

SERIES | BOOK 1

# dare to *express*

a collection of bold stories  
and brave women

CHOTSANI SACKY • LAURA LEE LOTTO

JOY DANNER LEHMAN • JEN MILLER

JENNIFER WREYFORD • CHRISTY YIP



SIMERJIT SETHI • MARY LANCASTER

AMANDA GOOLSBY • IVY KAMINSKY

WIAAM YASIN • WHISPER JAMES



## CHAPTER 12

# She's An Eagle When She Flies

By Whisper James

I was sprawled, staring at the roof, trying to focus on dots of...*something*? I couldn't tell what they were because my eyes wouldn't focus and when they did, the dots multiplied.

My body was airborne for less than a tenth of a second, but it still came down hard. *Where are we? Is this a dirt road?*

A sudden turn. This time, my body slid on the slick, white leather seat. I knew it was leather because the Man driving had made sure to tell us it was. At least twice. I was not impressed at all. It still felt like plastic, and I was sliding on it just like plastic.

My mind stumbled into why fur turned to plastic once it's off the animal. It was not a coherent thought. Perhaps it was all the glasses of bubbly wine the driver had insisted I drink that were now sloshing around my brain. Or perhaps it was because I was only ten.

(You didn't read that wrong. I was ten, and drunk.)

My head was still sloshing, but I could hear the Auntie in the passenger seat, “You know, you shouldn’t have given her all that wine. Her mother may get upset at you.”

He snorted. “Do you think that I care?” I knew what he meant. He wasn’t one of my mom’s “Fish.” Of course, he could be if he wanted to. He was one of the “Big Fish.” The special ones who were rich or powerful enough. This one was rich. A Big Fish could visit any of the Homes at any time and have his choice of...companions.

That’s how I ended up here, in the back of a Mercedes, sprawled on white leather seats, trying to remember if I was remembering.

The car took a sharp left. I was not about to slide onto that fucking floor again. Instinctively, I grabbed hold of the seat cushion. My fingers touched something plastic. I pulled it out. It was a white cassette tape.

My eyes widened. “Dolly Parton’s Greatest Hits,” I read silently. I had never heard of her, but that, of course, was because I’d never heard of anyone. (Except Michael Jackson. I did know who that was, but only because in the early 80s he was EVERYWHERE. Even in Malaysia, where I was drunk and bounce-sliding around in the backseat of a car like I was in a snow globe.)

Holding the cassette tape, I was suddenly sober. Or, it felt like that because the blood had drained from my brain to help my heart beat. I was holding something from the *Outside World*.



There was a reason I’d never heard of anyone, anywhere.

I was born into and raised in the notorious cult, the Children of God. Their later aliases have been The Family of Love, The Family, and The Family International, respectively. (Yeah, some geniuses at work there.)

The Children of God is a “fundamental” Christian, apocalyptic, isolationist cult. It’s better known in the news as a sex cult, and they definitely use “fundamental” incorrectly.

If your curiosity is anything like mine, you’ll probably want to toss those names into a search engine (Protip: “Children of God” works best). But be ready. There’s a lot of information out there about them. Unfortunately, nothing good. (Unless you end up on their website. That information is—miraculously—super good.)

The Children of God came to be in 1968, when a handful of disenchanted, hippie teens followed a fifty-year-old disgraced Evangelical preacher and his children into a clubhouse and declared a “revolution against the System.”

In the post-Vietnam War era, they found plenty of disenchanted hippie teens. By the early 70s, they had grown to a point of requiring their members to report their numbers. By 1973, they had four thousand Members, five hundred eighty Homes<sup>1</sup>, were in sixty-two Countries, and one hundred twenty-two babies had been born.

That’s when I came on to the scene. I was one of the one hundred twenty-two.

Growing up in the Children of God, we were raised in institutionalized abuse. As in, all the physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual abuses you could think of... but make them institutionalized. No matter what Home you went to, you would experience the same abuses. Nothing changed, just the faces.

Isolation from the outside world—the “System”—was one of the strictest held rules. Going out into the System required intense and unrelenting supervision of at least two adults. No System school, music, books, movies, friends, jobs, relatives. No contact at all. None. No

<sup>1</sup> Homes: the cult’s name for communes

exceptions, unless you were proselytizing or asking for money. So, if you did speak to a Systemite<sup>2</sup>, *it better be about Jesus!*

That's why it was such a big deal when I decided to risk everything to sneak the cassette tape home.



I spent the rest of the ride trying to look like I was sleeping, while imagining my once-in-a-lifetime private Dolly Parton show, and begging Jesus for forgiveness.

*Just for one listen, Jesus, I promise to put it back.*

I knew I could promise that, because I knew I'd be in this backseat again.

Or bed. Or hotel room.

Luckily, it wasn't going to happen to me that night. When we got to the Man's house, the Auntie<sup>3</sup> said I was too drunk for anything and sent me to the living room—or some room with a couch.

I tumbled onto his couch. *Oh, for fucks sake. What was it with this guy and leather seating? So, no bedding?* The Auntie wasn't the nurturing type. She didn't have to be, she was a star FFer<sup>4</sup>, and one of the few allowed to be childless.

She leaned in so close, I could smell her fish dinner mixed with alcohol. *Gross.* Exhausted, I curled deeper into my knees and pretended to sleep. "Whisper?" I squeezed my eyes tighter until I heard her suck her teeth. She was preparing to hiss through them. "You better not have done anything to make the Man angry."

<sup>2</sup> Systemite: Someone who lived in the System (outside world).

<sup>3</sup> Any woman who was a member of the cult.

<sup>4</sup> FF: short for "Flirty Fishing;" aka proselytizing and getting money for the cult through prostitution. Fish were the men they targeted

The fish-whiskey smell left with the Auntie, and I started breathing for what felt like the first time that night. My cheek against the cold, plastic-leather, I didn't care that there was no pillow or blanket. With chattering teeth, I clutched my cassette tape tightly. In that moment, nothing else mattered. Not tonight. **There would be other nights and other "Mans." But not tonight.** The bubbles in my head were quieter now. Or they had all popped. *Not tonight.*

In the morning, the couch was still plasticky and cold. Those bubbles had definitely all popped. *Why is my entire body a nauseated stomach? Never mind.* I dared for a moment to touch my tape. It was still there, wrapped in my sweater like a roti. *Bleh. No rotis.* But I smiled through the queasiness; I had Dolly. I couldn't have known what that tape was going to mean to me. Or maybe I did, the way it already felt like a treasure. I was giddy all the way home. Going back to where every tomorrow was worse than every today, I knew I could bear it better now.

I had Dolly.



I always smile when I recall my triumphant ride home. I never did put that cassette tape back.

Getting away with smuggling the contraband tape into my life would end up being my salvation many times over. It was something that was mine, and only mine. In that chaotic, confused world I was growing up in, it felt like a lifeline to sanity.

Dolly stayed with me over the years, while that Man faded into the darkness, just like the many other men before him and the many men that would come after him.

## Okay

If you feel like you need a few deep breaths, that's okay. I have to take a breather sometimes too. (And it's *my* story. But, yes it's a lot.)

It's also okay if this is freaking you the fuck out. This isn't supposed to be okay. None of this was okay. A 10-year-old isn't supposed to know what being drunk tastes like. She shouldn't have understood that she was meant to ask for gold jewelry when she went with the Man(s) and that she was the trade for the gold.

If that leaves your brain screaming, and your heart begging to look away, it's a good thing. It means you are sane. The people who I grew up around were not.

I still get surprised at the levels of depraved insanity that was everyday life for me. With casual resignation I'd accepted I'd be given out to the Man again, but it was my "sin" of wanting to listen to the tape that had me trembling, bargaining with chips a little girl should never have to hold.

I didn't know then that my eventual attempts to fuse this cult god I knew with a supposed god of love would prove spiritually fatal. I think I gave up trying to understand the cult's god and why he would be so angry at the gentle wishes of a little girl, but that she would please him as crippled prey. What I did know was that the worn journey from my knees for their prayers to my knees for their phallic pacifiers was a short one.

Would it help if I took a moment to skip to the good part? It's this: *I'm okay*. I'm on the other side of these particular storms. The woman I am today is a Warrior who is proud of her scars.

I wouldn't write about my story if I wasn't. But it's not easy to read, I know. It's not easy to write. I guess that's partly why I throw some humor in.

So if anything makes you chuckle, that's okay. If you find nothing funny at all, that's also okay. (Just don't write to me about it.)

This is not to minimize anything. It was shockingly ugly what happened to so many of us. But sometimes I need to laugh. It makes my monsters a little smaller and their shadows fall a little shorter.

## She Must Have Written It For Me

One of the songs on Dolly's tape was "*The Bargain Store*." These days it's probably not one of Dolly's more recognized songs, but it was one of the ones I played over, and over and over again. From the first night I brought her home, under my headphones, I would listen to Dolly's lilting, glittery voice singing my song to me, and I would thank her with snot and tears.

The words that were "mine" said:

*My life is like a bargain store  
I may have just what you're looking for  
If you don't mind the fact that all the merchandise is used  
With a little mending it could be as good as new.*

I say "mine" because there were times where I felt so broken, I would pretend that she had written it about me. With my thumbnail years and my poor orphaned heart, I would wonder if someone could ever come along to love me, now that I was so used up. Used up, in my all-of-ten-years-old. It wouldn't be until years later that I would understand that a ten, eleven, or twelve year old wasn't meant to think they were "used up."

That little girl is the reason I have held on through hurricanes, undone monsters, and plowed through hell to ensure my children will never know this cycle. From these wounds I sourced a typhoon of unconditional acceptance, and a love without edges that will always be theirs. I transformed my abandoned little girl into their unwavering Warrior.

**That little girl is  
the reason I have  
held on through  
hurricanes,  
undone  
monsters, and  
plowed through  
hell**

As sad as it was that I had seen so much pain and abuse that I could believe those lyrics were for me, still, my soul was telling me that this wasn't love. It was registering as very wrong, even though I'd never known anything else. I like to thank Dolly for this, but obviously something in me knew. My heart was rejecting the abuse, even when my conscious mind couldn't picture living another way.

## The Necklace

There finally came the time that we would leave that country behind. The country that brought me so much pain, so much confusion, and to so many men, would be gone.

I remember it so clearly.



They said the leadership wanted us to move to a new country. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. I didn't care about the reason. We'd moved so many times already, my passport looked like a United Nations

conference. I only cared about one thing. *I wouldn't have to see the Worst Man again.*

No, not the Always-Leather-Seats Man who would get me drunk. This Man was so much worse than all the other dripping, wrinkled men. My body convulsed at the thought.

*So, how soon can we leave?*

I didn't need to ask that. I could blink, and our world would be packed up yet again. We had practice. Lots. (Is there such a thing as a professional packer? Ask me to pack a suitcase. I will tetris the shit out of that and fill it with twice as much as you can.)

*Am I watching one of those Charlie Chaplin movies?* You know the ones, where everything is going just a little too fast, but not so fast that it's on fast forward. I wanted to be on fast forward. I knew that I wanted to get out of this country—so very, very badly—but what was the rush for everyone else? *Maybe they are afraid of something too.*

I was counting down the seconds until I'd be gone from the blackest place I had ever lived. Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one counting down.

The Worst Man was too. Another Big Fish, only he was the scariest of all. I had been traded to him the most. The most gold jewelry was from him, and the most pain. I thought of how often he would tell me that I belonged to him. Sometimes I believed him, since nothing seemed to stop him.

*But leaving would...right?* I felt relief watching his eyes flash when he found out I would soon be out of reach. I was so glad. In my mind I was soaring where I would be safe from him. *Yes, I know there will be more Uncles<sup>5</sup>, but at least not him.*

<sup>5</sup> Uncles: Any man who was a member of the cult.

Except he was showing up more than usual. *Maybe because we're leaving?* I am terrified he is going to ask for one last trade. I want to not be here. *Can I pray for that?* My heart was exhausted. I curled up into my bed. I needed to cry, to hear her voice. I put my headphones on, and pressed play on my Walkman. I would imagine that I was Sandy, and Dolly would take me in for my last night. I wanted to not be here anymore. *Ain't ya got an extra bed for me and little Andy?*

*She was just a little girl, not more than six or seven  
But that night as they slept the angels took them both to heaven  
God knew little Andy would be lonesome with her gone  
Now Sandy and her puppy dog won't ever be alone*

We were leaving, in days, then in hours.

The Worst Man showed up on the last day. This time he didn't care who saw the way he grabbed my arms, and I froze from the shock of that. His hands were so tight, I was sure he had reached my bones. Suddenly he pushed something into my hand.

"You are mine, and you always will be. Wear this so you know you belong to me. I will follow and find you."

All the soaring miles in my head suddenly turned to inches. My feet were sinking in mud. It was not a small or vain threat. The Worst Man was a very top-ranking member of the military, the same military that ran the country.

I looked at my hand, even though I already knew. A gold necklace. But it was different this time. My blood suddenly felt cold inside me. The Worst Man had carved his name on it.



For the first few years after we arrived in Thailand, on the rare occasion I would be outside one of the Homes, I would scan every face looking for the Worst Man. I would see him on sidewalks and around corners. None of my body parts ever stayed where they were supposed to. I would hear my stomach in my ears and feel my heart pumping in my throat.

It was exhausting always being so terrified. One day I was so tired, I simply decided that the Worst Man was dead. I imagined his fat stomach drowning his heart and that in the last moment he'd know I had finally hated him hard enough. I stopped being afraid of him. I hoped the maggots took their time with his rot, but he would never touch *me* again. (I still won't watch James Bond movies, or listen to Nat King Cole, but I call that a win/win.)

Like an invisible collar, that necklace stayed with me, years after it had been taken and sold. My own markless branding.

During those pre-teen years, the Worst Man was my scariest nightmare, the one who could leave me trembling in fear, so much more than my dad or the Uncles would. Perhaps because he was part of the *Outside World*, the System. What I've found over the years is that the wounds from the Worst Man have long since faded, while it was the ones who were supposed to love me, whose betrayal left the truly lasting scars and the deepest branding.

## To Thailand and the Wheel of Terror

I turned twelve a few weeks after arriving in Thailand. An adult, according to the cult. That meant full responsibility. It meant I could drink wine. I'm sure there were more "allowances," but the one that mattered to me was that I was allowed to watch the few adult cult-approved movies. Like Star Trek.

My happiness at turning twelve was short-lived. A handful of movies were a pitiful compensation for the shitshow those next few years turned out to be. Becoming an “adult” at twelve sounded good to us, but apparently there was the fine print. Really, really shitty fine print.

I don’t think there’s a better way to describe it: I was a ward of the cult. Passed around as they saw fit, from one Home to another, whenever it would suit a purpose. What purpose? Whose purpose? I never knew. Truthfully, a reasoning wouldn’t have made a difference. “I gave you to God,” my mom responded when I had written to her and asked why they had sent me away. In two years, I was moved to, and from, six different Homes. Weirdly, it was both confusing and comforting that a move would only change the faces. Of course, there was always some fresh hell unique to that Home—but the essence remained the same.

Even today, many of my nightmares are filled with dozens of people I’m aware I am living with, and I never know any of them. A Home was required to have anywhere from twenty-five to forty-five people, and I wasn’t the only one being moved around all the time. Especially the young teens like me; they never seemed to really know what to do with us.

Except make us work. When we weren’t being indoctrinated, we were a full-time workforce. From childcare, to fundraising, to cooking—all of it—we were free labor they could crush into submission. “Trafficking” was definitely not a word they would have used. (They will still vehemently claim that wasn’t what it was.)

Naively, when I left Malaysia, I thought I’d left behind the worst of my sexual abuse. *I passed the threshold*, I thought. Instead, there was the shitty fine print. I don’t think I could forget the day I first found out the *full* requirements of being a twelve-year-old adult.



A sledgehammer could have dropped on my toe as I stood there and I wouldn't have felt it. I was staring at the Wheel of Terror. I was on it. I had only moved here four days ago, and I was staring at my name. On the Wheel. I was on the Wheel. I guess I need to get used to this, real fast.

*This is really not worth a Star Trek movie and a glass of wine,* was all I could think.



The (actual) adults called it the Sharing<sup>6</sup> Schedule. To me, and the other few pre-teens around, it was the Wheel of Terror. I loathed it. I never could adapt to it or endure it. I wish I had known that it never should have been something I was required to “adapt” to.

Usually within days of getting to a new Home, my name would be added to the Wheel. The men were on the outside wheel, the females on the inside (there were *always* more men than women), and it would hang on the Home's main bulletin board. Every week it would be turned, and that would be your Sharing partner for that week. You know, sharing god's love. Penises as the conduit, of course.

## The School That Actually Wasn't

I was fifteen when the cult decided to open “schools” to house and control (er, “train”) the insane amounts of kids they were having. Take a movement that promoted boundary-free sex with as many possible women the men

<sup>6</sup> Sharing was initially used to describe swinging (as in “sharing your partner”) and evolved into a generic term for sex.

could find, combine that with never allowing birth control or protection, and herpes wasn't the only thing running rampant. Eight thousand eight hundred thirteen of us had been born into exploitation by the year I turned fifteen.

(Oh, and the herpes thing? Not hyperbole. It was not uncommon for the Homes to have a "herpes bathroom" for outbreak season.)

They heralded it as the "School Vision." (Although "Boarding School Vision" would have been more accurate.) The one in Thailand was called the Training Center, or "TC" for short, and the property we were housed in was an old, broken-down hospital. There were always somewhere between two hundred to two hundred fifty-250 people living there, and it wasn't uncommon to pass someone in the hall you hadn't seen for six days, because you were on kitchen duty and they were cleaning toilets.

The years I spent there were painful ones. They may have turned the sex abuse volume down (well, *told* people they turned it down), but they turned all the physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual abuse volume way, way up. Like a neighbour kid who stopped playing the drums at 2 a.m., only to add an entire band and amplifier.

There's no need to tell all the stories of mindfuckery and abuse that happened at the School That Wasn't A School. In today's spotlight, some of our experiences would be similar to stories from the infamous "Troubled Teen Industry," but even that feels dismissive and inaccurate.

We were prisoners in their war against their own children.

Over those dark years, I would listen to Dolly (when I could get away with it), her angelic voice carrying me to places I'd never known. When the insanity seemed sure to drown me, she was a tether to sanity. Her voice sang to me of places in this world, somewhere, where children were safe and loved and cared for.

I'm going to fast forward a bunch as I attempt to condense several years into a few lines, but by the end of my time at the School That Wasn't A School, I was a young kid, pregnant without choices or options, engaged to an even-younger kid who, at seventeen, was going to become a father.

## The Everywhere and Nowhere

We were sent to a Home in upcountry Thailand. It was probably the most rural town I'd lived in. (Not been in, just lived in.) There were several adults, handfuls of kids; mostly strangers. Almost immediately, I became very sick. "Morning sickness," they rolled their eyes. No. No, something was wrong. In a cult adamantly opposed to secular medicine and doctors, trying to get any help other than prayer was screaming at the ocean.

I got sicker. What I didn't know at the time was that I have Hyperemesis gravidarum (HG), an extreme type of morning sickness that can be fatal to both mom and baby. In fact, until the 1950s, it was the leading cause of maternal death.

It nearly became mine.



*Okay, where am I?* I was so confused. *Am I being punished?* I was in a wheelchair. *Oh, I remember now!* I couldn't stand up any longer; my legs were crumpling under me each time I tried. No one from the Home was anywhere to be seen. We had committed the unforgivable by going to a hospital, so they had just dumped us off at the front doors. They didn't even leave a note in my basket. I clung to the plastic pitcher I'd carried

with me everywhere for the last three months. Except it wasn't just bile I was throwing up anymore, it was blood.

I still didn't know what was happening, mainly because no one in the hospital spoke English. Except for one doctor, and he was two days away. They wheeled me to a room with eleven women, all moms in some stage of pre- or post-delivery. The whole hospital was the same colour, I thought. There were too many voices garbling in my head. There was a drain in the middle of the room. *Yikes*. I had been to places like this, to sing at for our one missionary act of the month. *Now I'm a patient here.*

My poor baby husband, barely eighteen, was trembling like a chihuahua as I was weaving in and out of consciousness. I cried for him...or I was crying because I needed to pee. I remember wanting to pee. My body refused to cooperate with the condensed metal toilet, so I decided to get out of bed. To walk to the bathroom, of course, as if my body was working at all. Many things happened, most of them all at once. So many voices...and then,

*Silence.*

*I am nowhere. But, also, everywhere.* I registered that I didn't seem to have form. In a rush, like a bullet train, I felt it come in, flooding me: total, complete peace. There isn't a word for...all this. *I feel full, happy, expanding, infinite. I have never felt anything close to this, and I never want to let it go. I can feel everyone. All of me and them and love. So much love. Unending love.*

*So this is what dying feels like; a soft sigh. Okay, I'm ready.*

I understood that all I would have to do is let go and I would become one with this. My part of it becoming a whole of it. I felt what I imagined a balloon just let go of would feel, in that moment before it flies.

Then there was a flicker of him. *Hmm, him.* In the expansion was a

center that reverberated. Pulsed. *My baby*. I felt his want, more than his need. *No, need is there, but I feel the want. He wants me to stay for him.*

*Okay, little one, me too. You deserve that chance.*

I felt breath. Everything that was nothing became nothing. I heard Thai voices again. and...*FUCKING HELL! The pain! Is this really how much pain lives here? I am SO heavy, an elephant is sitting on me. Hurting. Every inch of me, every bone.*

It looked like it was day. I thought it was night. I look at my watch. *WHAT HAPPENED TO MY WATCH?!* I couldn't even see the hands, the glass was so shattered. Then I saw the bruises. Everywhere, covering my arms, my legs. Somebody had invited me to Fight Club but didn't tell me. My infant husband had a look on his face. "What happened?" I asked. At least, I think I did.

"You kind of... left us," he said. My head didn't feel all the way there. Like it was a pie missing 3 pieces. *Come again?*

Oh. OH! I put my hand over my abdomen. *Yes, baby, I'm going to give you every possible chance.*



So much changed after my time in the Everywhere and Nowhere. I knew, without a doubt, that I needed to rescue my baby from this life. I hadn't even taken in the enormity of what had happened yet.

A couple of weeks later, I received a letter from the one precious thing I found in the cult: my BFF. (Ah, the days of snail mail.) It was dated the morning after the Everywhere and Nowhere happened. Her letter said I had come to her during the night and told her she was going to get some news that I was sick, but everything was going to be okay.

Sometimes it feels like I *still* have goosebumps from that letter. The enormity finally caught up: I was never going back.

## Breaking Free

In 1996, I flew to the U.S. It was clear I wasn't going to be able to keep my baby healthy or safe unless I did. We were swallowed up into yet another Home almost immediately (what would be the first of several) and what followed were five long years of pain, confusion, and depression.

For me, that is. My infant husband, why, he was having a grand time, including carrying on a three-year-long relationship with a woman and also having sex with the other women in the Home. I gave up being hurt by it after the Third Exorcism they'd given me for being hurt by it. He was—to no one's surprise—very comfortable in the cult. But I was living a nightmare. I had four kids who somehow seemed to be all the same age. I'd had a miscarriage alone in my bathtub. I wasn't allowed to learn to drive or have money, making me dependent on the infant husband, even with his three-year relationship.

I thought I was terrified of becoming a single mom with a deck so stacked against me. But truthfully, I had forgotten my strength.

After those five years, I finally convinced the kids' father to escape with the kids and me. We weren't allowed to have any money ourselves unless we were going to the "mission field," so we told the leadership we were. Once we got the money, we secretly bought round trip tickets from New York to Kingston, Jamaica.

We were flying out of JFK on September 11th, 2001. Except for an embarrassed travel agent messing up one of our tickets, we would have been sitting in JFK when the towers fell. We left from LaGuardia on Sept 15th instead.

After five months in Jamaica, the futile attempt to establish an orphanage collapsed under government regulations. We flew back to NY on February 18, 2002, with only \$500 to our name. We were offered a room in the basement of an upstate NY house, assuming we could get there.

After a \$300 taxi ride, in a tiny basement room with \$200, and four kids under six, my life started for the first time.

## Me, I'll Just Be Fine

*Lord, it's like a hard candy Christmas  
I'm barely getting through tomorrow,  
But still I won't let sorrow bring me way down.*

My life since leaving the cult has been much more like the scrambled strings of Christmas lights than the cliché “ups and downs.” And like those tangled strings of lights, there have been many starts and stops, blown fuses, and mostly not knowing which end was up.

Getting out of the destructive cult I had been born into has been overwhelming and confusing and challenging and inspiring. All the things. These days, this is the part of my life I usually want to talk about. It's the part that was the toughest and the most rewarding; the part that matters the most to me. It's where I ended the cycle of abuse and brought my kids into a world of unconditional love and freedom.

In the podcast I started and host with my BFF, I talk a lot about my life since leaving. It's even in the title: *Butterflies and Bravery: Leaving, Living and Loving After A Cult*. The fulfillment, expansion, and love that I've experienced since starting my podcast has been immeasurable. In

telling my story, I've turned my past into purpose.

As you can imagine, there is a lot of story not captured in this condensed chapter, and some not even touched on. I've got stories of starting over, kids, divorce, suicides, deaths, coming out, discovery, and a life of healing. In the end, finding the cassette tape of Dolly's songs was the place that I wanted to jump off from. I even thought I knew why.

As one of my most vivid memories, it's a place I return to when I think about influences in my life, and what I often think of as the beginning. The beginning because it was the first time I fully understood there was something beyond the cornered walls the cult had boxed around me.

It was my first connection to hope.

Although I didn't know it at the time, carrying that tape of Dolly's songs through so many years of pain and abuse kept a connection to the center of my soul, the part that believed in a better world. But in writing this chapter, I realized I had touched something even deeper.

It was my power. In having the bravery to risk so much for something for myself, I tapped into my power for the first time. Believing in something more, I acted on it. It wasn't just Dolly (who I love) that I had taken home that night, but also a reminder that I had believed in something better for me, and it had made me brave.

Even if just for a moment, I had imagined a better world where children are loved, valued and safe, and I responded with courage. That's why it's my beginning; it was the first time I felt my power.

So, what gave me that bravery? It was more than just believing that gave me the courage to step into that power. It was because I had acknowledged my worth. I had believed in the possibility of a better life, and not just that it was possible, but that it was possible for *me*. I deserved love and safety, and that gave me the courage to be brave.

## Belief, Then Worth, Then Power

That's when I saw the connection.

Belief, worth, and power are all connected, and one feeds the other—they all need each other. Just believing in something is not enough, but if you believe in that something for you, *That's your worth agreeing with you.*

I'll use the example of wanting a better job. You have to first *believe* that the job is out there, then you have to believe that it's for you, that you are *worthy* of the job, and that in turn gives you the courage to take your *power* and go get the job.

In some ways it's very simple, each step creating the building block for the next one. But also, sometimes it's not so simple, because you still have to take that next step. It might start with a question, or a hope. A question or hope is neutral. But if from that question or hope you can envision something more for you, take it and use it to see your worthiness. If you want something, doesn't that say that your soul knows you are worthy of having it? Belief is the steppingstone that you can use to show yourself your own worth. Then from your worth, step into your power, and make it happen.

That's why I kept coming back to the story of finding Dolly's tape. The moment I first believed that there was something better that I deserved, it helped me feel brave enough to bring the tape home.

I am often asked, "How are you still here, how did you survive through everything?" I don't know if there's really one answer for that. But maybe part of it was that, in the backseat of a white Mercedes, at ten years old, I met my power for the first time, and I took that Warrior home with me.

Shaped like a white Dolly Parton cassette tape, I've carried my moment of courage and power with me all along.

## But Am I Worth It?

Living with trauma and C-PTSD often means living with a lot of challenges. (It sure does for me.) You're on a path of healing, and you may also have mental health issues or addiction, there are triggers and coping and masking, and making sure, in all that, that you are productive, present, and show up for life.

It's a lot.

But how do you know you're *worthy*? Through all the work and counseling and healing I've done, for me, that is the hardest one—that's the doozy. Living with trauma can completely cripple any feelings of worth. So, how do you go about finding it? You can't just pull it out of the air. (Tried that.) You can't just pull it out of your ass. (I am trusting that doesn't work either.) In reality, most humans need validation to believe in our own worth, and how do we validate ourselves?

I saw the steps: belief, then worth, then power. In recognizing the building blocks of these steps from belief to power, I realized that this could be the key to finding that worth. Once I believe it, then I can also believe that I deserve it. *That I'm worthy.*

When you believe something is possible, if you can picture it and desire it, you already know you're worthy. And once you connect to your worth, that's when your Warrior kicks in and says, *Let's go get it.*

Believing something is possible for you is your soul knowing you're worthy of it.

This is why I go back to the tape. My soul, she knows. She knows that was the start of my story of reclamation and power. And she gave me the building blocks for knowing my worth.

My belief became my worth became my power.



*She's been there, God knows she's been there  
She has seen and done it all  
She's a woman, she knows how to dish it out or take it all  
Her heart's as soft as feathers, still she weathers stormy skies  
And she's a sparrow when she's broken  
But she's an eagle when she flies*

*Gentle as the sweet magnolia, strong as steel her faith and pride  
She's an everlasting shoulder, she's a leading post of life  
She hurts deep, and when she weeps, she's just as fragile as a child  
And she's a sparrow when she's broken  
But she's an eagle when she flies*

**- DOLLY PARTON**



## Whisper James

Hi, I'm Whisper James.

I grew up in a rather unconventional way, by which I mean that my passport is American, my parents are from Ireland, and I had lived in fourteen countries and countless cities before I was twenty.

All the circus living I've done so far has left me quite good at juggling, which I am doing quite a bit of lately. I am Director of Community Engagement for i-5 Freedom Network, a non-profit organization fighting Human Trafficking. I also work part-time in the publishing world with self-publishing authors, and do occasional graphic and web design. Best of all, I am the founder and co-host of a weekly podcast of Survivor voices called Butterflies and Bravery.

I've been lucky enough to be called mom by four amazing kids, who've now grown and flown. Besides my four kids, I have eighteen siblings, (sixteen of them are half-siblings), one dog, and a part-time cat. (She travels a lot.) The beach is what makes my heart smile, and I am an artist in my spare time (Which is obviously not much.) I am curious as to where more writing might take me.

It's incredible to have a future to look forward to.

### CONNECT WITH WHISPER



@whisperwjames



butterfliesandbravery.com