

Amanda Metcalf: The Journey to Know and Love Yourself



Amanda Metcalf was born in Cairo, Illinois, the daughter of Charlotte Madeline Butler Grogan and Manuel Metcalf. She is the mother of one son, Matthew Metcalf Welch. She is an attorney, currently living outside of San Francisco. We first met Amanda at the Native American Film Festival and were able to catch up with her at her home prior to our return north.

For Amanda Metcalf, the journey out of depression has involved learning to know and to love herself. “I wanted to very much, but I didn’t,” she said. “I would have loved anything, anybody in the world. And I was repeatedly told that you have to love yourself before you can love anybody else. And whenever I was told that by therapists or friends, I became very frustrated, because I would say, ‘Doggone it, don’t you think if I knew how, I would do it.’”

“Growing up, a lot of things went on that I didn’t quite understand - a lot of pain and suffering that I didn’t understand or know how to deal with and damn near killed me. I don’t know all the psychological explanations. It may have been that there was, or is, a tendency toward chemical imbalance inherited from my mom. And maybe it was circumstance, or environmental. I don’t know about the cause, but I do know that there was a sadness, a deep profound sadness, that I carried with me all the time. I could be laughing and having a good time, but let me come to a still place and that sadness was always there, a constant companion.”

“So having carried that with me most of my life and having gone through the places that you go, and the people that you go to when you are looking for answers outside of yourself, I found myself at age 28, divorced from a man I had been married to for seven years and thought I would never be divorced from. And with that came the realization that I needed to choose a new name.”

Amanda said she had learned at age 14 from an aunt who helped raise her that the man she thought was her father was not her biological father. “And I went and I asked my mother about it and my mom went to pieces, and I knew it was true.”

“I learned at 14 that Manuel Metcalf was my father, and I proceeded to forget about it until the age of 28, faced with having to name myself. I knew that Grogan, Charlene Grogan, the name I had gone by all my life wasn't it, and in marriage I became Charlene Beal. Then with the advent of women's liberation, I became upset that I was a lawyer, in an office working with men who were all called by their last name. I was the only one they called Charlene, the women did, the men did. I was in this little short body – a small, petite body at that time - and I was really hell bent on having every bit of respect everybody else got. So I had them call me Grogen-Beal. I had hyphenated my last name with women's liberation at that time, and they kind of laughed it off. You can't really force anybody to call you anything. So I went home one night and I told my husband, if we ever have a daughter I am going to name her Sir Arthur Grogan-Beal. And he said, 'If you are going to do something like that, you do that to yourself, you don't do that to a kid.' And he was right. So I went down the next day, literally, and filed papers to change my first name to Cir – spelled C-I-R. I kept the C.”

“And that next morning, he got up all wide eyed and he said, 'Look, you are all over the newspaper. Herb Caen, who was a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle back in that day, had written an article about this Deputy Attorney General for the State of California who was tired of not getting enough respect. And because they wouldn't call her by her last name like they did the guys, she went and changed her first name to Cir. 'Cir, Yes Cir,' I went to work that day and nobody knew what to say to me. They were all wide eyed, and I walked down the hall, and somebody said to me, 'Charlene.' And I kept walking and they said, 'Charlene.' And I said, 'You don't have to answer to that anymore,' so I kept walking. And I heard this stuttering, 'Ms. Grogan-Beal.' And I said, 'Yes.' It was a very long drawn out way of getting to where I wanted to go. I think it represented a sense of powerlessness that I had always had and I think I wanted that recognition. It didn't bode well, because I made everybody called me that - my mom, my brothers and sisters, and my husband. Having your husband call you Cir was a little bit of an odd situation.”

“We were separated about a year from that point and I don't think it was at all because of that. He was a very liberal minded man. But ... in the process of trying to find out what I would call myself, I took my older sister to dinner and I said, 'I want you to tell me about my father.' And she ordered a double scotch, because nobody in our family was permitted to talk about that.”

“She said my father was a short, roundish-faced man, with a very nice smile. And he was very nice to mom and the kids. But one day he was brought home by an uncle who was a member of the police force in this small, little town. They had a black police force and a white police force. So my uncle brought my dad home and he said, 'Charlotte, we caught him stealing groceries and I don't want to put him in jail. So

he's either got to pay for the groceries, which he can't do, or he has to leave town.' He had been doing this for a little while. My mom thought he had been bringing home the groceries from work, but he didn't have a job and he wanted to save face, so he had been stealing the groceries and bringing them home. My mom was a real strict Christian woman and so the thievery didn't set well with her, so she bid him goodbye. And somewhere in the recesses of my memory, I think I have some smid-geon of a recollection of his being around me, but he left when I was six months old and I never heard from him again - not a card, not a letter, not anything."

"So when I set my sister down and she told me this, I immediately went home - and she said the last time we heard of him he was living in Chicago - so I called Chicago information and I asked for a Manuel Metcalf and they said, 'Here is the number.' I called and an older sounding black man answered the phone. I asked if he knew a Charlotte Grogan and if he had ever lived in Cairo, Illinois. And he said, 'I think you might be talking about my father; his name is Manuel Metcalf, too.' And as we spoke he said, 'They told me I had a sister out in California somewhere.' And we became close friends in the 20 years from that time forward until he died about five or six years ago."

"I never knew my dad. I asked my aunt for a picture at one time, but my father never took pictures. My brother asked me over for Christmas once and I told him I would really like to have a picture of my dad. I always felt like I would be a daddy's girl. Somehow all my life I felt that the reason my dad left was me - if I were loveable my father never would have left. Now, I know that makes no intellectual sense what-so-ever, but the child in me, the baby in me, that was the precise articulation: if I were loveable, he wouldn't have left."

"So being determined, which I got from my mom, to have some part of him, I learned that night that he had died when I was 16 years old and that he had come to California during the war and worked building ships in Marin County. Curiously enough, I had ended up in Southern California in the same small county in California where my father had lived. I remember the first time I came through the Golden Gate, that they had rainbows painted on that little tunnel that takes you to Sausalito and I just thought it was the most beautiful serene and tranquil place I had ever felt. Maybe he felt some of that too. But isn't it odd, that both of our lives, we would both end up in this county."

"So the difficulty, being a kid who felt that she was lost and not worthwhile and not loveable, and the long journey that it took me on. I named myself after my father. From Cir Grogen-Beal, I became Amanda Metcalf and changed my name legally—that being the closest to Manuel Metcalf that I could get. I took his surname and

tended to represent him in the world. My brother, who I was told was very much like him, was the sweetest, most gentle man, and I just love him. We just loved each other the minute we saw each other. So coming from that point, going through a difficult divorce - which I had learned had more to do with my not knowing who I was, or where I was, or who I came from, or what I was supposed to be doing in life and having this deep sadness - I made a commitment to try to learn who I was and become who I was. And I remember the conversation I had with myself. I said, 'You know you are really kind of messed up. There is a whole lot that I think is objectively wrong with you.' And I said, 'A lot of people go through life with this stuff. They may not live desirable lives, but they get through. I think most people do just kind of make a peace with who they are and what they are and just go on. And if you are really gonna work with this stuff, and pull the scab off of all these wounds and hurts, there is going to be a long time. It's not gonna be a quick fix.' But none the less I said, 'Let's go do it.'"

"So I commenced to read a lot, and go through various programs. At one point I was looking to Werner Erhard and EST. I was reading a lot, doing a lot of metaphysical reading, and transcendental meditation, and just spending time with me trying to do the work. At one point Cecil Williams, who is a very good friend of mine and a minister in San Francisco at the Glide Memorial Church, I went to him because I didn't want to be with the law firm any more. I was tired of that kind of practice. And he introduced me to a man by the name of Jim Jones, who had the Peoples' Temple in San Francisco. I realized when I met Jim that he was a very charismatic man, he was something special, he was a mystical light. You couldn't deny it - there was an attraction, because being around Jim made you feel whole, made you feel loved. You honestly felt that by virtue of being around him you were getting what you needed that was missing. I got involved with Peoples' Temple trying to help the Temple because of bad publicity, and as a lawyer trying to use my skills. And the reason I have taken this offshoot from the story is that my pain led me to some often dangerous relationships and choices. After Jim left and went to Jonestown, we were still in communication. I would go up to the temple and go into the basement and there was a shortwave radio and we would be in radio communication with him in Guyana. I would give him reports about what I was doing, and Jim said, 'Amanda I want you to come down here.' And he said, 'There is another plane leaving next week and I want you to be on it.' I was to speak with him in another couple days and I said I would definitely think about it and let him know what I was going to do. I don't recall, but I think I had pretty much decided that I wasn't going to go, but I don't know why, when I turned the television on one night and got the news about the 900 people being killed in Jonestown. So was it that he was totally charismatic and anyone would have been seduced or induced to go there, or was it that I was in so much pain, that I was looking for love anywhere I could find it? I don't know."

“To wind up this story, I have persevered. I learned to know more about what I really wanted. I never thought I would be a woman without a man in my life, and because I made such poor choices, because of what I was trying to find in relationships, at one point I faced a truth. I said, ‘Johnny and Billy and Paul, and Joe and Dick - what were the common factors? You, sweetheart, are the only single thread that runs through all those unfortunate relationships.’ And what I realized, which was really hard, you are going to have to be alone, by yourself. No male relationships, because that messes you up because it takes you off, and you go searching for stuff that you don’t need to be searching for there. And you are not ready to be a good mate, so leave it alone.”

“So quite literally, for years I was voluntarily abstinent, after having been out there, I mean out there and having a lot of fun. I had to, because it was just clouding up everything else. And at one point I realized that whereas I thought I wanted the American dream - the man and the kids and the perfect family home - I realized that Hollywood had done a lot of damage. And a lot of the ideas women have about what is desirable really have no solid, spiritual or real foundation. It’s way too much make believe and not in a good way. And as a part of what I came to understand was that what I really, really wanted, was to be OK with myself. That is something that I never thought was possible. I thought I might get the man, and the kids, and the house and the way of life, but to really love me and really be OK being with me - that was a bit farfetched. Except I realized on this journey that’s what I got to be. That was the hardest thing: not loving myself, not knowing how to go about loving myself, and starting from scratch standing in the mirror saying it to myself. Taking the time, because there was no manual out there showing how to do it, from the basic caressing my own cheek to learning ways of being kind to me. I am really proud of that, because it is what has been the hardest thing and the most rewarding thing in my life.”

When asked about the lies about herself or the world she had believed to be true, Amanda said, “Lie number one, that I wasn’t beautiful. I remember when I was a little girl I asked my mom if I was pretty. And she said, ‘It’s not prettiness that counts, it’s what’s in your head that counts.’ Now how kids interpret things, I said to myself, ‘Ah, huh! You ain’t got too much going on in the looks department, so girl you better be smart.’ That’s how I interpreted that.”

“Also compounded with that was that I grew up in a very racially segregated area where not only was there racial segregation between blacks and whites, but there was really deep segregations within the black community. There was a color scale and it was epitomized in a phrase we used to say, ‘If you’re white you’re right, if you’re black get back, if you’re brown stick around.’ That was really true when I was a little girl.”

“And so like most of the girls who I grew up with, I grew up putting bleach on my skin because I wanted to be light. My mother would say things when I was a little girl like, ‘Get out of the sun, you are going to get so black I won’t know you.’ All those things that lead you to believe a lie, that you are not attractive. Watching Miss America and saying you know, ‘That will never be me cause I ain’t got the goods.’ And somehow saying that was wrong. That was lie number one.”

“Because of that lie, I believe I was led to be more attracted physically to – that’s part of it - to light men. I was married twice and both of my husbands were white.Now I have come full circle and I can honestly say that there is no bias or preference on my part about the color of a man’s skin. That has been a journey in itself. So I would say the first one was the lie that I thought I wasn’t beautiful because I was black. Other lies that I told myself or that people told me.... I think I have always told myself a lie that I was weak. I have always perceived the accomplishments that I have as a result of having some false bravado that it really wasn’t me. Something that I could turn on if need be, but it really wasn’t me. Now that I have thought about it, I think that was a lie. I think I am strong. And that doesn’t mean I am impervious to pain, or fear, or difficulties. But strong, as people have always called me, yah, I would have to say that is right.”

“My mother was a very religious woman. She sent us to Sunday school, but she didn’t go to church herself, because where we lived there was a lot of judgment going on about how you looked. People put on their finery when they went to church and my mother thought that was bogus. She was a person of very modest means, but extraordinary. Literally, at times I remember when she had two dresses: one she washed and one she wore. They used to say she’d take off one cotton dress with a wrap around tie and put it in the washer and put the other one on, but every penny she had went into her kids. We always had whatever we needed. She worked different kinds of jobs in factories during the war. She worked in a hospital. She took in laundry. She cleaned homes. She did whatever she had to do, usually working two jobs because she had four kids. She instilled in me the importance of having a personal connection with God. So I went to Sunday school and watched my mom not go. I remember my mom had a statue of Buddha that she burned incense in. I don’t know if it was just an ornament or if she had an attraction to Buddhism or some kind of Eastern philosophy. She was a kind of a mystical woman. I came out to California when I was 14 years old to go to school, because the schools where I came from were really terrible. And she came out the next year. She was in her 50s and so were her sister and her sister’s husband, who came with. Because they were so isolated - I say because - they became Jehovah’s Witnesses. Most of my family became Jehovah’s Witnesses. I found it very far apart from the Baptist Church that I grew up in. After she became a Jehovah’s Witness, no matter what I did - finish college, go to law school, become a lawyer, become a federal prosecutor, sit as a

temporary judge, I did all these things – but no matter what I did my mom would always say, ‘That is wonderful, but you still haven’t found the Lord.’”

“But through the process that I was describing before, I said, ‘Daggone it. You have not been honest with yourself. You have tried everything. You tried drugs, mystical seeking out the inner truth, all that stuff to get to some place that was higher or better. We thought we were looking for a higher place. I came from all of that, all the reading, and all the weekend seminars, and all the therapy sessions, and I was still in a really low place. I thought I had tried everything.

One day I passed a Baptist church. I really hated that my mom couldn’t use scissors on Sunday. You couldn’t make noise. You had to only sit and be quiet and reverent. So when I left home when I was 14, I never wanted to see the inside of a church. So my then-husband said, ‘I heard this really great music coming out of a church in Marin City. You’ve always liked music. Why don’t you go there?’ So I went to the First Missionary Baptist Church and I took my son, who was about eight-months old, and I sat in the back. And the music was good and it was uplifting and inspiring. At one point the minister gave the call. But then he said, ‘Have you told yourself that you’ve tried everything. Are you looking for peace of mind and you think you’ve tried everything? Well, unless you’ve tried the Lord, you haven’t.’ I said to myself, ‘You don’t just walk into a church and join, that isn’t done.’ But I said, ‘Don’t talk to me in the future about how much pain you are going through if you know that you haven’t tried this means, this route, then just shut up cause I don’t want to hear it anymore.’ So I got my behind up and I went up in the church to join and I became baptized. And it was a really wonderful thing for several years. I was more focused in my business. I was more focused in my life and things went very well.”

“About eight years later when AIDS was victimizing everyone, the preacher in my church went out after gay people as the horror, as deserving God’s wrath and vengeance. He said AIDS was visited on them as punishment. My son’s godfather was a man I loved very much. He was the best friend I ever had, a hairdresser from San Francisco who was just a wonderful, mild-mannered human being. He was dying of AIDS at that time. And I said to myself, ‘Do I stand up and take these people to task or do I leave?’ I knew I couldn’t change their minds, so I left.”

“And I experienced from that time on a kind of spiritual difficult isolation. I was doing personal battle with ‘Does God exist?’ - which I thought was a question I had answered long ago. I had been in an automobile accident before my son was born and it was bad. But in the course of that accident, I was tumbled over in the car several times and the car landed smash down on its roof. The steering wheel was even broken in two. And after the dust settled, I heard people running up and screaming,

and I crawled through the windshield with the car upside down. I brushed the glass off myself and I felt absolutely wonderful.”

“Now, I had way too much to drink, and way too much to smoke, and way too much everything. I got to the point where I was driving around curves fast on a one way street. And I continued to push the accelerator down and something said, ‘If you don’t take your foot off the accelerator you are going to crash,’ And I knew that, and I didn’t take it off. At one point I realized I had lost control of the car and the question came— in a real clear voice – do you want to live or do you want to die?’ That had been preceded by many bouts of tortuous time spent alone thinking, ‘God I want to take myself out of this.’ At one point after my divorce I made a deal that if you stay with this one more year, and at the end of it, if you don’t feel life is more bearable, I’ll go with you. At the end of that year, I had to admit that I was still in a lot of pain, but it was better. So that option was gone. But I would stand out on my balcony, sobbing and weeping in pain, and a lot of serious depression, only to say to myself, ‘Amanda, turn around and go inside. You are on the second story, you’ll only mess yourself up. You’re not gonna die!’ That night when the car spun over and when I got out, people came up and a man came up and offered to take me to the hospital. There was some other intervention at some point, but anyhow I did go to the hospital ...As the nurse was filling out her chart and as I was telling her the story of what happened, I sat bolt upright because I was telling her the story from the vantage point of a person sitting in the back seat. And I recall very vividly seeing my body rolling over and over, and a sweet soft voice, to this day unmistakable, the tone and the words, saying over and over, ‘You are in an accident but you are alright.’ Don’t ask me how I know, but I knew that was my grandmother speaking to me.”

“I never had a moment’s pain. I was banged up and bruised. My brothers and sisters wouldn’t let me go near my mother for a month because she would have fallen out if she had seen how I looked. But I went to work that next Monday after I took two aspirin. There was an epiphany. I really didn’t want to die.”

“What I would pass on to another human being is that we are spirit, much more so than physicality. And spirit and energy never die. I am not afraid to die. What I would say is establish your connection with God. Find out who and what God is to you. That is what is really important. Ultimately, I went to my mom when she was near death and said, ‘Mom, I have found my own personal relationship with God. It’s a relationship that get’s worked on, but it has never gone away.’ And she said to me. ‘Yah, but you are still not a Jehovah’s Witness.’ And that was painful, because I will never be a Jehovah’s Witness. And the fact that my mother could not say, ‘Wonderful for you,’ was a painful thing, but I had to learn to love her because she could

not do that. Her unconditional acceptance and love was something that was not available to me. That was painful, but the wisdom that she imparted of connecting spiritually with the universe, that is where I am.”

“So what I would pass on to another woman is love yourself and find your own connection with God and define it for yourself. . . . In this journey there are some questions I don’t want to have to answer again. So let’s put this one on the decided side. There is a God. How I may refer to Him, or Her, or It, or call Him, or Her or It, that may vary. But there is a Spirit, if it’s nothing more definite than the love of the universe, the Divine. Whatever words may be appropriate, that I know. And in times when I feel most frustrated or confused, I can refresh myself with the recollection of my own specific experiences where the Divine was kind enough to give hard-headed me some concrete evidence of His or Her or Its existence.”

“The greatest joy in my life was the experience of raising my son. He saved my life at a time when I found no purpose in life, he provided that. When I was trying to learn to love myself, I remember his sweet little voice just saying, ‘Mom, it’s easy. Just love me. Just love me, it’s really easy.’ I don’t feel I can elaborate. Finding my place in the world, no matter what else I may have done or may do, I am convinced that my calling was to be a mother to that boy. If I was put on this earth for a purpose, that was it. And my greatest joy has come through the experiences I have had, the courage I have found, the ability to keep on going, to persevere, to come back from the down and go back up. To understand and to know that tomorrow is another day, that there is a brighter side, that happiness is a state of mind. It’s not where you are or who you are with. It comes from inside and if you want it, go get it, because it is always available to you. Those things I have learned in the process of mothering, parenting.”