

In the 20 years from when I finished college until March of 2012, when my father died, I didn't write a word about him. In fact, I hardly wrote anything at all. He took up too much space, held so many words hostage in my brain, I didn't have enough letters left to squeeze in around the edges of him. He was an infection spread through my whole life, though I hadn't seen or spoken to him for years.

Even after his death, it took another year for me to write anything about his abuse. Based on the ways I've tried to live my life, I don't often think of myself as a coward, but here's what's true: I spent decades terrified to tell my story--forty-two years of mute terror.

When I was in college, I took a couple of creative writing classes, but I was afraid to keep writing, because of a lawsuit my father brought against my mother. I didn't want more writing classes, more practice using my voice, because every time I used it, things in my family seemed to get worse. In the Spring of my freshman year at Oberlin, the year before I transferred to Stanford, my father filed a lawsuit against my mother for a refund in all the child support and college tuition he had paid for me since the day I'd turned 18.

The premise of his lawsuit was that, since I'd taken a year off before my freshman year (a move which had been signed off and approved by him and his lawyer before I committed to it and deferred my freshman year), it was proof I was financially supporting myself. That voided the divorce agreement between my parents, which he took to mean he didn't have to pay for me to go to college at all. The complaint against my mother went on to state that I wasn't worth educating anyway, because I was a bad seed, a drug user, and stupid as a bucket of hair. His "evidence" for these things was threefold: I was out as a lesbian, I looked a little "rough" around the edges (which meant I wasn't gender conforming an--didn't own even *one* pair of ballet flats,) and had chosen to attend Oberlin, which was a place renowned for its druggies, hippies and free-thinkers, and therefore, a substandard place to get an education.

It didn't matter that I was basically straight-edged and getting excellent grades. It didn't matter that these accusations were legally irrelevant. My father's purpose, in listing these concerns, was to create a public record that would cast doubt on my competency and my worth as a human being, should I ever decide to speak out about his abuse. In the years since my father brought that lawsuit, I have seen perpetrators create lawsuits and public campaigns against their victims over and over again. (For a current example, look no further than Donald Trump.) It's typical perpetrator behavior, but at the time I didn't understand it and I decided that my silence was the only way to protect my mother from further legal assaults.

We got the notice about my father's lawsuit just before I'd been accepted to Stanford, and when we informed him I was changing schools, he didn't say, "I'm so proud of my daughter for

getting into Stanford,” or “Maybe she isn’t a black hole of intellect after all.” What he did say was, “Those *assholes!*” as though my mother and I were using my acceptance to Stanford as a way to make him look bad. But I had applied to Stanford without any knowledge that my father would sue my mother. I had simply been trying to find a place where I could be a little fish in a big pond, with the added bonus of being as far away as I could get from my family without falling off the continental United States, and moving to California from Massachusetts fit that bill.

After I posted my first blog post in 2014, I crawled under my covers and stayed there for two days, stiff with fear. When I was a girl, my father told me that when I grew up, and didn’t need him anymore, he would send someone to kill me. He would say, “You won’t know, til the last moments of your life, who I sent, but it will be somebody you love.” It wasn’t until I turned 30 that I stopped waiting to die, stopped imagining myself crumpled in a heap in the parking lot of a grocery store, or sprawled over a hedge on a quiet sidewalk, my legs and arms at wrong angles. It wasn’t until I was 30 that I stopped waiting to die, but then, with my very next breath, it became clear I had no idea how to live.

Somedays--the ones where the air feels thick with ghosts and it is hard to breathe--one question stops me cold, knocks me just sideways, out of time. It is this: How am I a person? I am making breakfast, sitting with a client, waiting for my daughter to put on her shoes and my breath catches on this question. It is the same sound I make when I see something beautiful, or shocking, or have been punched in the stomach and can’t get air. I always hear my gasp of breath before I feel my throat contract. Then I’m back standing in the kitchen waiting to flip an egg, or stepping off the curb, or standing under the shower.

How am I even a person? The words in this question are the wrong ones, because the answer is easy. I am a person because I was born a person, and because I have not yet evolved past person into dog or tree, constellation or dirt, or whatever I might be next. So what is the right question? It’s not: How am I okay? Because I’m not always sure what okay means, and on the rare days when I feel sure about it, I don’t always meet the standard. Sure, most days, I just put on my pants and deal like the majority of other people I know, though some days, I don’t put on pants, and other days, I don’t deal very well at all.

But the words in that first question won’t relent, rearrange or compromise themselves. Here they are again. HOW AM I A PERSON? They are urgent and screaming and telling me that being a person is *of course* more than being the meat, the muscle and the bone. Being a person means I am of other people, among other people, would not exist without other people. Being a person means I need other people. I love other people.

The day I stopped waiting to die is the day I allowed myself to love. I am a person because my love grew stronger than my fear.

I am not a coward, but I was afraid for 42 years. And the truth is that I'm still afraid. Fear lives in my body like stiffness and pain and choking for breath. Fear lives protected under these layers of fat, which I both struggle with and love every day. Love lives in my body like laughter, like slow, deep sighs, like stretches and yawns, like my feet moving forward, one in front of the other. Love lives in my body when I hold my daughter and take my partner's hand. Love lives in my body when my heart aches and when I feel rage. Love lives in my body when I write.

The day I stopped waiting to die is the day I started to write again. In tiny print, in a small journal I hid in a plastic bag in the tank of my toilet, when I lived alone.

I am afraid to tell my story, but it's out in the world now. Damn, yeah, it's out there. It is hard to hold steady knowing that, though I have a right to tell my own story, the fact that I choose to causes other people pain. People have asked me, more than once, why can't I just write, but not publish? Do I just want attention? Do I want to be perceived as a hero or a martyr? For years I was silent because I was afraid. I was a shadow of a person still growing the backbone I needed to become a whole human being. I was trained, by words and experience, that speaking the truth would cause harm. This is what love says to me: "It is not truth that causes harm, my dear, it is the hiding of it."

This is what my heart screams at me: "What is the point of finally using your voice, getting to speak your truth, if you're only allowed to whisper it into a dark, empty room?"

My story doesn't belong hidden in a toilet tank. Nobody's story does.

This is what shame said before I started writing: "If you write this, nobody will love you. If you write this, you will die."

This is what shame said after I started writing and publishing: "Shame got drunk and fell down the basement stairs. I'm the rage that shame was hiding in the basement. Let's you and me go out into the world and kick some ass."

Asking somebody not to tell their story is a particular kind of violence. The obvious subtext is this: "the truth makes me uncomfortable, and my discomfort Trumps your reality. I demand you live in my reality." When I hear this particular kind of bullshit, what I see in my head is that courtroom full of girls and women at Larry Nasser's sentencing hearing, speaking their stories

into the public record, one after the next. How brave. How fierce. How that lit up my heart and restored some of my faith in humanity, especially when I saw their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters cheering them on. Each of them alone, whispering their words into a quiet, empty room, would have changed exactly nothing. This is what it means to be a person--that your love for your sisters, your fellow human beings, is stronger than your fear of reality. That your character is more important than your reputation.

I never confronted my father about his abuse publicly, much less in a court of law. I knew, deep in my heart, that if I tried, I would have been standing there alone. This is what nobody ever says: Being abused by a parent causes harm, but it's the silence and the secrets that everyone else you love asks you to keep, on their behalf, in service of their comfort, that destroys your faith in humanity--your own and everyone else's. That's the worst of it, really. It is an act of violence, justified by shame. Shame runs deep in families. But it's the *shame* that destroys families, never the truth.

This is what I teach my daughter: "Life starts at uncomfortable, Love, so let's both practice being uncomfortable." She is not a fan of this particular gem of wisdom, but I'm trying to get it in there early and often, along with "always wear pants at the dinner table," and "you will vote in every election, because if you do not use your voice it will be lost." Those seem like the building blocks of a good life.

I am still trying to let the meaning of brave live inside my cells. I still have to practice being uncomfortable, every day. The ability to be uncomfortable without freaking out and shutting down, or trying to shut everyone else down is the foundation of love.

What if we all agreed to practice being uncomfortable, today and every day? What would the world be then? Would there be more connection, more love? Would we all get to be people? I want to find out. Do you?