

RISE UP



*Make Peace
With Your Past*
A 3-Step Freedom Guide

Dr. J.

Empowering Your Success.™

JESSICA L VERA, PH.D.

Rise Up

***Make Peace with
Your Past***

3-Step Freedom Process

Jessica L Vera Ph.D.

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Cover Design by Anointed Productions, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Published by Elite Foundation, Inc.
EliteFundsFreedom.org

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First Printing: May 2016
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-943526-25-3
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-943526-24-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2016907277
Author Academy Elite, Powell OH

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DEDICATION

To my fellow survivors and to those who live in secrecy,
you have the power within you to be victorious.
Experience freedom from the bondage of your past. Live a
life of triumph.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew [and] approved of you. I carefully planned who you would be. The color of your hair, eyes, and skin.

I gave you gifts, talents, and abilities to be used for my glory.

No matter whose approval you did not get on this earth, I love and approve of you. Despite the mistakes that you might have made, there is nothing that can separate us.

Receive my love and acceptance, it will empower and strengthen you.

All the days of your life.

FOREWORD

Too often we get stuck, stalled, and sidelined. This is exactly what the enemy wants, for us to be knocked out or and least knocked off our path of deepest influence and impact.

Author Jessica Vera knows this tendency and she's not about to sit by in silence. In *Rise Up*, she provides a three-step freedom guide to help us scale our trauma, strengthen our resolve, and summit to triumph.

Jessica invites us to engage in some overdue introspection. She asks:

“Are you bound by the chains of your past? Are you lost, unable to see your unique significance? Do you feel that everything negative is a result of your own doing, perhaps even something you deserved?”

Much more than asking questions, Jessica also provides real answers. She shows us how we don't need a Ph.D. or years of psychotherapy to experience a breakthrough. Rather, we just need courage to regain the right focus and resolve to take effective action.

Rise Up reveals how to:

- Overcome limiting beliefs, emotions, and behavior that self-sabotage growth
- Implement bold steps to transform your personal story
- Reclaim your power position in all areas of your life

- Gain understanding that victims are made, not born; even when choice was eliminated
- And much more

Rise Up is a call to action for all who—because of experiencing trauma—struggle to find their unique purpose. Through her transparent storytelling and transformational process Jessica shares how each of us can Rise Up to the destiny inside us all.

Kary Oberbrunner

CEO of Redeem the Day and Igniting Souls. Co-creator of Author Academy Elite.

Author of *Day Job to Dream Job*, *The Deeper Path*, and *Your Secret Name*

Prep For Your Freedom Challenge®

You were majestically and perfectly woven in the womb with a divine purpose; nothing that has happened to you can ever change that, unless you choose to believe the lie that you are a victim.

Rise Up was written for those ready to reclaim their power position in life to experience freedom and victory.

Rise Up

Introduction

***You may trod me in the very dirt. But still, like dust, I'll
rise.***

—Maya Angelou

The dream of writing a book has been years in the making, since I was an adolescent. As a prolific reader, it was my escape to learn of heroic characters in a story who always seemed to arrive in the nick of time to save the day or the damsel in distress. I thought that one day, I'll write that type of story and some other little girl will read in astonishment at how chivalry still exists and that we can all live happily ever after.

Now almost 50, I still love a good romantic story. However, I have to be honest, this book is nothing like what I had ever anticipated. It is not a fairy tale children's book. Nor is it a research study or a scholastic paper, both of which I have written about through the years. This is my first published book, and it is in part, about me...my story.

Making the decision to write this book came through divine intervention where the right people were placed in my path at the right time. This is a story that needs to be told. I have been comfortable sharing bits and pieces of my story with a few chosen confidantes over the years. But the thought of putting my life story on paper for others to read--in essence, invite you into the private corners of my existence--was and is terrifying.

While my goals and plans are many, God now guides my steps, and I trust in his promises to complete the work that he started in me since before I was born.

Two years or so ago, I met a woman who was passionately seeking her purpose through ministry work with victims of the sex trade worldwide. We met in Israel during a pilgrimage of the Holy Land. She left an impression. Over the following year I would remain in touch with her and she would encourage me to become involved. Then in the summer of 2015, I was introduced to a dynamic man through a webinar, who was filled with a desire to help authors tell their story in order to increase the proliferation of spiritually based literature in our culture.

Over the years, I have met many people who have impacted my life, but for some reason the timing of these two chance encounters made all the difference. This would be confirmation to pursue not only the fulfillment of a personal dream to write a book, but also to provide a voice for so many who have grown up with the scars of trauma in secrecy.

Since at a young age, I've been committed to seek to learn all that I can about how and why we function the way that we do, and the role of our social context and trauma. I have often read and heard others say that knowledge is power.

My belief is that knowledge is acquired, but wisdom is a gift from God through experience.

My prayer and hope is to effectively impart the wisdom that I have gained through the personal experience of trauma, namely sexual abuse, exploitation, and loss, and the redemptive power of an unconditional love that surpasses human understanding.

You will read about my truth and join me on a journey that will increase your understanding through the information,

strategies, and insights learned that I will share. However, only you can decide what you will do with it.

My story will show you what I have done over the last 30 years, and how I have climbed and summited to freedom and victory.

So many thoughts run through your mind when you make the decision to lean in and commit to the journey of writing. Will people clearly understand my reason for writing a tell-all? Especially with those involved. Is the timing right, or should I wait until all parties involved are deceased? Whenever I start doubting myself, I am reminded that I was created to be a voice for the voiceless and to be an Agent of Change®.

So here we go.

Let me first share that unlike perhaps other books you might have read in the past, this book represents almost 50 years of life experience enmeshed with 30 years of learning all that is known about human sciences related to trauma. Therefore, at times, I break-out from the storytelling in order to highlight the knowledge that is known, which I believe is relevant to understanding trauma and how to overcome it. Concurrently, I also share my personal journaling of how experience, knowledge, and wisdom have impacted my personal passion to do something—in my case, I committed to a physical challenge to raise awareness and funds for human trafficking.

The Veil Removed

My personal history. I was born in Lima, Peru, a beautiful and vast country I would never get to know because we immigrated to Canada when I was two or three. I was the only girl of five children. Growing up, Latin subculture

intertwined with my North American environment. If you are unfamiliar with the significance of the subculture, here is a quick peek. Latin culture is best known for its beautiful caliente women, machismo, subservience, defined roles, wonderful vast foods, Spanish-speaking people, and heritage rich in value of the familia. I am one of over sixty-four maternal first cousins. If that does not exemplify a love for procreation to increase family, I don't know what does. But all humor aside, family is central to the Latin culture.

My family of origin was blended, initially comprising of three older brothers from my mother's first marital relationship. A younger brother and I would complete the five. My younger brother actually did not rejoin our family in Canada until a few years after my immigration. He stayed with our grandmother in Peru while our parents attempted to find stability in a new country.

We were your typical immigrant two-parent family struggling in a new country. But one nuance was evident to me, even at a young age: there always seemed to be strife between my eldest maternal sibling and my father. Interestingly enough, they, along with another sibling from my mother's side, shared a love for music and played in a band together founded by my father, called Salsa 78. They spent hours rehearsing and playing gigs, and once opened for The Rolling Stones when the English band was just starting out.

My parents met when my eldest sibling was a young boy fast approaching adolescence. My father was in an orchestra and my mom dabbled as a back-up singer in Peru. Apparently, my father had success and notoriety in that realm back home. For my mom, it was just something to try out once or twice. They fell in love and my father immediately gained a ready-made family with three boys.

At age six or seven, my family life changed when my parents' marriage imploded. I would later learn of infidelity

and other trust struggles that would undermine any relationship, let alone one between a husband and wife.

After my father left, there was just us five kids and a single mother, living with our basic needs met. But our mother, who always had a desire to want to give us more, worked endless hours, striving to achieve the American dream for herself and her kids. This left us with unsupervised time to find ways to keep ourselves occupied in her absence. What was also absent during those years was the presence of a father figure. More than a decade would pass before my father would re-emerge in my life.

My mother vowed never to allow another man into her home for fear of the pain they might cause her or us. At least that is what I had thought were her reasons...She has kept this vow all these years, which means she has lived a life of personal solitude.

We kids, at that time, contented ourselves with playing spaceship made of cardboard boxes, community tag, and other simple games that didn't cost money. My eldest brother was always the captain and leader, in charge of directing the rest of us in what to do. Those were some of my fondest memories of childhood.

It was during these same years that I would learn of many dynamics that could exist amongst a blended sibling system. There was a gap of almost ten years between myself and my eldest brother, and four years between him and my two other older brothers that followed him. The changes that occurred within our relationships left scars in a young child, who at the time could not reconcile them.

When my eldest brother turned eighteen, he moved out with my other older brothers, leaving me, my mother, and the youngest in our own apartment. But my brothers didn't move far; they stayed in the same community, living in an

apartment building adjacent from us. I must have been around nine.

It was here that I would go through an experience that would hugely affect the direction of my life.

A man, who was a relative though not by blood, would take interest in a girl so young and innocent, and provide her with unwanted and unsolicited answers to one of life's mysteries. He befriended her, volunteering to teach her how to swim while her mother was at work, and all to satisfy his own predatory needs. She would quickly learn the impact of differential power and evil.

The abuse occurred behind closed doors, in my safe haven, my home. I sought out my brothers for help, but at the time of the abuse, they were nowhere to be found. I finally disclosed these deep shaming secrets to my mother long after the man was gone. She was in utter terror, not the reaction I expected. She told me he would never have access to me again, and we did not talk about it anymore.

Several years later, I would learn that she had her own deep secrets of sexual abuse. Her abuse took place at a time when she was innocent. She had never spoken of it, but she disclosed it to me a few years ago. Once her trauma memories were exposed to me, it became clear why it was that each of our memories of my experienced childhood trauma were so very different.

It has taken many years of living, at times painful and unbearable but also joy-filled, to learn that I am not a victim. We are not defined by our past, but it must be acknowledged, as it does in part impact how we behave. But an undeniable truth is that I was majestically and perfectly woven in my mother's womb, predestined for victory and significance, even before I was born; and so are you!

Like me, you have pain in your life. Negative experiences are part of our existence, but I have learned that although we will fall, it is not the falling that matters, but rather, how well we get back up.

The truth is that personal growth and maturity are processes that require refinement. I have learned more from my trauma and painful challenges in life than from any other experience. I wish it were different, but that is reality.

However, I also know that not everyone is well equipped to face their challenges. It's for this reason I'm sharing a knowledge-informed three-step process that will teach you how to affect change in your own life, so that you in turn can positively influence the lives of others.

I am not going to minimize the experience of trauma, but I'm also not going to glorify it by overly depicting details. I know that we all can relate, at some level, to emotional pain. The kind that no miracle pill can eradicate.

But rather than dwelling on the pain, I prefer to focus on the solutions to life's challenges. Towards accomplishing this objective, we will have to dredge through our past, if only to gain insight for our future. But once the needed wisdom is attained, we will let the past go, to have it remain as it should—just history, but non-defining.

My disclaimer to you is that embarking on this journey with me will require commitment, difficult work at times, and this may cause pain. But if you are willing, then I promise you that the journey will end with a life of significance and freedom to pursue your divine purpose.

For you are a victim to whatever controls you – 2 Peter 2:19

I also have a desire to empower you to take action not just for yourself, but for others. My heart's desire is to be an Agent of Change® in the lives of others. Having worked in human services a great portion of my professional career, I've seen the aftermath of human atrocities firsthand. Amongst these, none has impacted me more than the heinous social pandemic of sex exploitation and trafficking. The criminal activity of human sex trafficking is now the second top form of organized crime due to an unexhausted supply and demand.

These modern-day sex slaves need warriors to advocate for their freedom.

Rise Up is your call to action. By dispelling your lens of victimization and claiming your crown, you will become free to be an Agent of Change® in the lives of others.

*

One such example is of an ordinary retired school teacher who was touched by the social injustice of sex trafficking and decided to do something about it.

In 2012, Cathey Anderson founded a women's ministry called The Freedom Climb, as part of Operation Mobilization, to raise awareness, funds, and to rescue and train up modern-day slaves of human sex trafficking worldwide.

She combined her love of hiking with her divine passion and calling to be a voice for the oppressed by organizing climbs of some of the most notable mountains in the world. Initially, I'll admit that not being a hiker myself, I had a difficult time conceptualizing the premise of engaging in astronomical climbs of big mountains, such as Kilimanjaro, Everest, and the Alps—and its relationship to the growing social issue of sex trafficking.

But then I read about Cathey's personal challenge. She wrote, "The Freedom Climb has always been a symbolic gesture of the climb to freedom. Women climbing big mountains to raise awareness, prayers, and funding for women around the world who are oppressed, exploited, enslaved and trafficked. Mountains come in all shapes and sizes, and I've recently been faced with quite a surprising and large mountain to summit. On September 2, 2014, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I've never climbed a mountain alone, and I've never climbed a mountain unless it was benefitting more than just me! So I invite you to consider symbolically climbing this mountain with me."

Cathey's words made the Freedom Climb personally relatable, especially as I have had several loved ones battle the same disease.

Despite my apprehensions, I signed up for a challenge in 2014. Around the same time, I was approached professionally to enhance my knowledge of victims of sex trafficking within the context of the dependency and juvenile delinquency systems in my jurisdiction in South Florida.

Within the year, the frequency of cases with alerts for human sex trafficking became domestically visible. Until now, most of the prevalence of known cases had primarily been international. For example, in India, children are born into the sex trade. It is a way of life, and although not condoned by the government, it still prevails.

Most people in North America do not believe that this criminal atrocity occurs in our own backyards. This is because sex trafficking was believed to typically originate in third world countries, and until recently, America had only represented the consumer part of the sex trade.

For reference, here is the statistical prevalence of human sex trafficking cases, which has limited collected data to date. It was reported by the Office of The Assistant

Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health & Human services that in 2009 between 244,000 to 325,000 American children were considered at risk of exploitation in the sex trade. And that an estimated 200,000 incidents of sexual exploitation of minors occur each year in the U.S.

My commitment to climb the Colorado Ridge Mountains in July 2014 seemed all the more relevant. However, I was unprepared for the need for specialized training, equipment, and conditioning because of the altitudes that would be encountered. I thought, well, I'll invest in the equipment—ugly hiking shoes, outer clothing, and trekking poles—and go out a few times a week to walk daily. Of course neglecting the obvious that there is only flat terrain available in South Florida.

I reached out to my beautiful spiritual sister and before I could tell her of my challenges, she informed me that there was a function to raise local awareness, and the team from Florida would be hosting. She asked, “Will you join us?”

Of course I said I'll be there. I was feeling ill prepared for the climb, but organized gatherings? Now this I knew a great deal about.

A few weeks before we were to gather, I sustained a stress fracture and gained a substantial increase load of cases with the sex trafficking alert. I was overwhelmed, but I wasn't going to allow a few setbacks to derail the plan.

At the gathering, I ended up being a speaker where I shared my heart for the cause and bowed out of the physical challenge. Funds were raised, but another lovely woman went in my place. The experience left me with a sense of incompleteness.

Fast forward to late 2015, my beautiful spiritual sister called and invited me out to meet her for coffee. I found myself

amongst twenty or so of her close friends. Over coffee, I learned that a new component was being considered: a co-laboring between two ministries with the same vision, to advocate and rescue. But the nuance was that the second ministry was devoted to working with sexual abuse victims and intimacy. The co-laboring between these ministries occurred because it had been recognized by the leadership that a great number of the women who were signing up for the Freedom Climb were themselves survivors.

A light bulb went off. Survivors were utilizing their gifts, despite personal trauma, to help others. Now that is my life's passion.

NOW here we go. Come to the edge. We might fall. Come
to the edge.

It's too high!

COME TO THE EDGE!

And they came, and He pushed, and they flew.

Christopher Logue

The Climb

—

**Strengthen
Your
Resolve**

***Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's
possible;
And suddenly you are doing the impossible.***

- Francis of Assisi

Gaining momentum towards your true self, who you were created to be, and what you were created to do with this gift of life is a process that can be stifled, especially if focus is lost and worldly footholds prevail. Remembering who you are because of whose you are is essential. Only then do you begin to live intentionally. But if you resist and remain self-marginalized, then you have yet to gain the insight and wisdom offered from your experiences to live in freedom.

I know that is not you. You have a desire to learn and to put your feet upon a path that will lead you to **Rise Up** and summit your personal challenge to victory.

In this proceeding section of our journey, you will be introduced to a three-step process model that led to my restoration. You have been attentive and have chosen to join me on this journey. Now allow me to unveil what I did in order to live an authentic life of freedom.

Take Inventory - Reset

***My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive;
And to do so with some passion, some compassion,
some humor,
and some style.***

- Maya Angelou

Where do emotions, feelings originate?

Popular belief says that they are matters of the heart. And if that is the truth, then the plethora of written works about the differences between men and women and our operating systems also must be true. Remember that book, *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*? There is no disputing the social conceptualization that there are observed differences between the sexes, but the dialogue of the origin of the mind and emotion has been ongoing for centuries.

Hippocrates' early writings (ca. 460 BC–ca. 370 BC) demonstrate that thinkers have pondered this and many other intriguing facets of our existence for years. He wrote, "Men ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain alone, arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs and tears. Through it, in particular, we think, see, hear and distinguish the ugly from the beautiful, the bad from the good, and the pleasant from the unpleasant... I hold that the brain is the most powerful

organ of the human body... wherefore I assert that the brain is the interpreter of consciousness..."

With advancements in neuroscience we have now been able to study the human brain and have verified with some precision what has apparently been known for centuries, that the brain is the central organ of the mind and it is from this organ that emotions, thoughts, and our behavior originate.

Today, neurosurgeons can 'send an electrical current into the brain, the person can have a vivid, lifelike experience. When chemicals seep into the brain, they can alter the person's perception, mood, personality, and reasoning. When a patch of brain tissue dies, a part of the mind can disappear: a neurological patient may lose the ability to name tools, recognize faces, anticipate the outcome of his behavior, empathize with others, or keep in mind a region of space or of his own body... Every emotion and thought gives off physical signals, and the new technologies for detecting them are so accurate that they can literally read a person's mind and tell a cognitive neuroscientist whether the person is imagining a face or a place. Neuroscientists can knock a gene out of a mouse (a gene also found in humans) and prevent the mouse from learning, or insert extra copies and make the mouse learn faster. Under the microscope, brain tissue shows a staggering complexity—a hundred billion neurons connected by a hundred trillion synapses—that is commensurate with the staggering complexity of human thought and experience...' (Pinker, 2003).

These fascinating advancement in science have also led to the use of brain mapping. This neuroscientific procedure has given us knowledge of the complexity of the structures of the brain and the multiplicity of their function. Science has gone as far as to divide the human brain (within ethical parameters) by its two hemispheres, and it has revealed

that each hemisphere had the same personality traits such as those found in twins, but also differences.

Carter (2003) quoted a statement made by Steven Johnson that says: “Our personalities, the entities that make us both unique and predictable as individuals, emerge out of these patterns of chemical release.”²⁰ Johnson’s statement summarizes well the understanding that all that we demonstrate to others—thought, feelings, and behavior—originate in the brain.

Therefore, the logical scientific answer to the question of where our emotions originate is that it is all a matter of the brain...

Just what is the brain? Well, it is a physical mechanism. An arrangement of matter that converts input to output in particular ways in which its hundred billion neurons are deployed. An infinite variation in their connections result in very complex neural networks. Then the multitude of chemical and electrical reactions within it, and the consequent almost unimaginable complexity of structure and function enable it to contain the mind. Just as it does the sources of all the other activities attributed to sentient life.¹⁹

Yet the scientific pragmatics of the neuro-physio-chemical makeup of the brain continue to be utilized as support for an abstract concept that is intangible - the mind.

Side bar of interest: There is a misnomer that I think is important to dispel. There are those who have written and propagated the notion that we only use 10% of our brain, but that is misleading. Science and common sense dictate that we actually use 100% of brain matter, just not all at the same time. Otherwise, if we damaged (through injury) the other supposed 90% of unused brain there would be no impairment of functioning, but this is not the case.

For as much as we venture in science to understand and to be able to rationally explain every human phenomenon, the truth is that our complexity and uniqueness as individuals is not humanly understood by science alone.

Why was it that despite my childhood trauma, the dysfunctional quality of my family of origin, and the demographics of my existence at the time that included abandonment did I survive?

In my work I have met tens of thousands of people who with similar trauma to mine have yet to fare as well. The one answer that I consistently return to, despite my need to 'know,' is that I survived only because of the grace of God. Of course you could argue that I am resilient, which is a true characterization, but resilience is learned from experience.

If you are not a spiritual person, I don't want to alienate you from my journey because we do not share the same soul beliefs. So let me establish a launching pad for our continued discussion by stating that grace allows us the opportunity to do the work because expecting spontaneous healing, although miraculous, still requires us to work in faith of the unknown.

As a young girl I did not have a relationship with God. He was a character introduced to me through formalized religion. Based upon this knowledge of God, I believed God failed me as he had allowed all these bad things to happen to me. What kind of God does that?

As I developed and matured into a young adult, going to church or being around spiritual people was not part of my context. In fact, my experiences with organized religion and religious people had for the most part been negative. They had shunned my mother from communion because she was divorced, and therefore, I too could not partake in the sacrament that I had been made to participate in as a child with such importance. People in my life, at that time, had

also not modeled morality, but rather selfishness and egocentricity. Looking out just for number one: themselves.

Really, I was no better or different; I had broken several of the Ten Commandments. I was a liar, adulteress, murderer, who lived in sin repeatedly. My religious foundation actually lent itself to the justification that my condemnation and personal hell was well deserved.

For many years, I lived my life with this meaning and in constant reaction mode. I had internalized so many distortions from my experiences of sexual trauma and abandonment, as well as from my perception of rejection by God, that my ability to develop trusting attachments was impaired. I navigated through life expecting the worst, even when seemingly good things were happening, and if life did not occur as I was expecting, then I acted in ways to self-sabotage.

Fifteen years ago, this way of life ended. Despite my substantial resistance, I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior. I was in a place in my life where I was searching for something more. I did not know what exactly, but my self-dialogue had started to align itself with considerations of existence.

I had done life my way thus far, and although I had accomplished worldly gains, it had not been without a great deal of heartache. And yet, somehow I had managed to move through it and to find myself living a life with a wonderful man and had been gifted two precious daughters.

I used to think that I had lived so much while still so young because it was likely that I would die young. Now I know better...

The relationship that I have developed with God is now central and focal to my existence. The development of our relationship was not an easy process, as you can imagine,

because you do not open the doors to your heart, allow Christ in, and then supernaturally become this perfect human being. It was the exact opposite experience for me.

In God, I found a Heavenly Father who knew me, accepted me, and loved me unconditionally, despite everything that I had done. At first take, my human brain could not conceptualize this type of Love. So of course, initially, I went back into default mode. Ignorantly, I thought, the scripture states that God knows the motives of our heart and its condition. I figured, well then, I must have gotten a pass because my way of doing life had been directly impacted by trauma and chaos. Things out of my control. He already knew all of this, and therefore understood my brokenness.

I was completely wrong in my thinking. Yes, God knows each of us; he created us before we were even born, weaving us delicately in our mother's wombs. Predestined us with a divine purpose. But we were born into a fallen world, in which there is evil. And although I am certain that if God could, He would restore the Garden of Eden. He loves us so much that He gives us free will, to allow us to make choices towards or away from Him and our divine calling. He promises that in Him, we will not have to do life alone, but that we do have to live life.

The question then became: "Do I [we] want life to happen to me [us]? Or do I [we] want to make the decision to live life intentionally?" We are not promised tomorrow. Yesterday is gone for good. Therefore, today is all we have.

The 3-Rs: Reset. Realign. Reconcile.

Get to know yourself intimately: If like me you have survived trauma, then there is specific work that we have to do in order to affect the process of healing. It is not a quick fix answer that I will share with you, but rather, a process. It

requires working through three (3) key functions of our brain: emotion, belief, and behavior.

There is no specific order to best tackle each of the three brain functions as they are interrelated. To create a self-directed guiding framework, we will agree that although it is uncertain what comes first—feeling, belief, or behavior—each is important to the other. But from the lens of social psychology and narrative therapy, which places emphasis on the importance of one's social context and personal story. I propose that we first identify our feelings.

Get Ready to Start: There are three prerequisite conditions that must be completed in order to be transformed from victim to victor:

(1)The courage to face your past trauma (release the secrets packed away in your mind);

(2)The will and courage to work through the unpacked trauma memories to identify their specific influence on you; and

(3)A desire to change.

I will guide you through the importance of each prerequisite condition. Provide free downloadable pictorial explanations and access to copies of the self-guided tools that can be utilized.

The first condition: Courage to Face Trauma

The prevalence of childhood trauma is high: 8 in 10 people. However, some forms of childhood trauma are more widely socially accepted than others. Incest continues to be underestimated in studies because of the associated taboo that continues to be perpetuated by ignorance and fear. Consequently, victims seem to share a collective

experience of shame, which does not empower disclosure but rather leads to lifelong secrecy.

When trauma is shrouded in secrecy, denial, or is ignored, harm can be done through re-traumatizing by even the best trained helping professional. Therefore, identify a *safe-haven* strategy that provides you with the security and safety that you need in order to tell your story.

Traditionally, use of a self-disclosure strategy, such as journaling—the one that I have used all my life since I could write—can be very effective. The key takeaway is to get your story out of the crevasse of your mind and in plain view, so that you can process it.

Studies have found that writing is a therapeutic strategy. It allows us to process our feelings in a concrete manner. It has been found in research that writing/journaling for 15-30 minutes three to four days improved physical health in trauma victims.^{26, 27, 28}

Another self-disclosure strategy is use of visuals such as a genogram or therapeutic drawing, painting, coloring etc. These are referred to as visual journaling. The key takeaway here is that you need to face your past trauma. Unlock the trauma memories in a manner that is plausible to you at this time in order to process them.

In case you are not familiar, a genogram is a graphic representation of a family tree that displays detailed information on relationships among individuals. It is more detailed than a family tree and allows the user to analyze hereditary patterns and gather information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations.

Go to www.drjvera.com, sign in, and click on the link to see a pictorial explanation of a genogram, if you are interested in learning more.

Visual journaling (aka art journaling) has a long history in the field of art therapy, particularly as an approach to assist recovery from trauma or loss and as a form of stress reduction. Go to www.drjvera.com, sign in, and click on the link to see a pictorial explanation of a visual journal, if you are interested in learning more.

The second condition: Identify Influence of Trauma

This second condition can be facilitated through reflection work and/or use of self-assessment tools such as the post-traumatic stress index (PTSI - Carnes & Delmonico) and/or the posttraumatic cognitions inventory (PTCI – Foa, Ehlers, et al.).

Both of these self-guided screening tools have been developed from known research of post-trauma psychology. There are numerous studies that have set out to validate the self-guided tools' respective reliability. For complete access to either of these self-guided screening tools, please go online to the resource tab at www.drjvera.com, sign in, and click on the link to gain access to either one of this self-guided screens for free.

The key takeaway is to gain insight of how your experience of trauma may have affected you personally.

Side note: there are many who have had similar experiences and either do not develop any adverse reactions/symptoms, and in fact, gain momentum towards reaching their full human potential either in spite of or because of their experience of trauma. This is referred to as *post-trauma gain*. Meanwhile, others experience significant dysfunction in their life due to underlying infringing unresolved trauma symptoms. These exercises can provide clarity and direction to better understand yourself.

The third condition: Desire to Change

This third condition calls upon you to be bold. Now that you have unpacked and processed through your trauma and have some idea of how it may have affected you, you need to decide each day to be present in your life, and to actively desire to want to make changes. Change is not easy—that is why it is often avoided. But there is no growth without change. Change will happen through your completion of small incremental steps to rebuild replacement habits that support a healthy lifestyle.

Be patient with yourself; only you know your limits. That's it. Prerequisites complete.

Bonus - Through this process, you will also learn the importance of setting boundaries for yourself and others. This is essential to healthy human existence.

Typically, we have a tendency to say "**Yes**" to whatever is asked of us because of our need for acceptance and validation from the outside world. But now it is important to learn to say "**No**" when the activity requested does not serve to heal and restore you.

*

Get to Know your Emotion Intimately

STEP 1 - RESET

Identify Your Trauma Triggers

What is a trauma trigger?

Trauma memories include characteristics of unintentional re-experiencing symptoms and intentional recall of trauma narratives. *Re-experiencing symptoms* (triggers) are usually sensory impressions and emotional responses from the trauma that appear to lack a time perspective and a context. The vast majority of intrusive memories can be interpreted as re-experiencing of warning signals, i.e., stimuli that

signaled the onset of the trauma, or of moments when the meaning of the event changed for the worse. Triggers of re-experiencing symptoms include stimuli that have perceptual similarity to cues accompanying the traumatic event. Therefore, your current emotional problems not caused by organic deficit or physical insults are conceptualized as the result of inappropriately processed memories of disturbing traumatic experiences.

Identifying your triggers then can be understood as a situational precursor that evokes an unconscious response (primarily arousal) based upon associated trauma memories not yet processed.⁶⁸

The following is a paper-pencil activity that will require your reflection, documentation, and self-assessment. If you have not done so please complete the post-traumatic stress index (PTSI) as it can assist you in identifying cluster situations by reviewing your responses to trauma reaction items (TRT).

Instructions to **RESET**:

- (i) Identify triggers situations (outside of you) that evoke an unexpected or exaggerated emotional physiological response. Remember, our brains' arousal receptor system experienced atypical overload during trauma in development. Therefore, we have a tendency, when triggered, to have excessive physical responses such as sweating, jitteriness, racing thoughts, and disproportionate fear...an increase stress reaction;
- (ii) Create a list of those situational triggers and write down what you felt (reaction);

Example:

Situation – Trigger	Reaction
Being in a confined space with a man with no perceived way to leave.	Sweating, fear, helplessness, anxiety, racing pulse
A man you’re physically attracted to tells you everything you want to hear and then makes unsolicited aggressive romantic (physical) advances towards you.	Helplessness, disassociation, numbness

Once identified triggers become visual to you, then you can begin the work of reframing today’s triggers from past trauma memories. It requires you to **reset** your narrative from **then** to **now**. Reality testing is a means to process this on your own.

Reality testing is depicted in the following example, “being in a confined space with a man with no perceived way to leave,” we can logically rationalize that every space has an entry point and therefore a tangible exit. Recognize your distorted belief that all men are perpetrators and reframe it into the present situation, “this man has not done anything to indicate to me that he is a threat.”

Examine and recognize that your response is disproportionate to the situation. Utilize relaxation techniques such as deep slowed breathing to self-regulate your response.

(iii) Encode the list to memory or have it visible to you in a journal so that you can do one of two things when the situation presents itself again:

(a) Remove yourself; or

(b) Examine and study the way that you are still reacting. Slow your respiration and initiate internal self-talk. Remind yourself of the reality of the situation (put it into perspective) and take control of your reaction.

2

Equip Yourself - Realign

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but allow yourself to be transformed into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

– Romans 12:2

What are beliefs and how are they formed?

The word *belief* in literature is interchangeably used with words such as thought, attitude, and perception. A pragmatic explanation of the formation of our belief system is that our thoughts evolve from our experience of the world. The **emotions** associated with these experiences influence our **beliefs**.

There is substantial research that has been completed on beliefs and their relationship to emotions. Most research to date has been unidirectional in that beliefs are believed to be a major determinant of emotion. The reverse relationship has not been as well researched, as emotion is viewed by most as influencing the content and the strength of an individual's belief and their resistance to modification.²¹

The premise of my model of transformation is that in order to affect change in oneself, there is a **distinctive relationship that has to be identified between our trauma-based beliefs and their fueling distorted**

emotional responses. But we also have to take responsibility that our beliefs are further ingrained by our own subsequent actions in life.²²

We cannot talk about beliefs and not discuss what has intrigued me, as well as early scholars and modern-day thinkers, but for which there is no conclusive scientific evidence found to support it. It is the existence of the Soul.

Several have proposed and attempted to study the soul as being ingrained in the depths of the brain's center structure. Others have attempted to argue that it is found in other neurological structures of the brain.

I found one early published study, but noted when reading it that it could never be replicated in modern-day science. I'll share it for you to consider for yourself.

In 1907, Dr. Duncan MacDougall of Haverhill, Massachusetts decided to weigh the soul by weighing a human being in the act of death.

He wrote, "My first subject was a man dying of tuberculosis. It seemed to me best to select a patient dying with a disease that produces great exhaustion, the death occurring with little or no muscular movement, because in such a case the beam could be kept more perfectly at balance and any loss occurring readily noted. The patient was under observation for three hours and forty minutes before death, lying on a bed arranged on a light framework built upon very delicately balanced platform beam scales. The patient's comfort was looked after in every way, although he was practically moribund when placed upon the bed. He lost weight slowly at the rate of one ounce per hour due to evaporation of moisture in respiration and evaporation of sweat. During all three hours and forty minutes I kept the beam end slightly above balance near the upper limiting bar in order to make the test more decisive if it should come. At the end of three hours and forty minutes he expired and

suddenly coincident with death the beam end dropped with an audible stroke hitting against the lower limiting bar and remaining there with no rebound. The loss was ascertained to be three-fourths of an ounce.” Dr. McDougall found the soul in six patients to weigh between 0.5 to 1.5 ounces.²³

For scientists who are people of faith, like Kenneth R. Miller, a Biologist at Brown University, asking about the science of the soul is pointless, in a way, because it is not a subject science can address. He stated, “It is not physical and investigateable in the world of science”. Dr. Miller spoke often at college campuses and elsewhere, and was regularly asked, “What do you say as a scientist about the soul?” His answer was always the same: “As a scientist, I have nothing to say about the soul. It’s not a scientific idea.”

²⁴

Since the structural existence of the soul cannot be scientifically measured, does it mean it does not exist?

I would ask that you consider the same logic expanded upon about the truth of the mind (another unscientific construct). I believe I can make the assumption that we agree that the ambivalent intangible concept of the mind is by the nature of its function in the organ of the brain. Therefore, I would argue the plausibility that since we have beliefs, and for some they are ingrained by our intangible faith, then these must be a function of the soul.

With my life’s story as a testimony of truth, I can assert that I was saved from repeating the same actions that maintained me on a continual cycle of recurring experience. By restoring me, my self-worth was no longer found in the self that I was; but rather, in the new creation that I became 15 years ago because of the experience of transforming love.

Since then, I think before I act, no longer ruled by distorted emotions. Now I am guided by a Truth that I have been unable to dispute, as my belief of undeniable love is

predicated upon the character traits that I'm now called to achieve and that I will forever aspire to in life: *Servitude, integrity, just, righteous, faithful, loyal, generous, humility, purpose-focused, hardworking, wise, joyous, listener, gracious, kind, encourager, diligent, resourceful and productive* –Proverbs 1-31

Ultimately, the answer to the questions I had pondered most of my existence led to a personal paradigm shift from one of needing to 'know' from a human perspective (which is limited) to one of seeking to gain and to emulate divine truth in love.

The Power of Language

It is said that the outward expression of the inward condition can be known through the spoken word.

The climb to redemption and restoration requires courage and getting equipped daily. One of my daily struggles has been my use of words. I think we can all agree that we have never been as conscientious about words as we have become in the 21st century. This has occurred primarily due to the proliferation of media through which we can now communicate our thoughts, ideas, and beliefs with one another universally.

Coincidentally, the research of language and psychology only started gaining momentum at the end of the 20th century, notably because of the development of such computerized systems such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) developed by James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D. in 1980.

This computer-based text analysis program allows scientists to explore how our use of communication affects us, and also how its analysis can tell others information about our persona. Prior scholars had to manually calculate word use

and divide them into constructs/variables, etc. It was an extremely arduous and time-consuming endeavor.

Wouldn't it be interesting to complete research to examine a sample of high profile celebrities who use public media to express themselves in order to identify personal socially constructed meaning?

Today, if someone is considered part of the pop culture and they say something that is televised, millions of people tune in, some taking their words as truth. For example, we are currently in the midst of a presidential election in the U.S., and I think that we can agree, no matter our political views, that Donald Trump has masterfully used language to gain free publicity and to propagate his story. Many would say that he has expertly used the art of shocking others into attention by his use of language to express his personal views/beliefs about socially shared governmental issues. The outcome of his strategy remains to be seen (as of this writing, the election outcome is not yet known), albeit it has generated him tremendous free media attention.

My personal experience has been that **words are powerful—they can imprint and perpetuate beliefs in one's self and others**. In the early stages of my professional development, during my studies in rehabilitation I never forgot a lesson on person-first language. Specifically, the importance of being intentional in our use of words not to dehumanize individuals with disability (previously, I might have said 'disabled people'). For many years our North American society utilized terms such as blind, cripple, and retarded to depict individuals with specific types of disabilities. We now know that these terms discriminate and can lead to the formation of generalized perceptions of the potential of individuals with disabilities. Professionals in the field of rehabilitation are given language sensitivity training in order to effectively work with individuals with disability, to ensure that we do not further perpetuate inappropriate and inaccurate words in society.

As you now know, there are phrases in my life's dialogue that resonate to this day and they were uttered when I was maybe six or seven years old. The words my mother spoke to me **then** served to shape my belief system about relationships with certain men and the position that I should take in a relationship, in order to have control.

As a parent now myself, I've been very motivated, although it has taken time to recognize my personal language of trauma. However, the motivation to arrest the inheritance of traumatic abuse in the lives of my daughters has been a greater motivator than any work required to accomplish it. That is not to say that I am able to control every word that comes out of my mouth, especially when I am passionately angry, but the overriding intent to improve it is always there.

A foothold is the reality that we have a tendency to hurt the ones who are closest to us. And I do still find that I will project ill feelings that might be consuming me at the time towards my husband, and sometimes out of frustration, towards my mother or daughters. It is interesting to me that I have surrounded myself with strong female friends. Although each relationship is different, my reactions with words towards them are always consistently more refined, filtered. At least that has been my perception. You would have to ask them if that has been their experience.

The point is, be intentional with the words that you use with your children and others. Our words can pierce the heart and cause great pain. **Language provides a window into our beliefs.** Just as it can empower, it can also be defeatist.

Always remember that once words are uttered, they cannot be retracted and all too often remain with the recipient.

Step 2 - Realign

Beliefs that lead to Self-Expression

Now it is time to examine your belief system of trauma and pay close attention to beliefs about self and the world—and how these are then projected onto others. Most trauma victims typically have ingrained beliefs of inadequacy and resonating themes of significant distrust. Our beliefs can lead us towards a prevalence of faulty maladaptive behavior and coping styles.

There are five identified core beliefs (as found in literature review) of sexual abuse victims. Each belief construct in trauma-informed work has to be considered from a bi-dimensional perspective. We have to consider how the belief relates to our self and to others (the world).²⁵

The five are: **safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, and control.**

^{69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74} To follow are a few examples of how you might process the various belief constructs for yourself. To assist you, please complete the posttraumatic cognitions inventory (PTCI) self-assessment. A pdf copy of the self-directed screen can be found on www.drjvera.com. It can provide you with insight about the type of thoughts that you have developed after a traumatic experience and their relationship to the following **three principal** components:

- (1) Negative Cognitions (thoughts/beliefs) about Self
- (2) Negative Cognitions about the World; and
- (3) Self-Blame.⁷¹

Below is an example to assist in conceptualizing how a trauma experience can lead to distorted beliefs:

Safety

Self – I feel threatened by males who I perceive as having disproportionate power over me.

Other – I never think anyone is ever safe from danger.

Trust

Self – I don't trust my own judgement.

Other – I don't trust men.

Esteem

Self – I am not worthy of love.

Other – Men are no good.

Intimacy

Self – Sex is power.

Other – They just want to meet their own needs.

Control

Self – I need a vice, i.e. alcohol, drugs, and food; otherwise, I don't trust myself.

Other – I'd rather be in control rather than allow others to take from me.

Let's examine how our beliefs might have been formed.

Some believe that one's personality can provide insight of predisposition to the probability of developing more serious and significant belief distortions that could lead to psychological distress.^{69, 71} The most common psychological disorder amongst trauma victims is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. This is a mental illness that can develop after a person is exposed to one or more traumatic events, such as sexual assault, warfare, traffic collisions, terrorism, or other threats on a person's life. Symptoms include disturbing recurring flashbacks, avoidance or numbing of memories of

the event, and hyperarousal that continues for more than a month after the occurrence of a traumatic event.

Although most people who have experienced a traumatizing event will not develop PTSD,⁷⁵ people who experience interpersonal trauma (e.g., sexual assault, child abuse) are believed to have a greater probability of developing the disorder, as opposed to people who experience non-assault based trauma such as accidents, natural disasters, and witnessing trauma.⁷⁶ Also, children are less likely to develop PTSD after trauma than adults, especially if they are under ten years of age.⁷⁵

In studies of PTSD there has been research that extended the discussion to include identification of personality types as a variable that might predict the potential of developing PTSD. Conclusively, it has been revealed that the more rigid one's belief styles are, it may render the individual more susceptible to developing psychological distress.⁷⁸

Others postulate that beliefs are formed based upon a person's locus of control, which in essence aligns itself with beliefs about personality types to some extent.

In psychology, the concept of the locus of control was first described by Julian Rotter in 1954. This concept developed out of his generalized expectancy hypothesis, which suggests that a behavior is controlled by a person's expectation (belief) of what will most likely happen as a result. As part of his social learning theory, Rotter emphasizes the connection between behavior and one's personal, subjective experience of past outcomes.

Locus of control therefore is a concept that describes the degree to which people believe they control the outcomes of their own lives. Locus refers to location, either internal or external, from whence controlling forces are thought to originate. Locus of control refers to a generalized set of

beliefs. However, an individual may exist at any point on a continuum from entirely internal to entirely external.

For example, individuals who have a *highly internal locus of control* tend to believe that they have a high degree of control over what happens in their lives. A person like this may believe that their good health is due to a healthy diet and exercise, or that winning a game is due to skill and effort. These individuals tend to see the good and bad things that happen to themselves and others as a result of their own actions or lack of action.

Individuals who have a *highly external locus of control* primarily tend to believe that the events in their lives are controlled by external factors like luck, fate, others' behavior, or "powerful others." For example, this person would believe that good health is due to genetics or environmental factors, or that winning a game is largely due to lucky events. These individuals tend to see the good and bad things that happen to them and others as being controlled by factors outside of their control.

In his work, Rotter was quick to assert that locus of control cannot be simply stated as either/or, and is not unchangeable. Individuals may generally fall closer to one end or the other of the locus of control spectrum, but in specific situations they may attribute an outcome to the opposite end of the spectrum. Likewise, an individual's locus of control may change over time.

If you are interested in completing a self-assessment to find out your current locus of control, please go to the resource tab at www.drjvera.com to access a pdf of Rotter's Locus of Control Scale

The key takeaway here is that in order to modify beliefs, we have to learn more about ourselves. Then we will be able to effectively self-regulate our emotions and **realign** our faulty thinking. Once this is achieved then we are well on our way

towards realigning our emotions and beliefs to lead to new behavior.

Recap in Step 1- Reset: We learned how to begin to identify our trigger-emotions that perpetuate our faulty beliefs. We then discussed the importance of language and its view (a window) into our beliefs. Another identified facet of ourselves that we have to consider now as adult survivors is our personality typology/locus of control and its potential influence.

We have the ability to control our mind by making intentional choices to change our thinking, by being aware of our linked emotions and language.

There are substantial resources available to us in the community to assist in identifying specific blocking beliefs that impair our functioning in a particular area of our lives. Please visit the resource tab at www.drjvera.com for additional information on how to access free resources and individualized guidance, if needed.

8

Embody Freedom - Reconcile

I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which I am divinely called.

– Philippians 3:14

A Gift - There has been no greater piece of wisdom gained in my life to date than the power of Love through forgiveness (grace). Once a trauma victim, now an overcomer, I've learned that we have to forgive ourselves and those who joined us in our experience of trauma. I am not going to sugarcoat that this was in any way an easy feat for me, or for others, who have gone through this journey of survival. The fact is that we can process our trauma, come to some understanding of it, but if there is no surrender of the anger, hatred, bitterness and pain through forgiveness, then transformation cannot fully occur.

I know this sounds impossible, to forgive the unforgiveable. Believe me I know...

However, it starts with us forgiving ourselves. As a child we were innocent, but with the experience of trauma our thinking and self-worth quickly took shape through our internal dialogue with such thoughts as *maybe I did something to deserve this...* And then as we got older, additional compounding thoughts emerged...such as these that ruminated in my head:

- You are stupid to put yourself in the same situation again and again.
- This relationship is going to fail anyway, so why bother.
- I'll tear it down myself before it can be taken from me.
- I'm broken, so of course it's not their fault, it is mine.
- It doesn't matter, it's just sex. No big deal, and really, I'm in control once he gets what he wants.
- He wants to go, so what, it's not like it hasn't happened before.
- I am not worthy of love.

Our self-dialogue has been playing throughout our lives over and over again. And typically we have further ingrained it by reiterating the language to ourselves...*I am unlovable, stupid, unworthy, ugly, broken, shameful.*

Until one day, like I did, you decide to stop the madness because you realize that life done your way has only caused you and others pain. We are the only species that will hit itself against the same rock repeatedly by continually repeating the same mistakes. Even animal species know enough to avoid the same rock.

Then you answer the knock on your heart, that silent voice that had always been there, but you just did not recognize it for who He was. Now you hear a whisper telling you that your worth is not measured by earthly values, but by His, who created you.

You were created in the image of the Creator. Blessed and given reign over all else created on the earth. An awesome responsibility, if we really think about it. But the greatest of His gifts to us is His grace. He accepts us just as we are: broken and imperfect. There is no sin greater or lesser than another. We are all sinners. There is absolutely nothing that we could or will ever do to gain His grace. It is freely given.

I could be the most perceived altruistic person on the planet, believing that because I have a good heart and do good works, then I am good enough. People will remember what I did... Let me be bold, there is no amount of good deed that will secure your salvation. Because we, you and I, are fallen sinners.

Only through Him have I learned that *there is (true) forgiveness of sins for all who repent* – Luke 24:47 NLT. His gift of forgiveness has been at the core of my healing. I had to make the choice to take a bold step in faith and confess my sins to my Creator, even though He knows all. This process of taking ownership of my sins was releasing, as it broke all chains associated with it that were binding me. Then it provided me with the insight that if I was worthy of such redemptive love, then anyone and everyone else was and is. I now walk through life in trust of an undeniable Love, seeking to mature in faith and to emulate this love in all my remaining days.

The soul-freeing experience of unconditional forgiveness is immeasurable. It manifested in me through a renewed passion for myself and for others. I had always had an innate love of people and a desire to help others, but there were exceptions. Towards men, and in particular, towards those men who had wronged me, there was an impermeable wall.

It did not happen all at once, but over the years, taking baby steps in faith. Situations presented themselves in which I had to choose to either walk through the experience in Love, or to run, avoid, and repress it. This required an adjustment to the lens through which I viewed others, and in time, it became my overriding perspective.

A few years ago, I received a call from my mother who advised that one of my abusers was terminally ill, at death's door. The call affected me in a way I never expected—I fell to my knees and started praying for him. I prayed that he

would repent for what he had done to me and to who knows how many others. The grief I felt in the moment was overwhelming. In that prayerful state, I forgave him and prayed that he would repent and be saved.

Shortly thereafter, I attended my weekly women's bible study and I shared this testimony with the ladies. There was no dry eye, but at the end of the study, when most had already left, a lady took me aside and told me, "I was sexually abused, and although I admire you for what you've been able to do, I will never forgive the man who did that to me." She had such anger, contempt, and pain in her eyes. She and I had several conversations afterwards during which I shared a great deal of my story while she listened. Sometime later, I learned that she was battling terminal cancer, so I got on my knees for her and prayed that she would forgive. I don't know if she ever did because she went home to be with the Lord, but to this day, the look of sheer anger and loathing in her eyes when we talked remains with me. It serves as a constant reminder (as do so many countless other examples) that harboring negative feelings only harms us, not the other person. They continue their life possibly oblivious to our pain.

I'll take our discussion a step further by asking you to think about how harboring negative feelings may have negatively impact your psyche and physical health.

I hold all my emotional reactions in my gut and right between my shoulder blades and eyes. Any time that I am blessed with the opportunity to have a massage, the therapists always tell me the same thing: *You are tight and twisted* (in the physical areas I mentioned). I also have always had gastrointestinal issues. As a matter of interest, they run in my family. I personally don't think that there is any mistake that my mother suffered skin cancer in her lower colon of all places. But we'll discuss our neuro- physiological make-up and the undeniable mind-body connection in a bit.

For now, I want to impress that I am in no way suggesting that you have to go out and personally seek to forgive the person or people who have done you wrong face-to-face, or by any other media. I tried this as a young adult and it backfired miserably, likely doing more harm than good to myself. However, what I am certain of is that you have to surrender your hatred, anger, and bitterness through forgiveness of yourself and others, if you want to be free.

Like in all training in life, detoxification is a necessary component of healthy living. Once you are able to purge all those negative emotions, the weight that has been forever bearing down on you will be lifted and you will then be able to take the next steps towards your climb to freedom.

What can forgiveness look like? Sometimes it takes the form of a written correspondence, a journal entry, or an in-person dialogue. But like I stated, it does not have to; it can also be that the correspondence/entry you write gets buried or burnt to symbolize its release. The key is to **release and surrender**.

A word of caution: Don't seek validation or forgiveness from the other person because they may still be in the grips of their sin. You have to discern, by evaluating the significance of the people in your life. Based upon this you will be able to determine what type of action you will have to take to forgive them.

Notice my language use: the "significance of the people." There is no doubt in my mind that my relationships in early adulthood resulted situationally. I did not choose them, but they sought me out and I allowed them in. As I have matured, it has become increasingly clear that there will be people that enter our lives with their own agenda. Others who are well intended, but transient and plant seeds. Then there are those who we choose to be involved with (invest). These individuals build us up and the relationship is collaborative and mutually fulfilling.

Have you ever been in the company of a person and after leaving them you feel utterly exhausted? It is like they have sucked the life out of you and you're left baffled by the experience. Being a people person, I've had to learn to set boundaries. I deal with people from all walks of life and with all sorts of history. If I want to remain healthy and to be an effective Agent of Change®, setting boundaries is essential not only in my professional life, but for me personally.

Boundaries are those invisible lines drawn in the sand of your life that are fluid at times, but serve to protect you so that you can be an effective Agent of Change®. It's the ability to know your limits, to say 'No' when needed, and to be comfortable with your decisions.

This process is enhanced when you realize that you can operate from an internal locus of control. You do not need the approval and acceptance of others to love yourself. Your actions and motives are not guided by others, but by your **internal eternal compass** (core) that steers you towards your unique purpose daily.

Remember, people will cross our path in life and it is up to us to discern if there is like-mindedness. A desire to uplift and have authenticity in Love or if the relationship has the potential of being toxic.

Surrounding myself with negative thinkers has never proven to be of any benefit. Of course, people we value have their good and bad days, and we should not abandon those relationships because of the bad days. However, when negativity is a constant in the relationship then I say run because it is contagious.

There are those, however, who despite their negative experiences foster a relationship invested upon mutual growth, understanding, and reciprocity of trust and love. These relationships are essential to your chosen 'inner circle' of support. Your warriors.

You might be surprised by what I'm going to share, but I believe that although remnants of my experience of sexual trauma remains evident in my story, the Love that I have today has overpowered any damage that could have ever been caused.

Today, my quality of relationships and dialogue, as well as my proximity to people, is intentional. I have an immense passion to reach and to mentor those caught in the grips of their trauma-bonds. I want to dispel the lies that they have to live condemned and imprisoned in their minds and soul.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. — Genesis 50:20 NASB

If I can. You can.

What attitude will you adapt to move forward every day?

I am not any different from you. We have the capacity to be tremendously compassionate to one another and towards our self, to listen to others' stories and to find relatability, and to share in their experience. Victor Frankl stated, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing...the last of the human freedoms...to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

I have chosen that the vision for my life is to forever embody my freedom. I live by the promise of redemption, health, and victory. In faith, this empowers me to live out my purpose daily.

Now in Your Freedom Challenge Journal© – free download found at www.drjvera.com – jot down your life's mantra.

What does it take to live out your purpose daily?

From the examples of and in my life, my firsthand experience of unresolved trauma caused detrimental effects on my psyche and body. Not to mention, and by no means less important, the pain that might have been averted had I gained this wisdom earlier. But, there is no way to return to the past for a redo. What needs to be done now is to live each moment in the day intentionally; we are better equipped to deal with it because of what we learned from the past.

For myself, I now make it a point to fill-up daily, first thing, with an attitude of gratitude for a new day. It is part of my routine of healthy habits. We are not promised tomorrow, therefore, tend to your soul today.

Also, take care of your physical body. For years my body was a source of considerable pain. Not your traditional concept of pain and aches, but rather my physical outer shell was a source of trigger for emotional pain. Whether I was thin or robust (simply overweight), value statements were made and internalized. I came to the belief that superficial beauty was powerful and perceived by most favorably. In social psychology this is an example of the halo effect.

The halo effect is a cognitive confirmation bias in which an observer's overall impression of a person (company, brand, or product) influences their feelings and thoughts about the character or properties.²⁹ It was named by psychologist Edward Thorndike in reference to a person being perceived as having a halo. The halo effect is a specific type of confirmation bias, where positive feelings in one area cause ambiguous or neutral traits to be viewed positively.³⁰

Everyone wants to be liked, but this body obsession led me to an external locus of control for many years in my life, as I had learned to equate the positive attention I seemed to get when I was outwardly attractive with acceptance and love. The opposite also held true. The added dimension of

trauma was that, historically, I had always attracted negative experiences in early adulthood.

During those times when I was in self-loathing mode I would binge-eat and gain substantial weight. If we were ever to meet, you would see that I am naturally petite, standing five foot and one-and-a-half inches in height, with small bone structure and no history of obesity in my heritage. How was it that I once reached a weight of just shy of 200 pounds? What might surprise you is that it was at a time in my life when I should have been the happiest.

In my experience, stuffing feelings, or repression, took the form of bad eating habits. I gained emotional gratification from hoarding comfort foods, but then would look in the mirror, hate the image in the reflection, and go through periods of deprivation. Or someone would make a slight off the cuff comment likely without much thought and say things like, "She must not love herself...such a pretty face, but no willpower," and this would just send me into an all too recurrent cycle.

For several years, I had size zero through size plus one in my closet. Depending upon what I was trying to accomplish, my size and its presentation would match the objective in the moment. Since we have experienced such loss of control in the past due to perceived helplessness, controlling what we can becomes a habit.

Eating habits and lifestyle choices are a tell-sign of emotional wellbeing. When we are depressed, changes in appetite and sleep hygiene occur. These cycles of negative changes in wellbeing are further affected by the reality that having been sexually traumatized we do not perceive our body as our own. Therefore, the habits become unconscious and a possible anxiety response. But if these cycles are not addressed, body perception can become too distorted and lead to serious eating disorders.

The good news is that these behavioral responses to emotions, although sometimes take time, can be healed and resolved.

Your body is a temple to be cherished. You only have one and it requires tending, and at times, mending. Take the time to get to know yourself well and to restore balance. This will require planning (preparation), discipline, and modification of old habits (behavior).

Here is my daily routine:

1. Fill-Up, feed the soul.
2. Hydrate sufficiently. It detoxifies impurities from our consumed diet.
3. Regularly invest time to detoxify my lower colon. The toxins that build up in our gut has been linked with types of systemic cancers.
4. Eat as cleanly as possible. Stay away from processed, chemically refined foods. Make greens and fruits, grains, and algae part of your daily intake.
5. Supplement food intake with essential minerals, oils, vitamins, and probiotics. Our readily available food sources and daily aging bodies require it.
6. Move...your body.
7. Sleep sufficiently. Most adults require 7-8 hours of sleep to afford regeneration of cells and to be productive. Not surprising, the number of hours needed declines as we age for obvious reasons.

When unforeseeable health issues present, I utilize homeopathic medicine and western medical treatment, but first, I get on my knees and pray for grace and healing. Science, as I have attempted to showcase, can give us information...but there are human phenomena that human science will never know. I have seen the power of prayer and God's grace for healing surpass all understanding.

Step 3 - Reconcile

Solution-Focused Behavior Building

In this step I have to disclose: All the presented learned information of sexual trauma and its influence on our emotional responses and beliefs originated from exhaustive empirical scientific research review on the subject. Most from primarily a medical/pathology-based framework.

Although, it is relevant to acknowledge that this empirical body of knowledge of victims of trauma does provide some understanding of how we might develop deficits in ability for altruism, difficulties with empathy and trust of others, become preoccupied with self-preservation and develop psychopathology in some cases such as depression, PTSD, addiction, and eating disorders.^{31, 32, 33, 35, 36}

Some medical empirical research has started the dialogue of viewing trauma experience as a potential precursor to character traits that lead to health and wellness. Particularly, the finding that the intricacy of the circuitry of our brain develops, changes, and reforms over time³⁹ supports the notion that **with what we do know thus far about brain function, change is possible**. Even amidst studies of samples of individuals with diagnosed psychopathology, scientists have isolated neurotransmitters that influence expression of either destructive or restorative behaviors.

For example, Oxytocin has been isolated and found to be elevated in traumatized adolescents who presented with psychopathology, and is linked with increased aggressiveness and violence. But also, low levels of the same neurotransmitter are linked with mutual trust.^{37, 38}

The paradigm shift that started approximately 10 years ago has grown out of positive psychology and other related emerging disciplines. Ironically, my approach to working and guiding others has always been one of empowerment

through strength-building rather than identification of deficits.

By working through a person's strengths change is more palatable. You see, even though this book may have started with my personal story of trauma, you will learn as I did that **our experiences in part shape who we can become**. Though I will be the first to proclaim that while negative experiences are difficult at the time, they too can serve a greater purpose. Through experience we build character traits that over time and through refinement can become our greatest asset towards attaining happiness, joy, fulfillment, and victory.

There is no doubt from my shared life story that each trial created opportunity for learning of self and others, as well as of the world in which we live. Also that I am not alone in my experience. I have tremendous gratitude that I was afforded grace to experience that which transformed me, but which did not destroy me in the process.

I can share endless stories of others who have overcome their own experience of abuse and other types of trauma to claim victory, lead productive and fulfilled lives, with love and joy. And your story is remarkable as well.

The key takeaway is that if terrible experiences can be offset by just enough good compensatory experiences then we can re-find a sense of our goodness, which will then lead to enhancement of empathy and other formative qualities within us.³⁴

Through my story, I could see that I developed several character traits that might have otherwise remained recessive had it not been for my experience of trauma. Through disciplined work, I have become a resilient survivor (one who continues to grow and thrive in spite of and often because of my history of trauma). A coined term by scholars for this phenomenon is **post-traumatic growth**.⁴²

My blueprint to thrive in life, despite my difficulties, has always been:

BUILD UPON STRENGTH ABILITIES + WISDOM = PERSONAL GROWTH

Consequently, in the first two steps of this process model we explored the possible impact of our trauma emotions (feelings) and beliefs (thinking), as well as how language, relationships, mind-body health and wellness impact us; and the transforming power of forgiveness and grace (soul work). The supposition was made that the three prerequisite conditions outlined in **Step 1** had been fulfilled (unpack, process your story, and make the decision to change). This equipped us with information about our self and our perceptions of our world.

In **Step 3**, we will identify our character strengths gained from our trauma experience. The overriding objective of our shared journey through my story of trauma.

Character Strengths – Self Assessment©

This self-assessment requires that you read each statement carefully and truthfully, and then tell us how much you “Agree” or “Disagree” with each by putting the appropriate number between 1 through 5 in the box to the right of the statement. Each of us is uniquely different. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. The self-guided results simply delineate what character strengths are more prevalent in you at this time. Rank your top three character strengths and review their qualities in the descriptions below.

1	2	3	4	5
totally disagree	slightly disagree	neutral	slightly agree	totally agree

1	When faced with the dilemma of telling the truth, you will do it regardless of consequences.	
2	There are few things in your adult life that you are remorseful about.	
3	You believe that all men are created equal.	
4	You accept corrections and instruction well.	
5	When a bill for a meal arrives, you customarily tip over the recommended amount.	
6	When you start a task, you have to finish it.	
7	It's important to you to enrich others' understanding of things.	
8	If given a reward, no matter the amount, you are gracious.	
9	Your outlook is always optimistic.	
10	It's important to you to have the facts in situations that require you to make decisions.	
11	Others see you as a high level multi-tasking individual.	
12	You will donate to a worthy cause, to ensure that others don't go without.	
13	You will not consider taking any action that might contradict your beliefs.	
14	It's important to you to hear what others need to express.	
15	If you are part of a discussion it is important to you to assert your known information.	
16	You are typically happy and satisfied.	
17	You have a cheerful disposition most days.	
18	Accomplishing goals is important.	
19	If you know that something is against the rules of the game, you won't do it.	
20	You prefer to give individualized attention to others.	
21	You like to be helpful to others.	
22	In a crisis, you assume a leadership role to motivate others.	
23	It is essential to you to be decent to other people.	

24	You don't seek to be repaid when you lend money to others.	
25	You learn that your best friend's boyfriend is cheating, and you will be the person to tell them of the betrayal.	
26	Your work style requires painstaking attention to details.	
27	You recognize others for what they have achieved in life.	
28	When a new neighbor moves into the community, you will be the organizer of a welcome committee.	
29	You don't like to make a promise you may not be able to keep.	
30	You push through tirelessly when a project must be completed.	
31	Two people reach the finish line of a race at the same time. You will ask them to share the prize.	
32	You are comfortable being in the spotlight.	
33	You expect that if you work hard you will get good results.	
34	You can find something positive in all situations.	
35	Nothing ever seems to get you down.	
36	Being reliable to people is important to you.	
37	There is very little that can distract you from a task.	
38	You receive an offer for your house on sale. You start negotiating it with potential buyers, but before the deal is closed you receive a better offer. You will inform the potential second buyers you are already in contract.	
39	You derive pleasure from being able to do something unsolicited for others.	
40	Keeping an entrusted secret is a priority.	
41	It is important to you to achieve a significant result.	
42	You find satisfaction in small gains in life.	
43	When you decide to do a task you complete it thoroughly and well.	

44	You prefer others to recognize your accomplishments.	
45	You are optimistic even when faced with difficult decisions.	

Character Strengths – Self Assessment© Scoring Key

Record the number from 1-5 for each item number in the chart below. Then add the total and document it in the space provided next to the initial. The higher your total number in the character box, the more pronounced that strength is evident through your responses. We are all have character strengths and areas that we can continue to improve upon through intentional learning and living.

4. ____ 10. ____ 15. ____ W - ____	1. ____ 19. ____ 25. ____ I - ____	31. ____ 38. ____ 3. ____ F - ____	2. ____ 13. ____ 23. ____ R - ____	29. ____ 36. ____ 40. ____ FA - ____
45. ____ 34. ____ 17. ____ H - ____	5. ____ 12. ____ 24. ____ G - ____	28. ____ 39. ____ 21. ____ K - ____	44. ____ 32. ____ 27. ____ H - ____	16. ____ 18. ____ 37. ____ D - ____
43. ____ 30. ____ 26. ____ DI - ____	42. ____ 8. ____ 16. ____ C - ____	22. ____ 9. ____ 35. ____ E - ____	41. ____ 33. ____ 11. ____ P - ____	7. ____ 14. ____ 20. ____ GL - ____

Top 3 Core Character – Document the initial in ranking order and then review the qualities as outlined below.

1. ____, 2. ____, 3. ____

Lead Character Strengths Identified

(W)ise: Having the power of discerning and judging properly as to what is true or right; possessing discernment, judgment, or discretion; characterized by or showing such power; judicious or prudent; and having knowledge or information as to facts, circumstances, etc.

(I)ntegrity: Adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.

(F)air: Treating all people the same according to the notion of justice; free from bias or injustice; evenhandedness.

(R)ighteous: In accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin.

(FA)ithful: Having or showing true or constant support or loyalty; keeping your promises and doing what you are supposed to do.

(H)opeful: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best; to continue to hope, although the outlook does not warrant it.

(G)enerous: Freely giving or sharing money and other valuable things; providing more than the amount that is needed or normal: abundant or ample; and showing kindness and concern for others.

(K)indness: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.

(H)umility: Not thinking you are better than other people; letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves.

(D)etermined: Having a strong feeling that you are going to do something and that you will not allow anyone or anything to stop you.

(DI)ligent: Characterized by steady, earnest, and energetic effort.

(C)ontent: In a state of peaceful happiness.

(E)ncourager: To make (someone) more determined, hopeful, or confident; to make (something) more appealing

or more likely to happen; and to make (someone) more likely to do something: to tell or advise (someone) to do something.

(P)roductive: Doing or achieving a lot: working hard and getting good results. Producing or able to produce something especially in large amounts; causing or resulting in something.

(GL) Good Listener: Makes an effort to hear something; pay attention; heed.

Once you have completed the self-assessment and identified your leading character strengths, it will provide insight on how to approach the realignment of your emotions and beliefs which will lead to building positive behaviors.

Side Note: Consideration, as you go through my process model, if you begin to uncover trauma memories that are invoking unfamiliar responses in you, please continue reading.

My story is not my own because trauma, and in particular, sexual trauma is a shared experience by millions of people. It is a near universal experience particularly amongst individuals with behavioral health issues. If you have struggled with depression, anxiety, or eating disorders, addictions or posttraumatic disorder, please know that it is not **weakness**. You are **not alone**. But you may need a level of care that is outside the scope of the current presented model.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health, 55%–99% of women in substance use treatment and 85%–95% of women in the public mental health system report a history of trauma, with the abuse most commonly having occurred in childhood.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study

conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente in the U.S. is one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess

associations between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being. It was found that:

- Almost two-thirds of the study participants reported at least one (1) adverse childhood experience of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, or family dysfunction; and
- More than 1 of 5 reported three or more such experiences.

There is increasing evidence that traditional psychotherapeutic strategies (talk therapy) are ineffective alone. This has led to development of Trauma-Informed Care models in working with trauma victims. Trauma-Informed Care aims to:

- Avoid re-victimizing;
- Appreciates that many problem behaviors arose from necessary defense/coping mechanisms;
- Provides increased choices and control over healing process; and
- Is culturally competent and sensitive.⁴¹

Although outcome research is still in its infancy, it is now known that trauma can affect the whole self, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Therefore, clinical care has to address all aspects of the experience.

There are Trauma-Informed Care resources available in the community. Please feel free to contact me directly through my contact portal at www.drjvera.com and I'll be happy to connect you with a provider in your geographical region.

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