


How Breaking Family Patterns
Can Liberate the Way
We Live and Love



**THE
ORIGINS
OF YOU**

VIENNA PHARAON

LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST

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*To my soul helpers
Connor, Code, and Bronx.
You are everything good in this world.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wouldn't have been able to write this book without the great honor of intimately working alongside so many incredible humans who chose to bravely share their stories with me. I have made it a priority to disguise all identities and recognizable details of my clients. In a few cases, I've combined aspects of multiple clients and attributed them to one. All stories are true in spirit, and I've made sure that any changes made still honor the individual's story.

Also, a note that abuse, suicide, and severe mental health challenges are topics in chapter 7, "I Want to Feel Safe." Please be mindful as you read.

Finally, as much as I hope you will find parts of yourself throughout, this book by necessity does not cover everything. Change is different and challenging for everyone, and the revelations you come into contact with here may feel destabilizing at times or introduce new dynamics with your family. Working with a therapist as you navigate the relational healing you're seeking may be supportive. This is especially true for those working to heal their trauma, which often requires a more involved approach. If you've experienced trauma or complex trauma, you will likely benefit from working with a trauma-informed clinician.

INTRODUCTION: MY FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND YOURS

I was just five years old when a rupture in my family left me with a wound that would dictate the course of my relationships for years to come.

For a long time I refused to acknowledge the effect my past had had on, well, *everything* else in my life. In fact, I might never have fully understood the importance of these early events without an education in psychology, a working knowledge of the lingering effects of trauma, and a deep curiosity around relationships. It has taken me years of hard work to see the impact of what happened long ago and to actively take control of who I want to be in relationships, valuable lessons I've learned that I will share with you in this book. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start at the beginning.

Let's start with my origins.

It was a beautiful sunny day in the summer of 1991. I was trying to make a flimsy gold bangle into a trendy hoop earring—five going on fifteen, as they say—when I heard my father's raised voice from behind the closed bedroom door. My father's anger was always scary to me. He was the kind of man who often dominated situations he was in, and the power and control he exuded felt threatening and manipulative. My joy in my cool jewelry project immediately vanished.

"If you leave, don't come back," he shouted at my mother.

The words pierced me. I'd never heard such rage targeted at someone I loved, at someone he was supposed to love: *If you leave, don't come back.*

Within minutes my mom was barreling upstairs, urging me to pack a bag. There wasn't much time for my system to process what was happening. All I knew was that we were leaving.

We picked up my maternal grandmother and went to the Jersey Shore, where I am sure I played in the waves, built castles in the sand, and probably convinced my mom to stop for ice cream on the way home. It hadn't yet struck me that "home" this time might mean somewhere else. Dropping off my grandmother wouldn't be just another stop. It was the destination.

When we got to my grandma's house, we settled in, unwinding after a day in the sun. It wasn't long before the phone started to ring. Although there was no caller ID at the time, it was obvious who was on the other end of the line. My father immediately demanded to speak to my mom, but my grandma knew better than to pass her the phone. Within minutes, we were all running over to the neighbor's house. No time to process. Just time to run.

About ten minutes later my father and his brother, my uncle, pulled into my grandma's driveway. We watched from afar as they banged on the front door, circled the house, and tried to catch a glimpse of any movement inside. My mom's parked car was a clear giveaway that we couldn't be far. I remember ever so carefully peeking my head above the windowsill to see what was going on just a house away. My dad and uncle were just small figures in the distance, but I could still see their rage.

I wanted to call out to my dad, but I was also frightened. I was hiding with my mom, feeling terrified and unsafe, while simultaneously thinking to myself, *I'm right here, Dad.*

Minutes later, the police pulled into my grandmother's driveway. I could hear the fear in my mom's voice as she demanded I hide in the closet with her. *This is really happening.* I was instructed to not make

a peep. Then came the knock, which pierced in a familiar way. The neighbor opened the door to two angry men and a couple of police officers. The questions came from the officers while accusations came from my father and uncle. They knew we were inside, but there was no invitation to enter.

I could hear the rage escalating. *There must be something I can do to fix this, I prayed. How do I make this stop? I just want them both to be okay.*

Yet there was no way to make both of my parents happy. There was no way to choose them both. There was no way to honor one without hurting or disappointing the other, or so I believed. There was no way to stop the fight.

Throughout the incident, we remained, my mom and me, stock-still, hand in hand, in the closet.

And though I didn't then have the language to describe it, it was then—at that moment—my own safety wound was born. I had no idea, at the time, just how long I would remain trapped in that moment.



Even though my parents tried their best, they couldn't protect me or shield me from their rage. My physical safety was never threatened, but the system I called my family was crashing and burning. The chaos became the status quo. I saw two adults come face-to-face with threats, exhibiting manipulation, paranoia, emotional flooding, abuse, control, and fear. As much as they tried to hide it from me, I saw it, I felt it, and I experienced it alongside them. My world had suddenly, dramatically, become unsafe. The two people whom I'd trusted to be my protectors were so busy fighting each other they for a time lost sight of me.

I realized I had to create my own safety.

I took on the role of peacekeeper in an attempt to put out the fire and to keep the family functioning. It was quite the role for a five-

year-old. Unaware that it wasn't my responsibility, I gave it everything I had. I became a phenomenal actress. I had determined that my not being okay at all times was too much for my parents to face, so I'd say, "I'm fine," with the sole intention of not adding to their burden. And in an effort to always please them and tell them what I believed they needed to hear, I never shared my preferences, only validated theirs. I became a child with no needs of her own, exceptional at anything I put my mind to, always helping to lessen the burden or distract them from what was happening.

My safety wound—more about this in the pages that follow—remained unaddressed and, repeatedly reinjured, continued to unconsciously direct my life. I was always on the alert, always ready to put out the next potential fire, whether the kindling and match came from my parents, my friends, or eventually my own partners. But the long-term effects of taking on this inappropriate peacekeeper role and of mistakenly putting all my efforts into making everything okay would take years to unpack. I learned to shapeshift, shrink, minimize, maximize, and distort myself and my experiences all in the name of pleasing—a habit I would later need to work tirelessly at overthrowing if I wanted to have authentic relationships.

And I became so skilled at making sure that what happened to my parents didn't happen to me that I wound up re-creating everything I was fearful of. My fear of being controlled, as my father had controlled my mother, made me controlling myself. My people-pleasing and need to be worthy made me invulnerable and inauthentic, blocking genuine connections. And my cool-girl, on-top-of-everything persona made it impossible for me to reveal how I really felt or to ask for any of my needs to be met. I was stuck in my personal and professional relationships, re-creating the very patterns I'd sworn to never repeat.

When I first started therapy, I didn't see any of this. I was convinced that the issue I needed to work on was "improving communication and conflict in my relationships." I found myself

inexplicably at odds with people in all aspects of my life—friends, colleagues, and especially people I dated—but somehow I never traced these different frustrations and struggles back to this inciting incident in my childhood. *I survived that*, I told myself. *I kept the peace*.

But deep down I knew better. The underlying problem (what all that conflict was *really* about) went back to that terror-filled day. It went back to my family of origin and my resulting safety wound. And it was only then—when I began to explore myself through the lens of my family of origin—that I finally began to become unstuck.



Suddenly, when viewed through this new perspective, my way of being and existing started to make sense. I saw how a finite experience that happened decades ago had had an enduring effect on me. I had attempted to ignore the original wound that had shattered my sense of safety and to sidestep the resulting pain—becoming the one who tried to fly under the radar in an effort to avoid adding any additional stress to my family, and in every subsequent relationship.

Spoiler alert: Trying not to add stress to others only created stress and more pain for myself. White-knuckling my way through conflict without properly acknowledging the origin of it didn't work in my own relationships as an adult. Neither did my other defense mechanism—the cool-girl, above-it-all persona. My attempts to avoid pain and keep myself “safe” were having the exact opposite effect. By hiding how *I really felt*, by failing to embrace my needs or express myself, I was tamping down conflict only for it to reemerge in other places. And in hiding from my pain and wound—in not even seeing that there *was* something that needed my attention—I denied my own healing.

The good news—which I learned from hard work, both on myself and with my hundreds of clients over fifteen years as a marriage and

family therapist—is that it doesn't have to be this way. Just because we have wounds from our childhoods doesn't mean we are doomed to repeat those patterns. If we pause to understand where these wounds come from (our origin stories) and take the time to make different choices, we can access powerful healing. In fact, our origin stories can be the road map to our healing, once we are willing to really look.

I've worked with clients in more than 20,000 hours of therapy over my career. I also run an Instagram community of over 600,000 individuals with whom I'm in conversation daily. In this book I share my own stories and the stories of many others I've worked with. Their names are changed and many of the details of their lives are altered to protect their identity, but their stories are offered with the aim of reflecting something back to you, with the aim of helping you truly see yourself and others. I want to help you explore your own origin stories, naming your wounds, making the connection between those wounds and your unhealthy behaviors, and ultimately learning how to create and maintain healthy relationships in your life right now.

This book will teach you how to look beyond what we in the therapy world call the *presenting problem*, the problem that you come to therapy to resolve. It will ask you to explore and connect with the *origins* of your beliefs, behaviors, and patterns, and the way your family of origin contributed to them. Most of the damaging and frustrating patterns we find ourselves in originate with wounds we sustained in childhood. Understanding your *origin wound* and the long-standing destructive patterns it leads to, will go a long way to addressing conflicts and behaviors that trouble you today.

The work begins with our family of origin. This is where the foundation of how we relate to others, ourselves, and the world around us begins to take shape. Your early relationships—the presence of them, the absence, the negligence, the hypervigilance—all have an impact on how you view just about everything in your life

today. Your family of origin may have been consistently functional, sometimes functional, or rarely functional. Whatever the degree, it wasn't perfect. You craved things from them that they couldn't or didn't give to you, you needed protection from things they didn't (or did) see, and you wanted permission to feel and experience things they withheld as threatening to their way of feeling and experiencing.

The majority of the relationship difficulties that individuals or couples come to me with are due to lingering and unresolved pain and trauma from past relationships, especially within their family of origin. It's why I call what I do with my clients *origin healing work*.

Origin healing work is an integration of family systems work and psychodynamic theory. It's based on Integrative Systemic Therapy, which was the approach I learned when I trained to be a marriage and family therapist at Northwestern University. We look for how our present-day behavior connects to the family systems in which we grew up, and to see the issues a person is struggling with within the context of a much larger system around them.

When you don't do this work, as we'll learn in part 1, your pain and trauma tend to go unresolved. It doesn't matter how much you try to avoid that painful past: how far away you physically move ("the geographical cure," as psychologist Dr. Froma Walsh calls it) or whether you fully cut yourself off from a harmful family member. There is an internal resolution that must happen if you're going to heal, and that internal resolution requires an understanding and awareness of the origin wounds that have a tight grip on you.

I have yet to meet a person who doesn't have some kind of origin wound. In this book, we'll explore five that are common. In fact, you might recognize more than one in yourself. Maybe you struggled to feel worthy of love growing up. Maybe you always felt like you didn't belong. Maybe you questioned whether you were important enough to be a priority. Maybe you struggled to trust those closest to you, or maybe you didn't feel physically or emotionally safe.

Naming your origin wounds is the first step toward your healing. In each of the chapters in part 2, we will explore a specific wound's origins and the destructive ways you learned to cope with it, and then read some healing stories. I will then lead you through your own Origin Healing Practice, in which you'll work through for yourself a four-step process that includes the naming of the wound, its witnessing, grieving alongside of it (yup, we're going to do some feeling in these pages), and then pivoting, making the long-lasting changes so that you don't keep repeating the patterns you've been trying to break in your adult relationships. If you're ready to stop replaying your destructive dynamics with the important people in your life, you're going to want to pay attention to this healing work. And no, you can't skip over your pain. No matter how much you bargain with it, you can't avoid your origin wound and forge a new way forward. As the saying goes, the only way out is through. I'm here to walk alongside you on your path through.

Once you have a more thorough understanding of your origin wound, you'll be ready to see how those wounds and the patterns you learned in your family system more generally influence your relationship behaviors today. In part 3, we'll look specifically at how you learned to communicate and to navigate conflict, and what you learned (or didn't learn) about boundaries. As we learn more about your past patterns, I'll help you shift the way you communicate, fight, and set or lift boundaries to healthier ways of engagement and a more authentic way of being.

When you notice yourself becoming reactive or falling into a destructive pattern, you're going to get into the habit of asking yourself certain questions so you can process what's happening in a different manner than you normally do. It's not good enough to just know why you choose the same types of partners over and over again, and it's not good enough to know why you react the way you do. Origin healing work is also about finding a path forward where you can live out what you *know* and reclaim what has been taken

with compassion, understanding, and empathy for yourself and often for others. We're going to focus on healing the past, but we're also going to take steps that disrupt and change the programming and conditioning that has kept you stuck in the present.

Throughout, there will be plenty of prompts, exercises, and guided meditations so that you can do the work as we go. You will start the process of freeing yourself from unwanted patterns and behaviors that sabotage your relationships and your life. You will take specific steps to get on the road to healing and self-discovery.

Let me be very clear here. This work is *not* about throwing parents, caretakers, or any of the adults who served as parental figures for you under the bus. (A note: Throughout this book, I mostly use the words *parents*, *caretakers*, or *adults*, but whenever you see those words, please recognize that they are interchangeable with any and all parental figures you had growing up.) In fact, when I work with clients, I explicitly don't point a finger or place blame. This work requires context, and if we can access them, grace and compassion. We ought to remember that our caregivers, too, have a rich history made up of flawed family systems and origin stories that laid the bricks to their way of being.

And though the point of the exploration is not to bash others, it also isn't about excusing harmful behavior. We explore to acknowledge and name our experiences without minimizing or invalidating them. Our families likely did the best with what they knew, but they still might have fallen short. Explaining away the harmful experiences doesn't change the work you need to do.

Your stories are also going to be different from mine and different from your neighbors'. Maybe you've faced many more traumatic events than most of the people you know, or maybe you feel grateful that your story isn't so bad. Wherever you believe you land on the spectrum, your story requires your gentle and deliberate attention.

Your work is to name, acknowledge, feel, and recognize the impact that your family of origin had on you—and to use that

awareness and understanding as a guiding light to create healthy, lasting change for yourself. You will not arrive and be done one day. You will continue learning more about yourself, your partner, and your family. You will find reactivity in new places no matter your age. You will notice areas of grief that are still calling for your attention. And you will likely meet your hurt inner child time and time again, who will crave for your acknowledgment, your witnessing, your grief, and your presence.



Origin healing work has been both the path forward for me personally and the work that I do day in and day out with my clients. It creates an opportunity for change (long-lasting, integrated change), gets you unstuck, and offers a reclamation of beliefs and a remembering of what was true before the unintegrated pain and trauma of your family got passed to you.

I don't believe that there is only one path forward. I believe there are as many paths forward as there are humans walking this earth. But what I do know to be true is that when I started to explore my origin stories through the lens of my family system, my way of being and existing started to make sense, and healing became an offering I could accept.

Instead of choosing the same types of partners who would re-create my childhood wounding, I was able to choose a partner who was equally dedicated to rolling up his sleeves and meeting me in the hard work. The narrative I held around romantic relationships began to soften.

- Instead of needing to be fine all the time, I was able to show vulnerability to others—and figure out who in my life was deserving of seeing my true, vulnerable self.

- Instead of needing to be a peacekeeper and prioritize pleasing others, I learned to honor myself—even if it meant that I’d disappoint another.
- Instead of trying to get others to change, to take a different path, or to see the suffering they were living in, I acknowledged who they were—and I changed the way I related to their *not* changing.
- And instead of needing to be in control, I learned to trust that someone could lead me without taking advantage of me.

Our origin stories carry beautiful complexity and heartbreaking pain. My parents’ separation became official in November of 1991, and my mother and I moved out in May of 1992. This began a nine-year process of divorce, the longest in the history of New Jersey at the time. There was a lot of fear and a lot of grief I had to process, even though their relationship shifted significantly and they’re friendly today. I’ve spent years packing and unpacking the messages I received during that time. Many of the skills I use today as a therapist can be traced directly back to my years-long role pacifying and mediating between my parents. As my dear friend and colleague Dr. Alexandra Solomon says, “Our wounds and our gifts are next-door neighbors.” What a beautiful reminder that some of our greatest gifts do emerge from the pain we’ve endured.

Yet there is a happy ending. Having an intimate relationship with your origin stories is not just practice in getting to know oneself, getting to know one’s family, or rehashing the past. An intimate relationship with them is an opportunity for healing—for you, for those who came before you, and for those who come after. As family therapist and author Terry Real says, “Family dysfunction rolls down

from generation to generation, like a fire in the woods, taking down everything in its path until one person in one generation has the courage to turn and face the flames. That person brings peace to their ancestors and spares the children that follow.” Will you face the flames?

It doesn't matter whether you've been in therapy for decades or whether therapy isn't for you. It doesn't matter if you've explored family systems work before or this is the first time you're considering it. It doesn't matter if you have loads of memories from childhood or struggle to remember anything at all. Sometimes the explicit memory goes away because the pain was so big, but you're still able to feel. What matters is your openness, your willingness to explore, to feel, and to see what might be hard to see, accept, or acknowledge. What matters is that you take good care of yourself as you move through this book, staying connected to whether you need to keep pushing through or pause for a moment.

How you use this book is up to you. There is no right or wrong way. You might choose to work through these chapters with your own therapist. You might choose to read it on your own in a deeply intimate way and reflect about what comes up. Or you might choose to read it with a partner, a family member, or a friend, and use it as a way to begin conversations.

Whatever path is for you, you are here because you are seeking something. You are here because you carry with you something that needs your attention. You are here because you are tired of the weight that you hold, the draining patterns you find yourself in, and the exhaustion of your very well-intentioned desire for change continually falling short. I see you, I hear you, I've been there before, and I'm thrilled to walk alongside you as you do this hard work.

To explore your origin stories is a courageous and remarkable step on your healing journey. Let's begin.

PART I
OUR ROOTS

1

YOUR PAST IS YOUR PRESENT

There wasn't much information on the intake form that was sent in. Just her name, age, and a small blurb about what she would like to work on.

Natasha Harris, 38

I need to figure out whether my partner is someone I can spend my life with. I've had concerns for a long time, but I feel like I can't look the other way anymore. Can you help?!

Natasha was new to therapy. Her friends finally convinced her to go talk to someone—me—and she was both nervous and excited for our first session.

"I so need this," she said. "Thank you for making room in your schedule to see me. I've been delaying this for a long time, and I know I can't anymore. Plus, my friends are so over me complaining to them." She laughed nervously.

I smiled.

"I guess it does get old when you hear the same old story over and over again. They've been hearing it since they've known me."

"How long have they known you?" I asked.

"Oh, we're childhood friends. We go way back. They've been my girls for thirty-plus years."

The complaints her friends were tired of hearing were not unique to this current partner. These complaints were the same she'd had about almost every partner since she began seriously dating.

"Can you tell me what it is they've been hearing from you?" I asked.

"Well, I guess I tell them it's more of a feeling, a sense that something's off. They tell me that I'm just *looking* for something to be wrong, you know? Like I'm just trying to sabotage a good thing. I don't know. I guess I *do* push away people who are good for me. That's what everyone says, so maybe it's true."

I could see Natasha in her head already. The words and messages from others had clearly infiltrated her narratives about herself. It was hard for her to know what *she* felt, to acknowledge what *she* knew, and to get clear on what was true for *her*.

"It sounds like your friends have a lot of thoughts about how you show up in relationships. But I'm curious to know what it is *you* know to be true of your partner and your relationship?"

"Okay, sure. Clyde is a great man. He's smart, attractive, interesting, successful, and so kind and thoughtful. When you look at Clyde, there isn't anything you can spot that's wrong with him. Everyone thinks he's a catch, and that I've finally met my match."

I interrupted her. "Do *you* think Clyde is a catch?" I was trying to move her back to her experience of him.

"I do. He's a wonderful partner to me. He's a great man and I really don't have any complaints of him. I just think something is off or that something *will* be off. Maybe I'm missing something, you know? Like, what if the other shoe drops at some point?"

"Has the other shoe dropped in other relationships?"

My sudden departure from Clyde seemed to surprise her.

"I don't think so, no," she responded.

"Did the other shoe drop in your family ever?" I continued.

She paused, looking at me with a puzzled expression. "I really don't think this is related to my family. Why do therapists always like

to bring it back to that? Honestly, my childhood was pretty great. I don't think you're going to find much there. I'd rather just figure out what's going on with Clyde."

It's in moments like these that I get a good internal (loving!) chuckle and think about Brené Brown from her TEDx talk "The Power of Vulnerability," where she famously tried to set a boundary with her therapist in their first session: "no family stuff, no childhood shit, I just need some strategies."

Spoiler alert: That approach didn't work for Brené, and it won't work for you, either. Because whether you want to admit it or not, the "family stuff" and "childhood shit" are at the root of, well, *everything*.

I know, I know, this may not be what you wanted to hear. You may even be adamant that the stuff that happened so long ago doesn't affect you at all today. You've grown and evolved, right? Maybe you've even forgiven. It's hard to believe that things from decades ago are still running the show and ruling your life.

But here's the thing I know for sure: your past creates patterns that affect your life today.

So even if you have evolved, even if you've grown in significant ways, even if you're not the same person you used to be . . . you're still a link in a multigenerational chain. And whether you're aware of it, that larger family system is guiding parts of your life in ways large and small. More likely than not, your past is running the show—*your show*—and if you're not conscious of it, you are likely suffering from it.

The past is persistent, my friend. The more you turn away from it, the more it follows you and asks for your attention. Ever wonder why you fight about the same things, over and over again? Ever wonder why you keep choosing the same types of partners? Ever wonder why you react the same way, no matter how hard you try to change it? Or why your inner critic repeats the same unkind things to you? That's your past asking for attention. That "childhood shit" directs

your life in some way today that you would benefit from knowing about.

By choosing not to spend time on her childhood, Natasha has actually revealed a lot. Within a split second I know that it's going to take a little work before she and I are co-explorers on this journey. She's not there yet, and that's okay. But what's so exciting is that this journey into her family's story will inevitably uncover important links between her past and her present. She'll see connections between her family of origin and the questions swirling around her life today. If she keeps with it, she'll soon begin to recognize that what she's experiencing with Clyde isn't as simple and surface-level as she might believe.

Natasha is not an anomaly. She, like most of my clients, wanted to talk about the issue that brought her to therapy—whether to stay in her relationship or not. Peering too deeply into her past—her family dynamics, her programming and conditioning, her experiences from decades earlier—didn't seem relevant or useful or important. She knew an engagement was not far off (Clyde had been looking at engagement rings), so any time spent examining something other than this one particular relationship felt like a waste of time. To stay with Clyde or to go—that was the decision that was haunting her.

It made sense from her perspective, of course. Most people would rather stay focused on where they're headed, instead of where they've come from. But what Natasha didn't understand was that examining *only* Clyde was exactly what would keep her from clarity. Over the next couple of months in our work together, Natasha would not just examine her childhood and past relationships, she'd also examine quite a bit about both of her parents and her sister. Eventually a lot would begin to make sense—in regard to Clyde and to other issues she'd been grappling with for years.

. . .

It's worth the time to examine your family of origin . . . but this is not always easy. That's what we'll be doing together in the pages that follow. Because if we're not aware of the patterns we're working from, we are bound to repeat them in predictable—and often destructive—ways. Like Natasha did.

As with so many others, before her breakthrough, Natasha was committed to the story that her childhood was an ideal one. Her parents' marriage was still intact, and she'd grown up in a loving family system. "There's nothing to complain about. I had a pretty great childhood and I'd feel ridiculous trying to find a few things here and there to criticize, especially when so many others had it way harder than I did."

Natasha had fallen victim to both idealization and what I call *wound comparison*. She wouldn't give herself permission to acknowledge her story because "other people have had it worse." People in her own circle of acquaintance, in fact. She had a friend who experienced abuse from her father. She had another friend whose mother died when she was thirteen. And yet another friend whose brother stole all the family's money and gambled it away.

"Those are real issues. Those are real problems. That is real pain and trauma," she said. Her hurt and pain couldn't compare with the hurt and pain of friends and strangers alike. She didn't believe she had a right to feel.

Her use of the word *real* felt important to pay attention to. What I heard between the lines was: *My pain and my trauma are not as obvious. Can people still recognize that even if it's not as glaring? Can I recognize that for myself? Does my pain have room here?*

Because Natasha had pain in her past—I could hear it in her voice and see it in the corners of the stories she told me. But until she deemed that pain worthy of notice, we couldn't address it together.

Wound comparison is a distraction, regardless of whether you come in minimizing or maximizing. The focus moves you away from

yourself—your story, your vulnerability, and ultimately your healing. It's also common, as Natasha did, to idealize your past. This is an attempt at protection. If you can continue seeing your family through a positive lens, you don't have to face the pain, feel like you're being disloyal to them, or appear unappreciative of the care and love that they *did* offer. And if the past isn't as secure as you make it out to be, there might be a lot of loss for what was or wasn't and fear for what your present and future might turn out to be.

This is a paradox that so many of us struggle with: thinking critically of our family of origin while also still honoring the love and effort that was there. It's difficult to hold two conflicting ideas in our heads at the same time. But if you can't look at your origin stories, if you can't look at your pain and trauma, if you get caught making what you experienced smaller or bigger than what it is, if you get stuck idealizing it, or if you get stuck intellectualizing it away, you run the very high risk of being a bystander in your own life.

Natasha would need to stop comparing and make space for her pain without any of the distractions. She'd need to acknowledge her true origin story. And she'd need to start by seeing the role she took on in keeping her family going.

Your Role in Your Family of Origin

Children are incredibly aware. They're constantly observing, watching, feeling, and sensing what's happening around them. They pay close attention to the emotional experiences of others, often offering a hug or a kiss to a parent or sibling they think is sad or upset. It's remarkable, really, to see children notice what so many adults often miss. Their intuition is still intact, and they're not plagued by constant distractions. They're present and attuned to their surroundings, and they haven't learned to cover up their pain or the

pain of others with excuses or minimizing. They're not afraid to point out the pain they notice in others, either—and like most of us, they often instinctively want to solve any of the problems they sense.

That incredible sensitivity to pain and the impulse to make it go away often lead a child to step into playing a crucial role in the maintenance of a family, like offering family members emotional support or acting as a parental figure to a younger sibling. Maybe you were trying to distract your parents from the hard things that were happening in their lives, or maybe you just wanted to make things easier for your parents. For example, if you had a sibling with special needs, you may have noticed the stress and exhaustion in your parents and decided to take on the role of the low-maintenance child, the child who looks after themselves and does everything in their power not to add any more stress to a household hanging on by a thread. Attuned children see what is needed and then step into a role they believe will protect them or their family.

And here's the kicker: that role you took on way back when? It might still be conditioning your actions and responses today. It's one of the main ways your past continues to have a hold on you. You might unconsciously choose partners, friendships, or even jobs where you find yourself right back in a role you know all too well. If you were the family perfectionist, you might maintain your perfectionist tendencies in your adult relationships. If you were a caretaker to a parent or siblings, you might still feel compelled to look after everyone's needs. Maybe you were the lost child, the invisible one who made yourself small and quiet, and you struggle today to speak up. Or maybe you were the comic relief, and still see it as your role to amuse. But there's also a more subtle way that a childhood role comes along with you, which is when you find yourself rejecting the role you once were in as a child. If you were a confidant or an emotional support for a parent, you might notice that you want nothing to do with emotional care and intimacy with a partner. Any sign of emotional needs from a partner or friend might remind you of

how draining being a support figure was for you growing up, so much so that you close yourself off to any and all connection, closeness, and vulnerability.

The role you took on may have been needed to keep a struggling family afloat. But it might not be needed today. In fact, that role you took on might be exactly what's *keeping* you from your healing. It might be keeping you from discovering, naming, and dealing with a deeper hurt, and thus from connection and closeness with a partner. That's what we learned as I dug deeper with Natasha about her hesitation to commit to her loving partner, Clyde.

As the weeks passed, Natasha continued to insist on her happy childhood. For several sessions I had been asking her about her fears around the proverbial "other shoe dropping" she anticipated in their relationship, her fear that one day Clyde would reveal something he had been hiding about himself. My questions about where the other shoe had dropped in her family and past relationships met no response, but when I asked Natasha whether she had ever hidden something herself, a door opened.

She shared that at age fifteen she had stumbled upon an email that had been left open on her father's computer. She was having some trouble with her own computer, and she needed to complete something for class the next day. She had asked her father if she could use his, to which he said yes.

"He must have not realized what he had left open," she said. Tears started to fill her eyes.

"The thread was right there. Right in front of me. I read every email between them. Every single one. I couldn't look away. It didn't make sense to me. Some woman, not my mother, was telling my father how much she loved him, how amazing the weekend had been, how she couldn't wait to spend their lives together. And my father was telling her the same things back. This had been going on for years. Years. And no one knew. My dad walked in on me. I just stared at him with tears in my eyes and started to bawl. My mother

was gone on a work trip that week and my sister was at basketball practice. He looked at me and said, 'Please don't tell your mother. I promise I'll cut it off.' We never talked about it again, and I never told my mother. He stopped the affair—I would check his email and phone regularly to make sure of it. He let me do this. I think it was our unspoken way of making sure our 'agreement' stayed intact."

She paused and shook her head. She had been looking down while she shared this with me. Her gaze rose, and she found my eyes.

"What a heavy burden to carry," I said steadily to her. "What a secret to hold for over two decades. I can only imagine the pain, the confusion, and the questioning you've done."

Natasha had held the secret. She had played her role magnificently. She'd kept the secret so well, including from herself, that it would almost be forgotten, oddly absorbed in such a way in order to allow for her family to continue to function in the way they always did: happy, connected, loving—as if nothing was wrong.

No wonder she believed her childhood was great. Natasha's role as secret-keeper had covered up and distracted them all from any underlying pain and sadness. But it was the very success of Natasha's role-playing that allowed the past to tighten its grip on her and prevent her from finding a more constructive way forward.

Trading Authenticity for Attachment

When you were a child, there were probably endless moments when you were either asked or encouraged to be a little more of this and a little less of that to get love, connection, validation, safety, or affirmation from your parents and caretakers. You may have received messaging from your parents, messaging they thought was harmless, that was actually asking you to become less of who you

were. And guess what you did when you were a kid? You probably went along with it. You want to know why? Because you are wired for attachment. Because attachment is necessary for your survival. And because your need to be loved, wanted, chosen, protected, prioritized, and safe trumps everything else.

But just as necessary as your need for attachment is your need for authenticity. To be authentic is to be free to be and to feel; it's to be fully revealed to yourself and to those you let into your intimate space. Authenticity is at the core of our existence. Without it, an internal death takes place.

Authenticity and attachment are both powerful needs. Yet, as Dr. Gabor Maté, a trauma and addiction specialist, says, "When authenticity threatens attachment, attachment trumps authenticity." What a thought to consider that so many of us must trade one lifeline for another: *To stay connected to you, I must leave and abandon me, or to stay true to myself, I must choose to disconnect from you.* And what a thought to think about tiny humans, including you, who needed to make that decision time and time again.

As children, we *do* trade our authenticity for attachment. Of course we do; it's the more important lifeline. Perfect grades make Dad happy. Being quieter makes Mom less irritable. Losing weight gets you attention. Being fine means your parents are less stressed out. Acting out means Dad stops hurting your sister. Agreeing keeps the peace. Helping Mom makes her less sad. You learned to adjust yourself to make sure your parents didn't abandon, reject, hate, criticize, judge, or disown you. And as adults, we sadly engage in this, too. But it's because we're conditioned to do it. It's because we've learned that our worthiness, belonging, prioritization, trust, and safety are given when we shift and change ourselves to accommodate others.

It is here, in your origin story with attachment and authenticity, where you first learn to engage in a recurring self-betrayal. It is here where you learn to abandon your true self for attachment. It is here

where you begin to shapeshift, transforming who you are in order to get what you believe you need.

Take that in for a moment. You've been convinced that being someone other than who you are is the only way you get the things you crave the most. *If I become who you need me to be, I can guarantee myself love, connection, approval, safety, and validation.* It's a form of self-protection, and you tried your darndest to accommodate. But becoming a successful shapeshifter isn't actually a victory. It doesn't actually reap the benefit that you want. Even if you get validation for getting the As, scoring the hat trick, or being less emotional, deep down you know what's up. You see through it and know that when validation is given because of inauthenticity, it can't be trusted. No wonder we turn into adults who are insecure, unsure, and doubting of ourselves and others. No wonder it's so hard to show up authentically and trust that another will love, choose, respect, and honor you.

Natasha's story provides an excellent example. She'd become an extraordinary shapeshifter. She'd avoided the pain of her father's infidelity so that her family could go on. Yet victories don't get much hollower. She'd carried that heavy weight for so long that she no longer knew how to honor her own pain, her own sadness, her own loss. She'd traded her authentic self for attachment to her father, who needed his secret kept, and to her mother, who was kept in the dark. That trade was robbing her of freedom, of resiliency, of being able to dance in the ebb and flow that relationships inevitably present and relationally walk with her partner toward healing. Natasha was sitting on the sidelines of her own life, letting the unresolved issues of her past dictate her life story and intrude upon her relationships and healing.

Our Past Is the Key to Our Present—and Our Future

I know it can be tempting to keep your eyes on the prize. I know you might want to stay facing forward, but I'm going to need you to be more of a swivel head. The things from the past, all that family stuff, it matters . . . a lot. If you want to heal your relationships with yourself and others, then understanding your origin stories is necessary. Your unhealed and unresolved past is directing your life today, but it doesn't have to continue to do so.

Legacies, family secrets, and fears and insecurities get passed down the generational chain. Some of those things are overtly offered and chosen—like cherished holiday rituals, family mantras, or Tuesday taco night. But other traditions that get handed down are unhealthy, even insidious. A woman who becomes increasingly critical of her daughter's weight in the same way her mother criticized her. A father whose patience begins to shorten when his children don't meet his unrealistic expectations, even though he hated his father for the rigidity and rules by which he felt controlled. An affair that is not to be spoken of for fear of judgment by others in the community, or the death of a young child that is never fully acknowledged and grieved.

When Natasha found her father's emails, the experience left her with both a doubt of others and, just as damaging, a doubt of herself. Although she wasn't consciously aware of this, Natasha began to live life with distrust. She didn't know what she could and couldn't believe. She was drawn to "good" people, safe people, people she would describe as honest, kind, thoughtful, and considerate, but no matter how consistent they were, she was always expecting for something to go wrong. Her way of coping was to end relationships prematurely; then she wouldn't have to wait for the other shoe to drop in the same way she did decades earlier with her father.

This wasn't obvious to Natasha. She had never told another soul the story of discovering her father's betrayal. It was locked inside her until she spoke it out loud to me. Over the next many weeks, Natasha would understand that her doubts about Clyde, her concern

that something was “just off,” were extensions of this massive rupture she experienced with her father. The avoidance and secrecy that was subtly asked of her by her father kept her stuck, and the continued avoidance and secrecy that she maintained with herself kept her choosing exceptional partners whom she believed would ultimately somehow deceive her. It was only when we delved deep into her origin healing practice that she was able to release herself from her past and find a happier ending and a healthier path.

. . .

For many, and maybe you, we first have to come to terms with the fact that this work of exploring your origins—though vital—isn’t always easy. The idea of looking back at your childhood can be downright daunting. It might scare you to think about what you might find, it can feel overwhelming to consider whether you’ll be able to handle what you do uncover, and it can feel like a distraction away from the very important issues at hand.

The reality is, most of us are more inclined to wait until we’re in crisis. And what I can tell you from my professional experience is that couples and individuals generally wait longer than they ought to before seeking support.

Whether you’re in a relationship or not, you might notice yourself bargaining with yourself and looking for a simpler, easier way out.

I should be able to figure this out on my own.

If I go to therapy, more bad things are going to get uncovered.

My family did the best they could, and I don’t want to hate them by digging up unnecessary things.

But what if the digging into your origin story could yield the relief and the exact answers you’ve been looking for all along?