

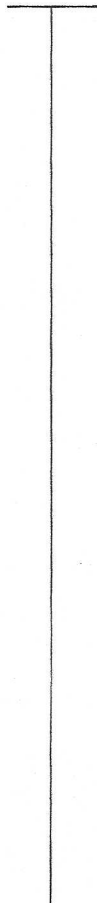
CHAPTER 6

TRUE

SOAKING SESSION

Yes and Amen by Housefires

Here's My Heart by Lauren Daigle



Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

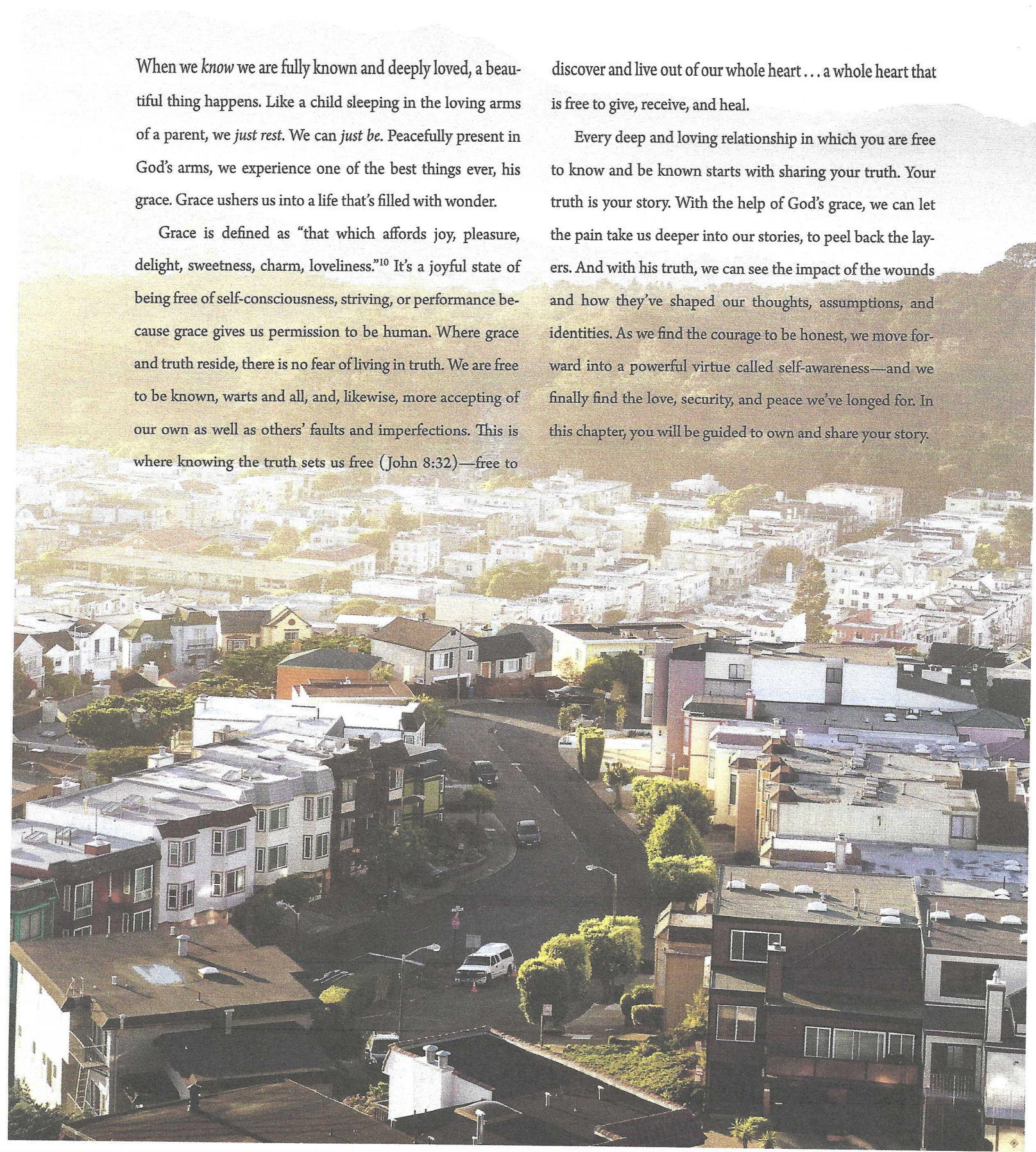
John 1:17 (NIV)

When we *know* we are fully known and deeply loved, a beautiful thing happens. Like a child sleeping in the loving arms of a parent, we *just rest*. We can *just be*. Peacefully present in God's arms, we experience one of the best things ever, his grace. Grace ushers us into a life that's filled with wonder.

Grace is defined as "that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness."¹⁰ It's a joyful state of being free of self-consciousness, striving, or performance because grace gives us permission to be human. Where grace and truth reside, there is no fear of living in truth. We are free to be known, warts and all, and, likewise, more accepting of our own as well as others' faults and imperfections. This is where knowing the truth sets us free (John 8:32)—free to

discover and live out of our whole heart . . . a whole heart that is free to give, receive, and heal.

Every deep and loving relationship in which you are free to know and be known starts with sharing your truth. Your truth is your story. With the help of God's grace, we can let the pain take us deeper into our stories, to peel back the layers. And with his truth, we can see the impact of the wounds and how they've shaped our thoughts, assumptions, and identities. As we find the courage to be honest, we move forward into a powerful virtue called self-awareness—and we finally find the love, security, and peace we've longed for. In this chapter, you will be guided to own and share your story.





As you experience more of God's grace so you feel free to be completely aware and honest, consider this: What would it be like to enter the process of owning and sharing your truth? What do you hope will happen? What are you afraid will happen?

Ask Father God to show you how his grace will transform and heal you. What did he show you?

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

In our pain and confusion, we instinctively want to hide. Our defense is to avoid honesty, to refuse to be vulnerable, to insist that nothing is wrong. In our intense stress and heartache, we desperately try to find ways to cope: We may take the stance of being defiant and dominating, we may try to fix people's problems so they'll appreciate us, or we may play the role of a helpless victim who can't make any difficult decisions (or take any responsibility for decisions). For each of these, the refusal to be honest about the pain keeps us stuck in a never-ending cycle of demands and heartache.

No matter what our problems may be—food, drugs, alcohol, anxiety, depression, self-harm, or anything else—we are only as sick as our secrets. Our reasons for hiding are as varied as our experiences, our relationships, and our personalities.

We can easily identify some of the most common reasons we keep things hidden:

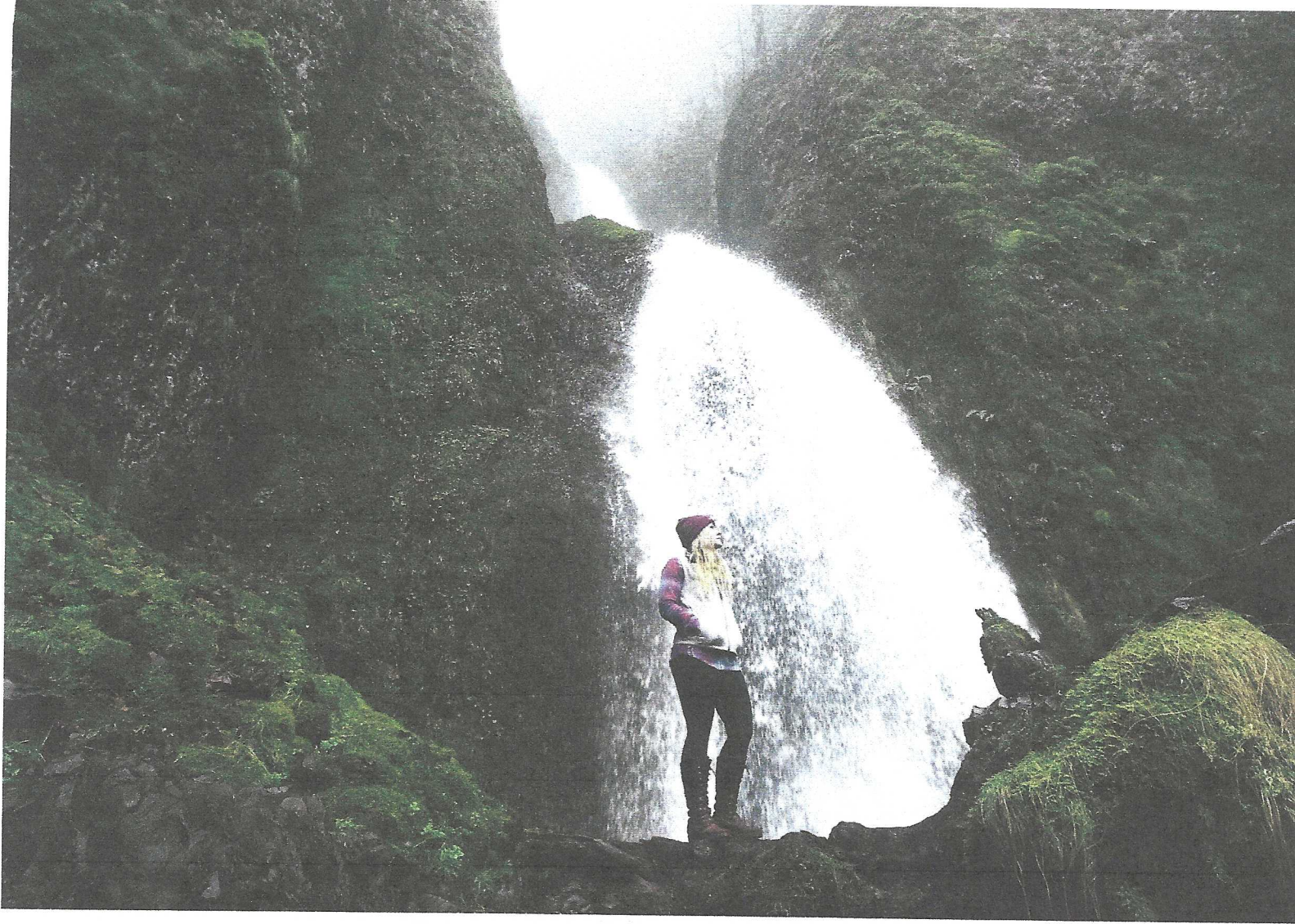
- » We want to keep the peace or protect vulnerable people (including ourselves) from being hurt by the fallout of honesty. We fear the truth won't be accepted, and it will blow up fragile relationships.
- » We want to maintain some sense of control over those who don't know what's happened. If they knew, we'd be vulnerable. Would they still love me if ...?
- » We're sure the truth would be used against us. We're terrified of the accusations, the fierce condemnation, and the rejection we will endure.
- » We believe it's safer to carry all the blame and absorb all the hurt than to expose the truth.
- » We've internalized poisonous rules: "Don't talk. Don't feel. Don't trust."
- » We've lived in shame so long that we can't imagine living in freedom, joy, and truth.

When we've been deeply hurt, we hide behind it when we tell ourselves:

- » "It didn't really hurt me."
- » "It's all my fault. I let it happen. I'm responsible."
- » "I should have known better."
- » "If you knew the real me . . ."
- » "It wasn't really abuse."
- » "No one will understand why I do this (cut myself, binge and purge, drink, etc.)."

And when we've hurt others, we hide behind excuses:

- » "I didn't mean it."
- » "I was just kidding."
- » "You don't need to know."
- » "Come on, it wasn't *that* bad."
- » "I don't know what you're talking about."



Which of these reasons for keeping secrets and remaining hidden ring true for you?

What has been so terrifying about exposure and vulnerability

When the wounds we've suffered aren't exposed, we become slaves to the past and estranged from the present. We are unable to grieve, and we find it difficult to forgive. Secrets cause chronic anxiety as we become fearful of being exposed and hope no one asks hard questions. No matter how skilled we are at playing the game, we live with the haunting and painful truth that we're living a lie.



Which lies have you told yourself to avoid the reality of your pain?

Which lies have you told others?

Describe the impact of secrets and lies on your life. How have they:

» Enslaved you to your past?

» Starved you of love, truth, and freedom?

» Isolated you?

» Kept you locked in shame?

MICHELE'S STORY

Michele suffered indescribable abuse. For years, she tried to hide the pain—from her husband, everyone else, and herself. But eventually, her world crashed, and she had to face the hard realities. She had been powerless, but God gave her the strength and hope to heal her deepest wounds. As you read it, underline or highlight the points where you identify with Michele.

People who met me before 2012 probably thought I was a woman who had it all together. I was married to a man I loved, I had four beautiful children, and I had a job I thoroughly enjoyed. I was living the American dream. I sometimes overheard people whisper about me, "I want to be just like her."

It was all a front. They had no idea about the struggles inside. I fought with depression and anxiety, and I was trying really hard to keep a secret past hidden. No one, even my husband for almost 20 years at the time, knew what I'd suffered, and I was determined to make sure the secret never got out.

When I was a little girl, my parents put on their best faces for the public. My father was an executive, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. We looked like the ideal little family. Behind closed doors, however, it was a very different story. My father was an alcoholic and an addict, and my mother was an alcoholic, too. They were verbally abusive—to each other and to me. My mother's alcoholism consumed her life, so when I was very young, I was on my own to cook meals and take care of myself.

One night when I was five, my parents had a violent argument in the kitchen. My mother stormed into their bedroom and locked the door. Dad beat on the door and screamed at her, but she refused to open it. Instead, he walked into my bedroom, which was next to theirs. That night was the first time my father sexually abused me. It was only the beginning.

For the next four years, my father regularly came into my room to take advantage of me. My mother was next door. She knew

what was happening, but she didn't lift a finger to stop him. When I was nine, my parents couldn't take each other any longer. The agreement stipulated that my father had custody of me on the weekends at his apartment.

Almost every Friday afternoon, I knew what the next couple of days meant for me. Alone in his apartment, my father abused me many times every weekend. My mother spent her time at local bars and with men who picked her up, so she was absorbed in her own world. Her neglect was really hard to take. For a while, I wanted her love and comfort more than I wanted my dad to stop.

A couple of years after my parents divorced, my father decided to get into recovery. He stopped drinking and went to AA. I thought, This is great! He's getting the help he needs. My life is going to change! But my dad traded his alcoholism for a stronger sexual addiction. At this point, things got worse . . . much worse.

My father got involved with a group of sex addicts. He invited them to come to his apartment on weekends so they could have me. At one point, I tried to escape, so my father installed a lock on the outside of the bedroom door where I stayed from the time I got there on Friday until I left on Sunday. All night on Friday and Saturday, men came into the bedroom to rape me.

One day, I ran away, but my dad found me. He beat me very badly, and he kept me in the bedroom until I was presentable enough to get out and go back to my mother's place.

In desperation, I told a teacher at school what was happening. She called my mother. When she picked me up and took me home,

she beat me and blamed me for embarrassing her by talking about the abuse. She then called my dad to tell him, and he took his turn beating me. I spent another several days in the locked bedroom until the bruises faded and the swelling went down.

When I was about 13, my father started taking me on road trips. In those cities and towns, he offered me to groups of men or to one man for a night or a weekend. On a trip to Washington, D.C., I spent a night in a penthouse suite with 12 to 15 men who repeatedly raped me all night. My father took me to Colorado to spend three nights with a man who was very violent. When he wasn't raping me or beating me, he kept me tied up.

During this time, I developed eating disorders—anorexia and bulimia. During the week, I was the model teenager at school. I never told any of my friends, and I certainly didn't tell any other teachers what was happening to me every weekend. My secret life had become completely normal to me.

When I was 15, I gave up on life and tried to commit suicide. In the hospital, I told a nurse what my dad had done to me, but I didn't say anything about the other men. I don't really know what happened in the courts, but I never had to go back to my father's apartment. As far as I know, he wasn't punished at all.

I lived with my mother, but there was no hint of compassion in her. She was embarrassed that I had brought shame on the family by telling the teacher and now telling the nurse. I had to find some way to get out of that life. I had one ticket: I was smart. I dove into my schoolwork, made very good grades, and earned a scholarship to university. I was ready for another life to begin.

By the time I went to college, my eating disorder consumed me. I weighed only 77 pounds. I was so driven to succeed that I finished in two years with a double major in math and computer science.

As soon as I left college, I got a job as a programmer. Soon, I met a young man named Mark. He asked me to go to a concert with him. He treated me with respect and kindness—which was

very different than anything I'd ever experienced. Then, on the second date, he took me to church. I had never attended church, so it was all new to me. I had never heard of the love of Christ. Mark seemed happy to introduce me to his friends, and they seemed as nice as he was. I saw them a lot. Mark and I went to church on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings. We played on the church volleyball and softball teams. His circle of friends became my friends. I had never had friends before. Throughout my childhood, I had been so hurt and guarded that I avoided any meaningful interaction with people. But now, I saw something in my new friends that was incredibly attractive—they experienced genuine love and joy. I wanted what they had.

I listened to the gospel of Christ in church, and I watched my new friends live out the gospel in everyday relationships. On November 4, 1990, I trusted Christ as my Lord and Savior.

The next year, Mark and I got married. I was living the life I had only recently begun to dream might be possible. During that first year, however, my eating disorder got completely out of control, and I had to be hospitalized. The treatment helped tremendously, and thanks to the new stability of my relationship with Mark, I recovered from the disorder.

We moved to Nashville and had our first child. We decided to become foster parents, and we adopted three children. We were a very happy family. We enjoyed family time, church involvement, and vacations. We were the picture of a loving, secure, happy family. I assumed I had escaped the pain of my past. I thought I'd left it behind when I started the new chapter of my life with Mark. I had put all the pain, all the violence, and all the abuse behind a locked door.

After about 20 years of marriage, however, the bottom fell out. In January of 2012, a dear friend committed suicide only minutes after we got off the phone. Two months later, our 15-year-old daughter was diagnosed with stage 3 ovarian cancer. A few months later in August, a close friend was murdered. Through all

of these tragic events, I was strong and loving. I was what my family and friends needed me to be. Our community of Christian friends was remarkably close and supportive.

The Make-A-Wish Foundation asked our daughter to tell them her wish, and she asked for a family cruise. By October, she had finished her chemo and other treatment, so we left for the cruise. It was a great gift to her and our whole family, but all my resources were drained. I had given everything I had all year, and I was completely empty. I should have been happy to celebrate the trip with her, but I couldn't. The trauma upon trauma during that year had worn down my defenses, and suddenly, the locked door flew open. Flashbacks and nightmares haunted me, and I didn't have any emotional resources to stop them.

For several months, I tried to cope the best I could, but the residual pain finally caught up with me. I was deeply depressed. On February 8th, my son's 16th birthday, I took him to get his driver's license and watched him drive off to school. I had been seeing a counselor. I called her and said, "I'm as close as I can be to taking my life. I don't know what to do."

She and I both called some friends to come to our house and take me to the hospital. From there, I called Mark. When he came, I said, "I need help. I don't know what to do. Will you figure out where I can go to get the help I need?"

Mark was surprised to see me so desperate because I had always been the strong one who helped other people get through their problems. But he realized this was very serious. He called a number of treatment centers, and he found Timberline Knolls.

Mark gathered some of my clothes, picked me up from the hospital, and we made the 9-hour trip to Chicago. For the next three months, I stayed at TK. I started digging through some of my past, but I was still guarded. I told my therapist and people in groups about being abused by my father, but I didn't breathe a word about the hundreds of other men my father had invited into my bedroom. It was just too shameful.

During my stay, Mark came up, and I told him about my father's abuse and the impact of growing up in a home where both parents were alcoholics. My depression had lifted, and Mark was very understanding when he heard about my dad. I was ready to go home.

But I had only scratched the surface of all the buried pain and shame. Those memories had been locked away for a long time, but they now occupied every moment of every day. About six weeks after I left TK, I fell apart.

I went back to TK, but this time, I was committed to radical honesty. I began telling my story—the full story—of all those men my father let into my bedroom, the road trips to different cities where he shopped me to other men, and the particular brutality and violence of some of the men. For the first time in my life, I was able to put the shame back on my father and the men who abused me. It was their shame, not mine. All these years, I thought I was having consensual sex with them. That's why the shame was so strong—I believed I was at least partly responsible. Now, I began to see that I wasn't responsible at all.

The biggest hurdle during that second stay at TK was the fear of telling Mark about all of this. He had been so kind and understanding when I told him about my dad, but this was different . . . much bigger . . . much worse. I had no idea how he might respond when he discovered I had been with hundreds of other men. Again and again, I tried to put myself in his place as he would listen to his wife tell these stories, and I could easily imagine him walking away from me forever. I was still struggling with the responsibility. I still believed that I could have stopped it. How could he forgive me for that?

My therapist worked with me to prepare me to have the most important conversation I'd ever had with Mark. One weekend, Mark came to Chicago to see me. We sat under a gazebo, and I told him the rest of the story—all of it. I didn't hold anything back. With every word, I felt terrified. When I finished, Mark folded

me in his arms and just held me. I cried for an hour. I didn't say another word, but Mark told me he loved me. He said nothing could change his love for me. It was the most wonderful, healing experience of my life. I had finally let everything out of the closet. I'd been completely honest with the person I loved most in the world. For the first time in over 20 years of our marriage, Mark was loving the real me—the me without any secrets. I no longer had any need to be fragmented. Finally, I could be whole. My fear of being abandoned melted in the warmth of his arms.

Of course, I still had a long road of dealing with the memories, the hurt, and the shame, but I didn't have to wonder about Mark's love for me. It was—and is—a wonderful gift. I stayed at TK to work on my anger for those who had hurt me. When I felt strong enough, I went home.

Forgiving those who hurt me has been a long process. I started while I was at TK, but it has taken a long, long time. I first worked on forgiving the many men who had abused me. I didn't know their names, but I had vivid memories of what some of them had done to me. I wrote letters to the men who had hurt me in specific and horrible ways. I described how they hurt me when I was a girl and how their actions continued to affect me. The letters gave a voice to the experiences that had remained secret far too long. At the end of each letter, I wrote, "I'm choosing to do through Christ what only he can do: I choose to forgive you for what you've done to me." It was powerful and healing to write my account of the incidents of abuse I'd suffered because of these men, and it was powerful and healing to choose to forgive them.

After these letters, I turned to my mother. She is a very old woman whose mind isn't clear, so I didn't confront her directly with the pain she had caused. Instead, I talked to my therapist at length about the neglect and emotional abandonment. In these talks, I was able to grieve, forgive, and heal. I could say to God, "I forgive my mother." Finally, I could let go.

Forgiving my dad has been very difficult. I've chosen to forgive him many times, but I often take it back. The hurt is just too deep

for it to be over very quickly. He's been dead about 15 years, but the memories are still there. I didn't want to forgive him, but I knew it was necessary so I could be free. God was very patient with me. He gave me grace and time to struggle to forgive my father. I think I've finally laid that down, and I don't think I'll need to pick it up again.

When I was in the depths of my despair at TK, it felt like God was nowhere to be found. I cried out to him, but my prayers seemed to fall on deaf ears. My journal was filled with pleas for God to show up: "Lord, please, I'm desperate. I need to hear from you! I need your help!"

God showed up in the form of wonderful, wise, loving people he put into my life. These people were his arms and his voice. They carried me through the dark times when I couldn't see any hope in front of me. They spoke words of love when I felt alone.

Gradually, I began to sense the presence of God again. God said, "Yes, Michele, you were a child who suffered pain and neglect, but you're no longer that child. You're my child now. I saved you by my grace, and I have much more for you."

Like other girls and women in my situation, I remained silent because I had no choice. But there is no hope in keeping secrets. There is only hope in radical honesty. I had to find my voice and muster the courage to speak the truth, share honestly with people who care, and walk through the memories.

As I became more honest about what happened, I asked God, "Lord, where were you when these things happened?" I especially wanted to know where he was during some specific times. I prayed long and hard to ask God for answers—and I listened. He showed me that in one instance, he was just outside the door; in another, he was holding my hand; and in another, he was taking my mind off what was happening to my body. In every circumstance, God was always close. God graciously gave me visual images of his presence in each instance. Even though I didn't know him at the time, he knew me, loved me, and was present with me.

One particular journal entry captures God's kindness to me. It is, I think, the message all of us long to hear.

God, I'm so conflicted. I want to let go of all the pain and all the lies, but I don't know how. I have lived with them so long they seem like an indelible part of me. If I am able to let go, who am I? What goes in their place?

God answered me that day:

**PAIN becomes RELIEF
FEAR becomes COURAGE
SELF-HATE becomes SELF-LOVE
SHAME becomes ACCEPTANCE
LIES become TRUTH**

In my journal, I wrote my response to God's encouragement:

The truth. What is the truth? My truth is that I lived a childhood of neglect, abuse, and lack of love. These things do not define me. They play a part in who I am today, but they have no power over me.

**POWERLESSNESS
becomes
EMPOWERED**



Write your thoughts, feelings, and questions in response to Michele's journey.

TRUTH SKILLS

In this section, you'll have the opportunity to reflect on the events and people in your life, and you'll write your story. As you begin, ask God to walk with you through this process. Ask him to make his loving presence very real to you. Don't hurry through these exercises. The things you remember and write are your personal history. Some memories will make you laugh and smile; others will bring tears or anger. Some events happened only once, but others lasted for years. Wade in to be honest about all of them, and be aware of your feelings through the process.

Because your story is precious, I would encourage you to keep a special journal just for your written story. In it, write your story after you have completed the following prompts:

What are the key feelings that you associate with your life thus far, both positive and negative?

- » Write something about each feeling and the story behind it, including the influence of the people involved.

What are the main events that have shaped your story?

Make a list of your life's key turning points . . . the critical and defining ones:

» Moments

» Decisions

» Pivot points

» Beginnings

» Endings

» Transitions

» Moments of truth

» Moments of grace

How did these events impact you?

» Where have you displayed the need to blame?

» What role has forgiveness played or not played?

What is the good?

» What is the good that surrounds the story?

» What good has emerged from it?

What have you noticed in the process of writing your story? How has reflecting and writing your story given you more understanding of why you think, feel, and act the way you do?

When you finish writing your story, present it to God. Let him take it and do something amazing with it. He has done that for Michele and countless others whose lives once looked hopeless. And he will do it for you.

PURPOSE FROM PAIN

IN EVERY HOPEFUL OR DARK PLACE FROM OUR PAST, GOD HAS A LOVING PURPOSE.

HE IS THE ONLY ONE WITH THE POWER TO RIGHT ALL WRONGS, AND HE HAS THE
POWER TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW. WHAT THE ENEMY MEANT FOR EVIL, HE MEANT
FOR GOOD AND WILL USE IT TO BRING ABOUT A GOOD, PURPOSEFUL, AND HOPEFUL

OUTCOME TO YOUR STORY.