensity of her feelings of shame got worse the next day, when she sent out a "thanks for having me" text and got no response. Here is how her trigger, thought, feeling, action chain went: Thought: "I said too much, they think I'm a freak." Feelings: anxiety, panic, embarrassment, and shame and increased heart rate. Action: avoid the women at school pickup so she didn't have to deal with further feelings of shame or embarrassment. The thing about Janet was, she had a lifetime of experiences of feeling unheard or like it wasn't safe to tell her truth, so while the women probably were just busy and didn't mean

harm (which later we found out to be true), she was going down the rabbit hole of shouldn't-haves and shame. This experience reinforced her limiting and old belief that it's safer to keep your feelings to yourself and to trust nobody. It's no wonder that with a belief like that Janet had a hard time allowing herself to be seen enough in order for others to fully connect with her . . . which, of course, made her feel more alone, moving her further away from the possibility of having healthy relationships. Over time, we worked to create a better understanding of how this old belief led to her acting in ways that weren't helpful and ultimately to create a new belief and new behaviors that could help her move in the direction she wanted to go—really the direction we all want to go, more REAL connection.

### LET'S WORK TOWARD CHANGE . . .

The point is, no part of our story happens in isolation from the other parts and without impact . . . so if we can better understand our story and how it has informed our identity (which is really just made up of the beliefs we hold and the actions we take), we can also change them in service to our own growth.

It becomes clear, then, that as we move through this journey of imperfect evolution we must start with our own story and a willingness to look back so that we can better move forward. I see this as a three-step process. Step 1: Dive into your own story so you can understand where and how you formed your life's narrative. Step 2: Decide whether those thoughts and beliefs that make up your story lead you closer to where you want to go, or farther away from it. In other words, do those thoughts/beliefs that fuel your behavior serve you anymore? If you can't find that even

just one or two beliefs don't serve you anymore . . . congratulations, you aren't even human. All kidding aside, we all have ways of moving through the world that no longer serve us, and it may take you a while to figure out what those things are—that's normal, give yourself lots of grace. Step 3: Once you've identified some of the limiting thoughts and beliefs that you are ready to say "byeee, it's been real" to, you're ready to start the work of transforming them into more powerful beliefs—ones that allow you to change your story, and your life!





