

“EMBRACE THE
GLORIOUS MESS
THAT YOU ARE.”

—ELIZABETH GILBERT,
AUTHOR OF *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*

CHAPTER 1

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE STRONG

How many times in your life have you been told that you are “so strong”?

You lose your job during a pandemic and cobble together freelance work to make ends meet. You are so strong.

You lose a loved one to an illness and plan the funeral. You are so strong.

You're a busy working mom of three kids juggling work and life with little time to care for yourself. You are so strong.

You're battling cancer, going through chemo, spending your days vomiting, losing your hair, and losing the ability to recognize yourself in the mirror.

And yet. And yet, you are “so strong.”

My entire life, I've been told I am so strong.

I was so strong when I tried to save my dad's life when I was eleven, as he was suffering from a heart attack that left blood to his heart 90 percent blocked.

I was so strong when I was diagnosed with postpartum depression after my third child and put in a part-time mental health facility.

I was so strong when I suffered from a debilitating mystery illness that left me unable to care for my family.

But let's be honest. Did you feel strong despite people telling you how strong you were?

I didn't. Yet I thought I needed to wear my "strong" cape because since I was eleven, I was told I needed to be strong.

For years, I put on the facade that I thought people wanted to see of me: one of strength, an army colonel's daughter who attempted to save his life; and nearly twenty years later, a mother trying to do it all only to suffer from a mystery illness that nearly killed me. And to be perfectly honest, the mask of strength was what almost caused my demise, not the illness.

In my professional career of media relations and training, I often teach that "your mess is your masterpiece." But why don't we show it? Why don't we own our mess? Why do we put on the mask of strength despite feeling the exact opposite?

A messy brew of anxiety, fear, and even depression has stuck with me since the traumatic event of my father's death in childhood, as it has for my friend Lorilee Binstock. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse, Lorilee experienced multiple suicide attempts, and later, spent months in a treatment center away from her children and husband diving into holistic healing techniques to address her childhood trauma. She came out on the other side renewed, inspired, and healed. Now she hosts the wildly popular *A Trauma Survivor Thriver's Podcast* and has launched a magazine titled *Authentic Insider*.

Lorilee introduced me to Dr. Dale DeNunzio, a therapist who specializes in techniques to heal trauma. He explains that events that become "too much" for us—too intense or too unmanageable—create feelings that overwhelm our nervous system, which makes it difficult to process them. "It is important to remember that having trauma does not mean that someone is unfixable, broken, or wrong. They are wounded. Trauma actually comes from the Greek word for wound. We all have been wounded in our lives."

I lost my father to a sudden-death heart attack when I was eleven years old. My mother, my nine-year-old sister, Alexandra, and I were all home when it happened, and he died right before our eyes. It was a Sunday evening, and we had just finished watching a family movie, *Jaws*. My dad was especially tired that evening and went up to bed. I put my pajamas on and went to give him a kiss goodnight. "I love you, daddy," I said as I kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, too, honey," he replied. Those were the last words we ever spoke to each other.

Moments later, as my mom was tucking me into bed, we heard moaning coming from my parents' room. My mom rushed to his side and started screaming, "Jimmy! Jimmy!" He was unresponsive. The moaning continued. For some reason, I had the sense to run down to my dad's office where we kept the house phone, and dialed 911. My fingers fumbled over the numbers, and the first time I tried, I didn't get through. I tried again. I continued to hear frantic screaming coming from my parents' room, and, at that point, my sister, who was just nine years old, rushed to my mom's side to help. I didn't know it at the time, but my sister started administering CPR on my dad while my mom stood by her side in shock. My dad and sister had just happened to take a CPR class together a week prior at the insistence of my mother. I was trying to get help. I reached the 911 operator and tried to explain that my dad was in distress, and that he needed help. I gave them our address and they said they were on the way. I'm not sure if the operator suggested what to do next or if it was my own idea, but I ran out the door in my pajamas to get help. We lived in a four-house pipestem, so I immediately turned to my neighbors on the right and banged on their door. They answered (thankfully) moments later, and rushed to be with my mom and sister.

After that, it was a blur. An ambulance came. The paramedics pulled my sister off of my dad to take over CPR, and she ran and hid in a closet with our dog and cried. I was shuttled to another neighbor's house with kids my age. We played ping-pong. My sister arrived, but not my mom.

My aunt (my dad's sister, who lived nearby) arrived at our house to be with my mom. The ambulance took my dad away. Kind neighbors reassured me he would be okay. And I felt like he would. I needed to see him, to hold him, to hug him, and be reassured that he was fine.

Not long after, my sister (who had been found in the closet by my aunt) and I piled in the back of my neighbor's car, and we were driven to the hospital where my dad was taken. We continued to be reassured that dad was okay. After all, how could he not be? He was my hero! An army colonel, ranger, and decorated war veteran, there was no one stronger or more resilient than my dad. If anyone could make it through this, it was him.

We arrived to the hospital and were swept to a private room with comforting colors and lighting. That was odd. Why are we in this room? I thought. Neighbors and family members gathered around my sister and me to comfort us. But still, my mom and aunt were missing.

What was going on? "Where is Dad?" I kept asking out loud and wondering to myself. A few moments later, my mom and aunt entered the room, and my life would be forever changed.

"Ashley and Alexandra," my mom said with quivering tears, "Daddy is in heaven."

What? I thought. How? My hero, my play buddy, my favorite person in the entire world. Gone. Just like . . . that?

Shock hit my sister and me like the biggest tidal wave. I couldn't grasp what was happening. I didn't even cry at first. I was angry. I was abandoned. My mom, sister, and I embraced each other and then collectively wept. I remember the entire room—us, my aunt, family members, neighbors—we all wept in shock.

Nothing we could do (or that the paramedics could do) could have saved him. The autopsy report stated that 90 percent of his heart was blocked. Yet, for years I lived with guilt that I didn't call 911 fast enough, that it was my fault that the medical help didn't arrive soon enough to save him.

DAILY AFFIRMATION

*During the darkest days, when it's
difficult to find the light and hope,
repeat this mantra to yourself:
"This is only temporary;
this is only temporary."*

I want to pause for a moment, dear reader, and tell you how hard it was for me to write the above account of my father's death. Even 26 years later, at 38 years old, writing about the tragic and sudden loss of my father triggered me to tears. After I finished writing the above, I had to stop. I closed my laptop. I felt a sudden wave of grief wash over me and I began sobbing. I texted my husband and asked him to come home from work. I reached out to a dear friend and told her what just happened. I'm writing this to say and show you first, how far I've come in even being able to verbalize and share my trauma, and my feelings. Eleven-year-old Ashley did not do this. High school Ashley did not do this. College Ashley didn't either. Nor did young mother Ashley. She did not talk about her grief, her trauma, and her loss.

Most damaging to my well-being, I spent years not wanting to speak with anyone about losing my father, despite multiple counselors and family members trying to help. I instead buried these feelings of sadness, guilt, and regret deep within. I wasn't doing, and didn't even attempt, the healing work I needed to do. I put on the "mask" of strength and went through the motions of life, wanting to feel loved, yet always feeling lost. On the outside, I looked like I had it all in high school. I was well liked among peers, a leader, a dancer, and I had a dream to become a news anchor one day. On the inside, I was lonely, sad, insecure, and had attempted to bury those messy feelings of grief and trauma because it seemed easier to do.

I continued numbing and ignoring negative thoughts, feelings, and experiences until I was thirty-three and the universe knocked me over the head with a second major traumatic event. I had been living what seemed to be my dream life in New York City. "Work hard, play hard" was my mantra, and I was the stereotypical overachieving, workaholic, partying professional. I spent long workdays as a producer for CBS News, and I traveled the country covering breaking news stories. Ironically, most of the stories I covered were very, very tragic. The Virginia Tech massacre.

Missing children. Mass shootings. Missing and murdered mothers. Instead of focusing on my own tragedy, I was wrapped up in covering others. It was the perfect gig to avoid focusing on "me," the little Ashley that was still carrying around the guilt and pain of her father's death.

I never took the time to really dive into what I was feeling, which was exhaustion, loneliness, lack of self-worth, regret, guilt, and more. I numbed myself with my newsroom career, ready to jump at the next breaking news story—the missing person, the mass shooting, the election. . . . You name it, I covered it. And when I wasn't working, I barely slept. Instead, I would get off a late shift and go to a bar to meet up with friends, only to return to work the next morning at 4:00 a.m. to get ready for our live show. I would often sleep on my boss's couch to avoid the commute to my apartment in Hoboken. Don't get me wrong, I was really good at my job and I was driven to be the best booking producer out there. And I was also really good at thinking and pretending to be okay, and I'm pretty sure I led people to believe I was.

After four years of working like a maniac at CBS News, I took a job in Washington, D.C., working for a new cable show that focused on energy and environmental issues, which I absolutely loved. My partying calmed down a bit, but I still hid from myself by diving into my work. I continued traveling the world covering breaking news stories. Somewhere in the middle of this madness, I developed a relationship with a wonderful man who saw enough in me to marry me. I thought I had achieved it all: the great TV journalism career, the happy marriage, and the three beautiful children that followed. But then, boom. Everything came crashing down.

In 2014, I became extremely sick with a mystery illness that left doctors stumped. At first, I thought it was a bad flu, or a stomach bug, because I couldn't keep any food down. By this time, I was in the process of launching my own media relations company, so I thought it might be the stress of being an entrepreneur for the first time. I started losing

weight, suffering from malaise and brain fog, and seemed to become allergic to all of the food I was eating. Then I became pregnant with our third child and the symptoms mysteriously disappeared. I felt pretty good during those nine months of pregnancy.

But from the moment my sweet Scarlet was born in November 2015, the symptoms came back tenfold. I was barely functioning. I constantly felt like I was going to pass out. I was dizzy, had brain fog, my body was numb, I saw white flashing lights in my vision. I had severe nerve pain all over my body, no appetite, and so much more. Having just delivered my third child, doctors diagnosed me with severe postpartum depression, and I was committed to an outpatient psychiatric program and loaded up with psychiatric drugs. I was so sick with fatigue, flu-like symptoms, and mental psychosis that I could no longer care for my family. I wanted to die and felt like I was dying.

I had spent nearly a year and a half at this point visiting up to thirty different medical professionals—infectious disease doctors who told me I just had “anxiety” as a new mom, gastrointestinal specialists who told me I was just recovering from a “stomach bug,” and internists telling me it was the postpartum depression. Chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, IBS, I had been given every diagnosis possible. My mother-in-law suggested that I get “just one more opinion” from a highly recommended infectious disease doctor. And this was the miracle day, my first appointment with Dr. Marsha Soni. She listened to me cry, with my husband by my side, for nearly forty-five minutes. I’ll never forget the words she spoke, which validated what I already suspected: “You have Lyme disease.” She ran tests to confirm and began treating me through IV antibiotics.

During the period of healing after my visit with Dr. Soni, the concept of hope was similar to a roller coaster. One day I would feel a bit better and even possess the courage that I had a proper diagnosis, and I would find a glimmer of hope. The next day, I would feel terrible and couldn’t

get out of bed, and was filled with despair. I could not muster up a mask of strength at this point; I had no energy to even fake it.

Not only was my physical health failing during this time, but my mental health was, too. I was in despair and severely depressed. Finding hope in the middle of all this seemed like an impossible and even unworthy task. One of the blessings of my career as a publicist are the people I’ve connected with on TV sets, such as Malena Crawford, transformation coach and author of *A Fistful of Honey*, a novel of spiritual and emotional healing.

“Trauma drains us in many ways, making even the most mundane activities challenging, like getting out of bed,” says Malena. Among the many healing techniques I learned from Malena is self-compassion. “Trauma is the time to wrap yourself up in compassion and give yourself the sacred space and time to heal.”

I can attest to the power of self-compassion as a path to healing. I would have not recovered physically if I had not first taken care of myself emotionally and spiritually. The person I was before my health crisis—the highly stressed Type A perfectionist and people-pleasing party girl—is not the person I am today. My health crisis stopped me in my tracks, and just in the nick of time. All the stress in my body, coupled with holding in the trauma over the years, likely caused a release of the “fight-or-flight” hormone called cortisol. Too much cortisol is known to speed up the reproduction of the Lyme bacteria.

I can now call my health crisis “the gift of Lyme.” It taught me how to prioritize my emotional and spiritual health to protect my physical health.

I believe in my heart of hearts that *hopeful practices result in positive transformation*.

Malena Crawford said it best: “You are not your trauma, but you can be powerfully and positively transformed by it if you are willing to. You are resilient and you will survive.”

HEALING PRACTICE

Connect back to the creative things you loved to do as a child and start incorporating them into your day. Find activities you loved to do as a child and practice them a few times a week for a month. Journal what this experience is like for you. For me, this was dancing, singing, reading, and writing.

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