2019

An Educator's Journey Of Finding Post-Traumatic Growth After Intimate Partner Violence Through Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing: Implications For Survivors, Advocates, And Educators

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AN EDUCATOR'S JOURNEY OF FINDING POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH AFTER INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE THROUGH SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE WRITING: IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVIVORS, ADVOCATES, AND EDUCATORS

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2019

Defense Date: February 12, 2019
Thesis Examination Committee:

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I share my personal story of finding healing—post-traumatic growth—after experiencing intimate partner violence seven years ago. Written in Scholarly Personal Narrative format, I dig into my own past, draw upon research and scholarship to better understand and make meaning of and from my experiences, and finally, make connections with other survivors, advocates, and educators through my narrative. I discuss how survivors of intimate partner violence can move closer to healing; provide practical tips on how individuals and educators can support survivors and better understand the complexities of abusive relationships; and explain how educators can use writing, specifically the Scholarly Personal Narrative format, as an avenue for healing and growth for their students in a classroom setting. My thesis is an example of how, when given the opportunity, educators can encourage students to experience post-traumatic growth within the American University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank you for your generosity, the love and the honesty that you gave me. I want to thank you, show my gratitude, my love and my respect for you, I want to thank you.
—Natalie Merchant, “Kind and Generous,” 1998

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I would first like to thank my husband, who continuously supports me in every endeavor. Thank you for being you and sharing this life with me. I love you, dear.

Thank you to my incredibly family, who always encourage me to grow in confidence. Thank you for consistently bringing me back to center. I love you all.

Thank you to the two best friends a woman could ask for (you know who you are), who unfailingly give me a space to laugh, dance, cry, process, and be myself without judgment. You’re two of the greatest loves of my life.

Thank you to my boss, who inspires me to continuously learn and grow in integrity and honesty. Thanks for putting up with me.

And last but certainly not least, thank you to my advisor and friend, Robert Nash. You have given me a space to share my story in a way I was unable to before I enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Studies program. With your encouragement and tutelage, I reclaimed my voice, my story, and my life. Words cannot express my gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a wall of silence against women and violence, and every time a woman speaks out it breaks a crack in that wall.
—Marai Larasi

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When I thought about how I wanted to approach the topic of intimate partner violence (IPV), and my personal experience with it seven years ago, I knew I wanted to write from a place of strength. While experiencing IPV was deeply traumatic, the healing and growth I found after leaving my abusive relationship has shaped the trajectory of my life in incredibly positive ways and led me find to post-traumatic growth (PTG). Throughout my thesis I will describe my experience with IPV. However, my focus will instead be on the resiliency and healing I found after this traumatic experience in order to move closer to PTG.

I have chosen to write my thesis in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) format. SPN requires writers to place their personal experiences within the center of their writing. From there, writers draw upon research and scholarship to better understand and make meaning of and from their experiences, and finally, make connections with others through their stories. SPN writing helps writers and students, like myself, to write their way into meaning and make sense of their lives and the world around them. Writing my thesis has allowed me to experience PTG more thoroughly as I wrestle with my own past, learn more about IPV and PTG through researching and studying scholarly literature, and make connections between myself and other survivors, educators, and humans. As I have used SPN writing to find healing and growth, as well as make meaning from my own

experiences, I feel equipped to help other survivors of IPV move towards PTG. I also feel more prepared to encourage educators to offer this form of writing as an avenue for students to find healing and growth within the classroom.

I have multiple goals in writing this thesis. First, I want to give voice to my experience and continue my own journey of healing and growth. Second, I want to help other survivors of IPV recognize that they are not alone and encourage them to move through their own process of healing, reclaim their voice, share their stories, and experience PTG. Third, I want all of my readers—whether they are survivors of IPV or not—to recognize that growth and healing are possible after experiencing trauma. Fourth, I want to give my readers practical tips on how to support survivors of IPV and better understand the complexities of abusive relationships. Lastly, I want to help educators understand how writing, specifically in the SPN format, can foster healing and growth for their students in a classroom setting. I believe it is through sharing our stories, especially our darkest ones, that we are able to not only find our own healing, but help others heal as well. I hope my thesis is an example of how, when given the opportunity, students can experience PTG in the American University.

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Please note that there are parts of my story that may be triggering for some to read, as I write about physical and emotional abuse. If at any point throughout the reading, you feel uncomfortable, anxious, triggered, scared, etc., please put my story down and do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

A NOTE TO MY READERS

Working on SPNs, I have witnessed the often small, still voices of personal history and lived experience become powerful affirmations of self, with recognition that self-exploration and conscious awareness of being connected to our own lived experiences can have life lessons for us all.
—Judy Cohen (2005)

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My Dear Reader,

If you take away nothing except one thing from my thesis, please remember this: you are not alone. I will repeat it for you one more time: you are not alone. Some of you will come to this piece of writing as survivors and/or victims, however you choose to identify, of intimate partner violence. Some of you will not have experienced what I detail in the pages that follow. Even if your story is completely different from my own, or different from the other survivors within these pages, my hope is that you recognize that we are all in this together. We all have parts of our narratives that are painful, raw, and seemingly impossible to share. These are the stories we need to share the most.

I hope that you realize—and truly believe, deep down to the bottom of your toes—that your story has value. I have personally not always believed this and I still have days where I struggle with this thought. However, I hope you walk away from my writing realizing that your story—your individual, unique story—has the potential to change the world.

Novelist Mary Pipher writes, "All of this individuality that is you, properly understood and clearly presented, is a tremendous gift to the world."[1] I hope that you, My

[1] Pipher, *Writing to Change the World*, 45-46.

Dear Reader, recognize the power in sharing your story. It is not easy. It has taken me seven years to put this particular story of mine to paper. However, it is through the sharing of our stories that we connect to others, that we find hope for ourselves, and that we bestow hope upon others. Your individual story and experience is a gift to the world and it is worth sharing.

Janine Shepherd once said, "When we share our stories, what it does is it opens up our hearts for other people to share their stories. And it gives us the sense that we are not alone on this journey."[2] At the pinnacle of her athletic career as a cross-country skier on the Australian Olympic team, Janine was involved in a life-threatening accident that left her wheelchair-bound. After her accident, doctors told her she would never walk again and could not have children. Janine, determined to defy these likelihoods, went through the rehabilitation process and succeeded in doing so. She now has three children and is able to walk. Janine has written six books about her experience in finding resilience after her traumatic accident and now travels around the world sharing her story of healing and growth. Through sharing her experience, she has helped thousands of people connect with their own healing, whatever form that may take, and inspires them daily to be strong and to share their own stories. Janine recognizes that her story has value and by sharing it, has the power to transform the lives of others and change the world.[3] Sharing your story, My Dear Reader, has the power to do the same.

My Dear Reader, you are not alone. Your story has value. Your story is a gift to the world. Share it.

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[2] Shepherd, interview.
[3] Janine Shepherd, "Meet Janine."

METHODOLOGY

The piece of us that holds our stories—all of our stories—is the piece that irrevocably moves us to share what we have witnessed and experienced, and from which we have resiliently bounced back. To say SPN is healing would be an understatement. I would say it allows one to rebuild a life.
—Wind Paz-Amor

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I have chosen to write my thesis in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing format, as this style allows me to put my personal stories and experiences, as well as my authentic self, in the center of my writing. SPN writing is the beautiful, messy interweaving of the personal narrative and the scholarly. It is difficult, gut-wrenching, vulnerable writing. To begin, it encourages writers, or soon-to-be-writers, to believe that they have a story that is worth telling. Robert J. Nash, the creator of SPN writing, reminds his students, "Keep telling yourself that you have a personal story worth telling and a point about your subject matter worth sharing."[4] It has not always been easy for me to believe I have a story worth telling. I have often asked myself: *What about my life is interesting enough to write thousands of words about? Who would read it? Who would care?* I have often clung to Nash's reminders that everyone—including myself—has a story worth telling. It is this belief that has helped me overcome many moments of self-doubt throughout my writing process.

In SPN writing, the voice and experience(s) of the writer is central to the heart of the writing. Without the personal, there would be no scholarly personal narrative. As Nash explains, "SPN scholars place themselves at the center of their research design.

[4] Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Research: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*, 28.

Everything else, although of pivotal significance, evolves from and revolves around the self-exploration of the author."[5] SPN writing requires writers to dig deep, look at their experiences with different lenses, wrestle with their past and difficult questions, and ultimately, make meaning of and from the different events and moments in their life.

As Nash and Viray note, "Scholarly personal narrative writing starts with the *writer's* life rather than the lives, thoughts, and activities of others. A life that signifies is a life that matters. SPN writing is self-reflective writing. It frees up the author, whether a scholar or a woman or man, to "testify," to bear personal witness to present and past events."[6] And that is just the first part of it.

SPN writing is made up of four major components, which can be summarized as pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search.[7] Within these components, writers identify major themes, connect these themes to their personal stories, draw upon existing scholarship and research to deepen their narratives, and finally conclude with universalizable ideas that connect with their readers' personal narratives.[8] SPN writing asks three main questions—What? So What? Now What? Throughout SPN, writers are also addressing, in depth, the following questions: What is the topic? What are we talking about? Why is it important? Why are we talking about this? What are the next steps? How do we move forward? What are the implications?

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[5] Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Research: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*, 87.
[6] Nash and Viray, *Our Stories Matter: Liberating the Voices of Margalized Students Through Scholarly Personal Narrative*, 10.
[7] Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Research: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts.*
[8] Nash and Viray, EDFS 200 Syllabus.

It was not until my first class in the Masters of Education Interdisciplinary Studies program that Professor Nash introduced me to SPN writing. Writing is, and always has been, one of the greatest loves of my life. As a young girl, my friend Lauren and I would tuck ourselves into my room with Gushers and chocolate chip cookies and write creative stories until my mom forced us to turn out the lights and go to bed. As I grew up, my love of writing continued. I graduated college with a Bachelor's Degree in English with a focus in creative writing. I wrote short stories, poems, and even a very, very, *very* rough first draft of a novel. Writing has always been a way for me to process the events, feelings, situations, and emotions that I've experienced throughout life. It has functioned as a way for me to escape reality, as well as make sense of it all.

When I learned about SPN writing, I felt that the writing I enjoyed most (i.e. creative self-reflection) finally made its way into a mainstream classroom that wasn't a creative writing class. In both my undergraduate and graduate-level non-creative writing classes, I was used to professors telling me, "Leave the 'I' out of your writing." Or, "I don't want to know how you feel—I just want the facts." I wrestled with the question: how can I leave my voice out of my writing? It's my writing! On the other hand, SPN writing not only encouraged me, it *required* me to bring my voice to my writing and center my writing around my own experiences. It pushed me to dig into my own past, draw upon research and scholarship to better understand and make meaning of and from my experiences, and finally, make connections with others through my narrative.

For my very first SPN manuscript, I wrote about my experience with IPV and the healing and growth I found after leaving my abusive relationship. At that point, despite

my love of writing, I had never put this particular story of mine to paper. Before beginning, I drafted a writing contract for myself where I stated my goals for my manuscript, as well as the commitments I wanted to make to myself through the writing process. I wrote that my goals for that semester, and my first SPN manuscript, were to:

1) Give voice to my personal narrative and put it onto paper.

2) Enthusiastically engage in self-exploration and reaffirm my self-worth.

3) Work to connect my personal experience(s) with the experience(s) of others.

4) Encourage others to find the value in their personal narratives and find the courage to share it as well.

In order to try and achieve these goals, I made the following commitments to myself:

1) I will continually remind myself that my story has value.

2) I will continually ask myself: How can I give voice to my authentic self on paper? Am I being vulnerable and honest about my experiences, emotions, thoughts?

3) I will be intentional about setting time aside, daily, to write.

4) I will be gentle with myself through the scholarly personal narrative writing process.

5) I will have fun.

I started writing my first SPN manuscript anxious, unsure, and scared. But, the wonderful thing about SPN writing is *that was okay.* Before I began writing, I asked

myself: *What was I going to find once I started to truly dig deep within myself?* This uncharted personal territory was, at first, deeply unsettling for me. However, the beauty of SPN writing is that it welcomes and encourages the discovery of uncharted personal territory. As SPN writers delve into the unknown of themselves and write to make meaning of their lives and experiences, the potential for healing abounds. Nash writes, "Healing is a complex process of understanding the intricate, and inescapable, connections between my body, mind, and spirit."[9] As I wrote my first SPN manuscript, I wrote my way into meaning-making. I wrote my way into finding connections between my body, mind, and spirit. And ultimately, I wrote my way into healing.

On one of the last pages of my manuscript, I wrote, "The process of writing this manuscript has not been easy. I have felt sadness and rage and disgust and emptiness. Despite these feelings, I have also felt a profound sense of healing, growth, clarity, peace, and calmness. Putting these words on paper has unburdened me of this story in a way that I have not been able to in the past seven years." When I returned to my original question—what was I going to find once I started to truly dig deep within myself? —my answer was surprising. I found strength. I found hope. I found resilience. I found healing. Despite the anxiety I experienced in the beginning of my writing process, I ended my first SPN manuscript believing two things. First, my story has power. Second, my story has the ability to connect with others and evoke positive change within the world. Writing my story in SPN empowered me in ways that I could not have imagined beforehand.

[9] Nash and Viray, *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning and Wholeness in the Academy*, 29.

Ultimately, this is what SPN writing gave to me, and continues to give to me every time I write in this format: belief in my story, belief in myself, and belief that when people gather and share their stories, relationships are built, healing is welcomed, and hope is born. I carry this same confidence with me as I write my thesis and hope to pass this belief along to my readers.

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Writing my thesis in the SPN format presented an ethical dilemma—*how do I share my story without exposing the stories of others that they may not want shared? How do I share my experience about IPV without exposing my abuser?* I would like to be fully transparent and emphasize that it is not my intention to expose my abuser in my thesis. Instead, my intention is to share my story—and my story alone—to help other survivors move closer to healing. Therefore, I have created a composite character to represent my abusive ex-partner. While I had an individual experience with an individual person, the character in my thesis is a combination of my ex-partner, as well as the abusers of multiple other women I researched throughout my writing process. Because of this, I have added certain elements to my story to demonstrate what happens within an abusive relationship, as well as removed some personal details.

I have also chosen not to give my abuser a name. By not naming him, my hope is that the focus remains on my story—my personal experience with IPV, as well as the healing and growth that I found after leaving this relationship.

In addition, I have changed the names of all the other characters in my thesis to protect their identities.

CONSIDERATION OF CURRENT LITERATURE

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you.
—Aldous Huxley

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In early March of 2015, Women's Aid, a charity in the United Kingdom with the aim of ending intimate partner violence against women and children, launched the "Look at Me" campaign as part of their "Blind Eye" project. The Blind Eye project aimed "to challenge the culture that allows domestic violence to thrive. By pioneering and using the power of cutting-edge technology, we make sure that nobody can turn away. Blind Eye aims to make the world understand that we all play a role in eradicating domestic abuse. We cannot turn a blind eye."[10] Women's Aid placed an interactive billboard in London's busy Canary Wharf, as well as Westfield Shepherd's Bush and the Birmingham Bullring, featuring a woman with a bruised face and the words: LOOK AT ME. Using facial-recognition technology and cameras that identified when passersby looked at the billboard, the screen was programed to change when people looked at it. If people chose to ignore the billboard, and subsequently the woman on it, her face remained bruised. However, if anyone—even a single person—stopped and looked at the billboard, the woman's face began to heal. The more people who looked at the billboard, the faster the women's bruises faded. Not only did the campaign win multiple awards, it also generated "mass awareness of domestic abuse through media coverage in twenty countries,

[10] Women's Aid, "Blind Eye."

reaching 326.9 million people."[11] 326.9 million people chose not to turn a blind eye to IPV.

I remember watching the billboard, through the computer screen in my office, and feeling the salty sting of tears behind my eyes. As I stared into the eyes of the female strangers featured on the billboard, I saw friends. I saw kindred spirits. I saw strength and resilience. I saw women who had gone through what I went through. And I realized I was not alone.

According to The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men older than 18 years of age have been the victim of IPV in the United States.[12] In their lifetime, nearly half of all women and men in this country have experienced psychological aggression from an intimate partner, with females 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 years old experiencing the highest rates of violence.[13] In addition, IPV "constitutes the leading cause of injury among women, resulting in nearly 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths each year for U.S. women aged 18 and older."[14] It is estimated that IPV "costs over $8.3 billion annually in lost productivity, as well as health, mental health, and legal costs."[15] Worldwide, almost one-third of women have experienced IPV.[16]

Seven years ago, I joined the ever-growing population of those who have experienced violence at the hands of their partner.

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[11] Women's Aid, "Blind Eye."
[12] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Get the Facts & Figures."
[13] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Get the Facts & Figures."
[14] Allen and Wozniak, "The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering from Domestic Violence," 38.
[15] Allen and Wozniak, 38.
[16] World Health Organization, *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women.*

Seven years ago, I became a statistic.

I use the term intimate partner violence, instead of domestic violence, as an abusive relationship is traditionally and more commonly labeled, purposefully. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines domestic violence as "the inflicting of physical injury by one family or household member on another."[17] This definition is, at the same time, too limited and too broad. On one hand, with this definition, abuse within a relationship is strictly limited to physical abuse. It does not consider emotional, mental, sexual, or economic violence, which can be just as traumatic and devastating, as abuse. This definition also suggests that in order for there to be domestic violence in a relationship, the individuals need to be living together. This excludes partners who do not live together, where abuse can be just as prevalent and distressing. On the other hand, for the purposes of my thesis, the Merriam-Webster definition of domestic violence is too broad, as it defines domestic violence as violence between any family members (i.e. parent to parent, child to parent, parent to child, etc.).

In my experience, I did not live with the person abusing me and while there was physical abuse, I was subjected to abuse that was more emotional and mental in nature. Therefore, according to the definition above, the abuse I suffered in my relationship would not be considered domestic violence. This is horrifying. It also has immense negative consequences, not only for myself, but also for the 6.8 million people in the United States who report incidents of IPV and sexual assault by their intimate partner each year.[18] While there is progress being made to more accurately define IPV,

[17] Merriam-Webster, "Domestic Violence."
[18] Allen and Wozniak, 38.

challenges still exist, as there are multiple views and opinions of what it consists of. This can be problematic in many ways, as it leaves abuse within relationships up to a matter of opinion.

For almost four months of my relationship, I was unaware that what I was experiencing was IPV because it did not fit perfectly into the definition I knew. In the early stages, there was no physical abuse. My partner exhibited controlling and aggressive behaviors towards me; consistently belittled me and told me I was worthless; and over time, strategically and deliberately isolated me from family and friends. But for four months, he didn't lay a hand on me and therefore, I was unable to label what I was experiencing as IPV. Looking back, I recognize that at that point in my life, I did not have the necessary knowledge or information about what constituted an abusive relationship. I knew that people in relationships sometimes fought, even yelled at each other. I knew that sometimes people got jealous and it was important to work through those feelings together as a couple. At the time, I was unsure where the line was between a healthy relationship and an abusive one if there was no physical violence. The National Domestic Violence Hotline explains that "all relationships exists on a spectrum from healthy to abusive with unhealthy somewhere in the middle."[19] They explain that key elements of a healthy relationship include open communication where both parties listen to one another; respect for one another where both parties feel valued; trust in each other where neither partner has to prove they are trustworthy; honesty; equality where both partners make decisions together, as well as have an equal say in financial matters;

[19] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Relationship Spectrum."

encouragement to spend time alone, as well as time with friends; and consensual sexual activity.[20] As I read these qualities of a healthy relationship now, they seem obvious to me. At 23-years-old, while I recognized that my relationship was not healthy, I did not realize it was abusive.

In addition, I never thought I would ever be in an abusive relationship. This prevented me from allowing myself to label it as one in the beginning. Instead, I looked for ways to normalize my partner's behavior and found excuses for him. Whether it was logical at the time or not, I was waiting for him to put his hands on me before I felt that I could accurately label it as abuse.

In 2010, the World Health Organization defined IPV as, "behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors."[21] This definition broadened what is considered abuse to include the non-physical, such as sexual or psychological. The National Domestic Violence Hotline expands the definition even further. It states:

> Domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic abuse or relationship abuse) is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship. Domestic violence includes behaviors that physically harm, arouse fear, prevent a partner from doing what they wish or force them to behave in ways they do not want. It includes the use of physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional abuse and economic deprivation. Many of these different forms of domestic violence/abuse can be occurring at any one time within the same intimate relationship.[22]

[20] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Relationship Spectrum."
[21] World Health Organization, *Preventing Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women.*
[22] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"

I've spent so much time defining IPV because of the very fact that there are so many different definitions for this term. With so many definitions, it is challenging to know what people believe constitutes abuse between intimate partners. For my thesis, when I use this term, I will be using the combined definitions from the World Health Organization and the National Domestic Violence Hotline quoted above. My hope is that in being this transparent about how I define IPV, my readers will have a clearer understanding of how I approach this topic and my own personal experience with it.

It is not surprising that after experiencing IPV, many survivors suffer from long-term negative effects. Many survivors report high rates of anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation and attempts,[23] as well as substance abuse and/or dependence.[24] Between 31% and 84% of survivors of IPV exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms[25] and "one of the most common negative psychological consequences of IPV is depression."[26] Waldrop and Resick report that between 50% and 83% of survivors experience depression.[27] In addition, many survivors of IPV experience "lowered self-esteem, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunctions."[28] Because of the vast number of adverse consequences of IPV, research around this topic, and the recovery from this type of violence, has largely focused on the negative outcomes. However, Anderson, Renner,

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[23] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 2.
[24] Valdez and Lilly, "Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: An Assumptive World Process," 216.
[25] Anderson, Renner, and Davis, "Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence," 1280.
[26] Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann, "Correlates of Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence," 895.
[27] Waldrop and Resick, Coping Among Adult Female Victims of Domestic Violence," 298.
[28] Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann, "Correlates of Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence," 895.

and Davis caution against concentrating solely on the negative effects of IPV. They explain that by doing so, "how women transform their struggle with such adversity and, consequently, a more complete picture of recovery is missed. In other words, a list of symptoms tells us little about the tremendous strengths and resources battered women draw on to recover from domestic violence."[29] They explain that in addition to the negative effects of IPV, most survivors "display a stunning capacity for survival and perseverance. Growth and pain, therefore, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but instead are inextricably linked in recovery from trauma."[30] By focusing strictly on the negative consequences of IPV, the strength and resilience survivors find and utilize to leave their abusive relationship, process through their experience, rebuild a new life, and thrive in the aftermath, is dismissed. However, only a small amount of research has been done on survivors' capacity for healing after IPV to date.

In 1998, Tedeschi and Calhoun coined the term post-traumatic growth (PTG). As opposed to post-traumatic stress, post-traumatic growth refers to the positive changes and transformation that individuals experience after struggling through loss, suffering, or trauma. PTG does not happen overnight, nor does it ignore the negative consequences of one's trauma. Instead, it is a process that requires individuals who have experienced trauma to confront their suffering, process it, and make meaning of and from it. From there, individuals can rebuild their lives and learn to survive—and thrive—after trauma. Valdez and Lilly explain,

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[29] Anderson, Renner, and Davis, "Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence," 1280.
[30] Anderson, Renner, and Davis, "Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence," 1280.

> Focusing on positive post-trauma changes is not to discount the adverse effects that may result from trauma. In fact, it has been proposed that positive post-trauma changes occur through the process of making meaning of a traumatic event that, at least initially, resulted in high levels of psychological distress. Yet over time, survivors often begin to perceive their trauma or victimization in a new way that fosters a sense of meaning and value in their lives.[31]

Survivors of IPV are also able to experience PTG after leaving abusive relationships. To date, my experience with IPV has been the most traumatic period of my life. For many years after leaving this relationship, I suffered from depression and anxiety and flirted with an eating disorder. I felt worthless and unlovable and carried an immense amount of shame because of what had happened to me. Due to the emotional abuse I was subjected to, I believed that I deserved the abuse I experienced. It took a lot of time, self-reflection, forgiveness, and an incredible amount of love and support from a few close friends I trusted, to confront and learn how to overcome these negative feelings.

And yet, there have been so many positive things that have happened as a result of such a traumatic experience. My experience with IPV, and the healing I found after leaving my abusive partner, has shaped the trajectory of my life in an incredibly positive way. It is because of this relationship that I am able to have deep, meaningful, honest and real relationships—with both friends and partners. I have learned what I do and don't deserve in relationships, how to set healthy boundaries, how to have meaningful conversations with those I love, and how to be vulnerable with and alongside others. It is also because of this relationship and its aftermath, that I have found a deep passion for working with and alongside other survivors of IPV, as well as other female-identified

[31] Valdez and Lilly, "Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: An Assumptive World Process," 216.

people in general. This passion has driven me to speak out and stand up against social injustice, sexism, and racism; critically examine my own feminism and feminist beliefs; and propels me to practice intersectional feminism on a daily basis. It is because of this experience—and the growth and healing I found afterwards—that I share my own story and experience, acknowledge and believe in my own self-worth, and deeply love those who allow me to be me.

It is important to make a vital distinction. It is not the trauma or traumatic event itself that causes PTG in a survivor. Instead, as D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks explain, it is the "struggle with the new reality" after the trauma.[32] In other words, PTG can only occur once a survivor has wrestled with the trauma they experienced and learned as much as they can from it. It requires, in many ways, sitting with the negative feelings that follow trauma and allowing oneself to fully feel them, confront them, process through them, and make meaning from them. It is difficult, messy, and raw. My road to finding healing after being in an abusive relationship was deeply painful, uncomfortable, and longer than I hoped it would be. It is also a road that, some days, I still find myself on. Recognizing that healing takes time has allowed me to be gentle with myself throughout the process. It consists of moments of deep grief and shame, alongside moments of a profound gratitude for all of the love and support in my life from friends and family. It was, and still sometimes is, an incredibly challenging, yet deeply humbling and beautiful process. In D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks' study, they note the following in regards to the healing process of survivors of IPV:

[32] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 4.

> While most of the women either implicitly or explicitly expressed an overarching sense of forward movement in their healing journey, many recounted cycling through feelings of loneliness, fear, sadness, uncertainty, and discouragement along with feelings of connection, courage, happiness, confidence, and hope.[33]

In this sense, the journey to PTG includes both negative and positive emotions and moments. It is the juxtaposition of both that helps survivors find healing. Growth is on the other side of working through the adverse effects of trauma—including IPV—if one allows themselves the space and time to heal.

As Anderson, Renner, and Davis explain, we currently know much more about the post-traumatic symptoms that individuals experience after leaving an abusive relationship than we do about resiliency and PTG.[34] This is partly due to the nature of IPV itself. IPV tends to be ongoing and involves multiple, repeated traumas inflicted upon an individual. In this sense, survivors of IPV usually need to confront and work through multiple traumas in order to experience PTG and find healing. I do not say this to discount the hard work that goes into growth and healing after one suffers a single traumatic event. Instead, I say this to emphasize that the healing survivors of IPV experience after leaving an abusive relationship is often multidimensional and nonlinear as they work through their multiple traumas. In addition, an individual usually tries to leave an abusive relationship multiple times. Their growth and healing may be interrupted throughout this process as they leave and re-enter the relationship. Therefore,

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[33] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 18.
[34] Anderson, Renner, and Davis, "Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence," 1280.

as D'Amore et al. note, due to the ongoing nature of IPV, "researchers suggest using caution when interpreting results with respect to the timing of PTG in relation to IPV."[35]

The research that has been done to examine the relationship between PTG and IPV is promising. I should note that the subjects of all of the studies I researched were female-identified survivors. As I identify as a female, I did not research the relationship between PTG and IPV in male-identified or non-binary individuals for the purposes of my thesis.

In 2002, Senter and Caldwell interviewed 22 female-identified survivors of IPV after they left their abusive relationships. They explained that the women reported, "stronger interpersonal relationships, increased ability to accept support from others, increased self-awareness and introspection."[36] The women in this study also displayed an increased likelihood of helping other women in abusive relationships, as well as a feeling of control in and over their lives. In another study conducted by Smith in 2003, it was discovered that after leaving an abusive relationship, "women's self-compassion had increased, they became more self-reliant and assertive, they gained a greater sense of self, and they discovered a greater purpose in life."[37] The testimonies of these women highlight the immense amount of strength required to not only survive an abusive relationship, but to thrive after leaving it as well. They deepened their relationships with family and friends; they allowed themselves to become vulnerable and accept help from

[35] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 5.
[36] Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann, "Correlates of Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence," 896.
[37] Valdez and Lilly, "Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: An Assumptive World Process," 217.

others; they learned more about themselves as individuals; they learned to rely more on themselves; and they found a greater purpose in life. In essence, these women lived through hell, rebuilt their lives, and came out stronger because of their hard work and dedication to finding their own healing. They walked through fire and lived. Not only did they live, they thrived in the aftermath. The stories of these survivors are ones of strength, courage, and honesty. These women provide hope for other survivors that PTG is possible after experiencing IPV.

Personal growth and development is difficult, even without experiencing trauma. The challenges survivors of IPV face to find PTG can, at times, seem insurmountable. But it is possible. From my own experience as a survivor, to the evidence the current literature has found, survivors of IPV can find PTG and thrive after leaving an abusive relationship. Norman E. Rosenthal M.D. states, "…in the aftermath of abuse, we often see the powerful resilience of the human spirit, as well as our deep-seated drive to convert personal trauma into compassion and kindness, to help others heal."[38] I have found that is has always been during the darker times of my life that I have grown the most, found immense inner strength and resilience, deeply connected with family and friends—even strangers—and ultimately, become the woman I am now. My experience with IPV is no different. Without surviving that relationship, confronting and processing through the negative consequences of it, and rebuilding my life in the aftermath, I am unsure if I would be the independent, strong, capable human being that I am today. While I am not thankful for the actual abuse I experienced, I am thankful for the resilience,

[38] Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections, 82.*

growth, and strength—PTG—I found after facing and overcoming it. My hope is that other survivors can, one day, find the same strength and peace that I, and many other survivors, have found in the aftermath of IPV.

CHAPTER 1: MY EXPERIENCE WITH INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

In this chapter, I will introduce the multiple identities that I hold in order to be transparent about who I am as a writer, survivor of IPV, and human being. I will also share my personal experience with IPV, specifically the emotional and physical abuse I was subjected to during my relationship seven years ago. In addition, I will describe how controlling behaviors, emotional abuse, and strangulation show up within abusive relationships and the consequences of each.

Chapter 1.1: This is Me

But all I am is a woman
All I am is my woman
I am the woman I can be
The one I want to be
Not the one I should be, could be, would be
Not so much more, too much like, or nearly so.
—Author unknown

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Within my one little five foot, four inch body, I hold multiple identities. Some of these identities have been given to me by my society and culture, while I have been able to choose others for myself. I am a sister, a daughter, a friend, a wife, a colleague, a border-line obsessive dog and cat mom, a traveler, a writer, a recovering perfectionist, at times a nervous ball of anxiety, an overachiever, a small business owner, a graduate student, and more. As one of my fellow classmates, Giana, eloquently once said, “There is more than meets the eye, and then some more.” Some of my identities are static and some are fluid and changing depending on the day, who I’m surrounded by, or how I’m feeling in any given moment.

I am also White, straight, and cis-gender. Because I carry these identities, I recognize that I have an enormous amount of privilege and opportunity. I am more likely to be given the space to share my story and my story is more likely to be heard by others and be seen as credible because of these socially constructed identities. Simply—and really, not so simply at all—because I am White, straight, and cis-gender, society has somehow deemed me more deserving of being seen, heard, and believed. While I do not agree that I should be treated better or given more space and credibility because of these identities, it is important to recognize that I have benefited from straight, white, heteronormative culture my whole life.

I am also a woman. Of all of the identities I hold, this is one I am most proud of and one that never waivers or changes. I absolutely love being a woman.

I proudly call myself a feminist. For some, this word may bring up images of women burning their bras and hating men. That is not my definition of feminism. I couldn't live my life without the daily support of my bras—no joke—and I do not think men are horrible creatures. Some of the kindest, most thoughtful, wonderful people I know are men. For some, the word feminism may bring up images of women and men marching together in unity against oppressors of our country, wearing pink pussy hats. For others, feminism may bring to mind the strong, smart, capable women and men they know that go about living their lives from day to day, trying to leave the world a little bit better than when they got here. To me, this is feminism. It is every woman, every man, every human being on the planet sowing seeds of kindness, lifting others up, speaking out against oppression of people who are marginalized, and trying to leave the world a little

bit better than when we all got here. I am deeply passionate about and committed to enhancing social justice for all people, regardless of gender, race, color, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class. To me, that is what a feminist embodies and I am proud to identify as one.

I was born on the crest of the second wave of feminism. It was during this time that feminism broadened from focusing on obtaining suffrage—for White women—to issues of sexuality and reproductive rights.[39] The second wave of feminism also brought the issues of domestic violence and marital rape to the public eye. The fourth, and current, wave of feminism is focused on combating sexual harassment, assault, and misogyny. The irony that I am writing my thesis during the fourth wave of feminism is not lost on me.

Before continuing, it is essential to note that historically, the feminist movement has been more focused on the issues of White, cis-gender, straight, middle- to upper-class women, like myself. With each new wave of feminism, the movement works harder to advocate for the equalities, freedoms, and rights of women of color, lesbians, poor women, and people who do not fit in the gender binary. There is still an incredible amount of work to be done for the feminist movement, as a whole, to be truly intersectional.

I am also a survivor. I am a survivor of a mentally, emotionally, sexually, and physically abusive relationship. While this identity is the primary one I will be unpacking in my thesis, it is important to recognize that I hold a multitude of other identities as well.

[39] Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism."

My identity as a survivor did not—and does not—happen in a vacuum. All of the other parts of my identity are affected by and intersect with my identity as a survivor. The other parts of my identity were, and continue to be, vitally important to my healing and growth since leaving an abusive relationship.

Chapter 1.2: Controlling Behaviors and Emotional Abuse

You can recognize survivors of abuse by their courage. When silence is so very inviting, they step forward and share their truth so others know they aren't alone.
—Jeanne McElvaney

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To this day, I don't think I ever loved him. In the beginning, I wanted to love him. But in the beginning, he was also kind, present, and fun. In the beginning, he was even gentle. During our eight months together, I told him I loved him. There was a stretch of time, near the end, that I said it daily with the hope that if I said it enough maybe it would be true, maybe he would believe me, maybe it would all stop. But my words rang insincere and he heard it. We both knew that I didn't love him, no matter how many times those words left my lips. Sometimes, in my deepest moments of self-doubt, I catch myself wondering that if I had truly loved him, things would have been different. The rational side of my brain knows this is not true. Because I know now, just like I knew then, that I did not love him—and could not love him. I was terrified of him.

Looking back, my mind is filled with ifs—if I just done so-and-so differently; if I had just left right after I realized what was happening; if I had never allowed a relationship with him to blossom; if I had just told someone what was really going on

between the two of us. But hindsight is 20/20 and my ifs are too heavy a burden to bear. And they are not my load to carry.

***

At 23 years-old, I was living on my own for the first time, far away from my family, in a two-story brick row house that had a garden of hydrangeas in the backyard. Most of my college friends had spread out after graduation, so my support system, while strong, was not physically close to me. I was naïve and impulsive with dreams of somehow saving the world, although I had no idea what that would look like. I was unsure of how to stand solidly on my own two feet and was excited to try and learn how. I worried too much about what others thought of me and because of this, I often questioned my own decisions and struggled with anxiety.

Now, before you get the wrong impression of me, I want to clarify a few things. Yes, I was young and naïve at 23. Yes, I was starting out on my own for the first time and struggling with many of the anxieties that most 23 year-olds do. No, I didn't fully know who I was or what I wanted to be when I grew up. However, I could not easily be knocked down. I was strong-minded, smart, and tough. I had a strong, large group of supportive friends and multiple hobbies. I loved working out and weighed a healthy 130 pounds. I was well-rounded with a good head on my shoulders and never would have believed that I would find myself in an abusive relationship. I may not have been completely sure of myself at 23, but I was on my way.

Enter him. He was successfully employed, hilarious, adventurous and well-traveled, handsome, and damn smooth with women. But of all the women he could have

chosen, he was drawn to me from the moment we first spoke. I think he sensed a certain weakness in me. He recognized that I was still green and saw the potential to mold me, shape me to his liking, and break me.

Immediately, we clicked. To this day, I have met few people who are able to make me laugh like he did—that deep belly laugh you feel in every fiber of your being. In the beginning, being with him was a non-stop adventure; even walks around the neighborhood were filled with laughter and exploring new nooks and crannies of my little town. In the beginning, I felt that he had unlocked a bold, free spirit that had been hidden inside me for 23 years. In the beginning, I felt free with him.

If, in the beginning, I had known I was befriending the devil, I would have turned around and walked away when he first said hello.

Within a month of our relationship, I knew something was wrong. At the time, I was unable to truly describe what it was, but I found myself feeling confused, anxious, and unsure of the relationship. It started with his bouts of jealousy when I said I was going out with friends or wanted to do something on my own. He would continuously ask me who I was going out with, what I was doing, where I was going, and when I would be home. No matter how many times I answered the same questions, always truthfully, he wouldn't believe me. While I was out, he would text and call me constantly. If I didn't respond, he would get verbally aggressive, calling me names and threatening to leave me. At times, he showed up at events and venues where I was in order to check in on me and try to catch me in a lie. The first time I confronted him about his behavior, he told me I was crazy and called me a liar.

At that point in time, I didn't realize that his behavior was not only controlling, but also emotional abuse. In abusive relationships, it is common for controlling and intimidating behaviors to surface before physical and/or emotional abuse. It is also common for the abusive partner to minimize, deny, and even blame the other person if and when they are confronted about their behavior. At the heart of IPV is the need for one partner to feel power and control over the other. By using isolation tactics such as controlling what the other person does and who they see or talk to; limiting the other person's relationships and involvements outside of the relationship; and using jealousy to justify actions, abusive partners gain control over the other person.[40]

Looking back, I recognize that my partner implemented all of these tactics on me within the first few months of our relationship. He tried to dictate who I saw and what I did outside of our relationship; he yelled at me for talking to my friends and family; and he called me a whore and threatened me when I talked to other men. He also used jealousy to justify his controlling behaviors. Yet, at the time, I did not have the knowledge I do today that would have allowed me to label his behavior as abusive.

In addition, when confronted, abusers often make light of the abuse, deny any abuse happened, and blame the other person for the abuse—i.e. if you didn't do X, I wouldn't have to hit you, yell at you, call you names, etc.[41] These tactics often result in the abused partner questioning if they are going crazy or making things up. Abused partners can also start to believe they are responsible for the abuse they experience. I remember asking myself: *Was I making everything up? Did he really act as badly as I*

[40] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"
[41] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"

originally thought? Was I just being a bad girlfriend? Could I do something different to change or avoid his aggressive reactions?

As time went on, my partner's controlling behavior intensified as he deliberately isolated me from family and friends. He often went through my texts and endlessly quizzed me on who I was talking to. Once, I set up a password for my phone so he wouldn't be able to read my personal conversations. When he tried to go into my phone and realized I had password protected it, he screamed that I was hiding something from him and punched a hole in his living room wall. With IPV, the abusive partner often employs intimidation tactics such as making the other person afraid using looks, actions, and gestures; breaking things and destroying the other person's property; displaying weapons; and even abusing pets. [42] All of these things are done to gain power and control over the other person. When my partner started destroying things in front of me—and it happened often—his goal was to make me afraid so I would submit to his wishes. Again, I did not have the knowledge I do today to recognize this as abusive. Instead, I felt paralyzed. After he punched a hole in the wall the first time, I started changing the names of people in my phone and deleting whole text conversations. While not fully aware of what I was doing—or why I was doing it—at the time, I also started distancing myself from friends and family, afraid that I would say something through text that my partner would later read which would make him angry.

Because of his behavior, I effectively cut off communication with those who expressed concerns about my relationship with him. Before I started dating my abusive

[42] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"

partner, my best friend, Leigh, and I spoke daily—sometimes multiple times a day. She was the first person I shared my worries with when I realized he was prone to sporadic, destructive behavior. However, as my relationship with him progressed, I distanced myself further from her and eventually, stopped talking to her all together. I left all of her anxious texts and frantic phone messages unanswered. Leigh was living hours away from me at the time so it was easier for me to ignore her and create as much space as I felt necessary. By ending my communication with Leigh, I stopped getting an outside—and healthy—perspective on my relationship. When I had talked to Leigh about my partner's behavior when we first started dating, she was able to help me process it and recognize it as unhealthy, although the word "abuse" never arose in any of our conversations. However, once I stopped talking to her, I had no one to help me make sense of it all. The only perspective I got was mine and my partner's which quickly became toxic, damaging, and abusive.

Understanding IPV the way that I do now, it is easy for me to look back and ask myself: *How did you not see the red flags? How did you not realize his behavior was abusive? How did you not know?* But these questions are unfair to ask my beautiful, naïve, out in the world for the first time on her own, 23-year-old self. I didn't know. I wasn't equipped with the knowledge and understanding that I have today. If I had been, things may have been different. But, as I said in the beginning of this chapter, hindsight is 20/20 and to expect my 23-year-old self to have the knowledge I do today is unfair. This experience—and the growth and healing I've found since leaving this relationship—has been an integral part of my development into a self-sufficient, self-aware, compassionate

human being. So, if I could go back in time, I'm not sure I would rescue myself. Instead, I would hold my hand through it all. I would tell myself that I would get through it and come out stronger on the other side. I would walk through the fire with myself and watch myself rise like a phoenix, reborn even more beautiful after it all.

Chapter 1.3: When Emotional Abuse Becomes Physical

On average, 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States—more than 12 million women and men over the course of a year.

1 in 4 women (24.3%) and 1 in 7 men (13.8%) aged 18 and older in the United States have been the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
—The National Domestic Violence Hotline

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These are the facts I know now:

1. Many survivors are hesitant to label choking as abusive.
2. It is possible to experience strangulation and show no symptoms at first, but die weeks later because of brain damage due to lack of oxygen and other internal injuries.[43]

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Five months into my relationship with my partner, I was getting ready to celebrate my birthday. The morning of my birthday, I was sitting at the kitchen table in my partner's apartment waiting for him to finish getting dressed. He planned to take me to a music festival, which he wanted to go to, even though I had voiced multiple times I wasn't interested in it. At some point that morning, my phone buzzed. I looked down and

[43] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "The Dangers of Strangulation"

read the words “Happy Birthday” across my screen under the name of a male friend. I instantly felt the color drain from my face as my heartbeat sped up. I had been friends with this man since elementary school. After high school he moved out of state, so although we rarely saw each other, we kept in touch sporadically through texts and phone calls. Without fail, we connected on each of our birthdays to catch up. I realized that I had not changed his name in my phone to a woman’s name, as we hadn’t talked since I started dating my partner. I replied with a quick “thank you” and told him that I would text him back later.

When I looked up from my screen, my partner was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and his bedroom watching me. “Who are you texting?” He asked. To an outsider, this question would have come off nonchalant. But at this point, I had learned that the slightest change in his tone could mean danger.

“No one, just an old friend.” I looked at him straight in the eye as I said this, watching for his jaw to clench.

“Who are you texting?” His voice was monotone, his eyes expressionless.

“He’s just an old friend. It’s nothing.” I moved to stand up, hoping that if I could touch him, hug him, it might diffuse the situation.

“He?” In an instant, he grabbed my phone from my hands and looked down at the screen.

“Who the fuck is this?” His face was an inch away from mine and I could smell his freshly brushed teeth. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“He’s an old friend. We’ve been friends since elementary school. It’s nothing, I promise.”

“You’re a fucking whore,” he spat in my face. “How dare you respond to him? How dare you text another man when you’re with me.”

“He’s just a friend.” I tried to keep my voice flat, but both of us heard it shaking.

In an instant, my partner flung my phone on the kitchen floor and grabbed me with one hand by the front of my neck, dragging me into the living room. Once there, he threw me on the floor, with my head just missing the side of his couch. With me on my back, he straddled me. He wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed until black dots shot across my eyelids like fireworks. I gasped for air as I started to lose consciousness. All at once, he stopped. My hands flew to my neck in protection and I gulped down air as I tried to stop myself from crying. He leaned his face so close to mine that our noses were touching and whispered, “You’re a whore.” Then he stood up, spit on my face, and walked calmly back to his bedroom as I lay on the floor crying silently. I felt glued to that spot, unable to move, trying to regulate my breathing. Sometime later—twenty minutes? Thirty? Two? He came back into the living room and held out his hand to me. I took it and he pulled me to my feet and hugged me tightly against his chest. He stroked my hair, whispered “I love you,” and told me to wash my face. I went to the bathroom, reapplied my makeup, and we left for the festival. We spent the day together, with him holding my hand the whole time.

***

These are the facts I know now:

1. When your partner strangles you, this is a significant predictor for future lethal violence.
2. If your partner has strangled you in the past, you are 10 times more likely to be killed by them.
3. Strangulation is one of the most lethal forms of intimate partner violence.[44]

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Strangulation is defined as, "the compression of the neck with one or two hands that may result in the restriction of blood flow and oxygenation to the brain"[45] and is more common within abusive relationships than originally thought. Of the 1 in 4 women who will experience IPV in her lifetime, "of women at high risk, up to 68% will experience near-fatal strangulation by their partner."[46]

The side effects of strangulation that do not result in death are often severe, although **"**many victims present with no visible signs of injury."[47] Survivors of IPV who have been strangled often experience "injuries to the soft tissue, esophagus, and spine,"[48] as well as "a myriad of clinical symptoms including loss of consciousness, scratches on the neck, vision changes, dysphagia, neck pain, and psychiatric problems that include depression and post-traumatic stress disorder."[49] I count myself lucky that I did not have any lasting physical side effects due to being strangled. My neck was red and tender for a

[44] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"
[45] Smith et al., *Frequency and Relationship of Reported Symptomology in Victims of IPV,* 323.
[46] Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention, "Impact of Strangulation Crimes."
[47] Smith et al., *Frequency and Relationship of Reported Symptomology in Victims of IPV,* 327.
[48] Smith et al., *Frequency and Relationship of Reported Symptomology in Victims of IPV,* 323.
[49] Wilbur et al., *Survey Results of Women who have been Strangled While in an Abusive Relationship,* 301.

few days, but then any physical indication that he had laid a hand on me receded. I was left, instead, to carry the invisible emotional weight of what he had done to me.

Of all of my interactions with my partner over the course of our relationship, this particular one was the most difficult to write about. It was not difficult to write about only because it was the most violent. Yes, it was brutal and horrific. Writing about this day brought me back to the feelings of terror and helplessness I experienced lying on his living room floor. But my challenge in writing about my birthday is also due to the fact that for a long time, I couldn't remember it clearly.

Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D. explains that when individuals are suffering from a problem, creating a story about said problem can help resolve it. I believe this idea can also be extended to people who are recovering from trauma and are trying to work through it to reach healing. Through the process of developing a narrative, Rosenthal explains that people are able to create a timeline of how one thing led to another to get them where they are "with all their suffering—and all their strengths."[50] By using both the emotional and analytical parts of their brains, trauma victims and survivors are able to process their experiences in a beneficial way that promotes healing and growth. He notes,

> Storytelling is a fundamental part of how we deal with trauma. As the story is repeated, however, the perspective should shift if the story is to help a person heal. New details should come into focus; others should recede. Such shifts in language, perception, and perspective all reflect the active mental processing needed to recover from trauma.[51]

[50] Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections*, 233.
[51] Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections*, 235.

When I sat down to write about my experience with IPV in general, it took me a while to remember the exact timeline of my abusive relationship. All of the events I remembered—him going through my phone, punching a hole in the wall, strangling me, etc. —were jumbled. I had a general sense of what had happened during our time together, but the details and the timeline remained fuzzy. And to be honest, I'm not sure if I actually do remember the exact timeline, even after sitting with it for some time. While I was writing, my memories of the relationship came back to me in bits and pieces. There are some moments I remember clearly, and others that are fuzzy.

My birthday is one of the days that when I first sat down to write about it, it was extremely fuzzy. I remembered that my partner had strangled me, that it was because a male friend had texted me, and that we went to a music festival after. However, I had originally forgotten that it was my birthday and that my partner had spit on my cheek before standing up to finish getting dressed. As I sat with the memory of this day, different parts of it came back into focus as I pieced together what had happened. It came out disjointed, non-linear, and messy. Over the course of many weeks, I came back to this part of my story to add details and change the order of events as I remembered them. As Rosenthal argues, the process of repeating the events of this particular day led me to a clearer picture of what unfolded between my partner and I in his apartment on my birthday. The more I processed it, the more I was able to sort out what had happened—the timeline and actual events—and how I felt about it—anger, terror, sadness, disgust. After unpacking this day in great detail within my writing, the burden of this day became a little bit lighter. As I was writing this section, I also processed this day verbally with my

now-husband often. While talking to him, I found myself reframing moments and feelings, connecting the dots of events, and focusing on new and different details. As Rosenthal points out, over time, my perspective started to shift, my narrative came together in many ways, and I was able to move closer towards healing and recovery after writing about this traumatic and violent incident.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROCESS OF LEAVING AND STARTING TO HEAL

In this chapter, I will unpack the complexities of leaving an abusive relationship, as well as dissect the difference between a "victim" and a "survivor" of IPV. I will also introduce the empowerment theory, which is often employed by organizations who support survivors of IPV. Lastly, I will describe the process I went through to leave my abusive relationship for good and how I found healing in sharing my story with other survivors.

Chapter 2.1: Why Didn't You Just Leave?

It takes a lot of courage to let go of the things that hurt us. But when we finally do—we are free.
—Kiran Shaikh

***

Within six months of my relationship, I was isolated from family and friends, getting accustomed to my partner's consistent put-downs and emotional abuse—although I had not yet defined it as such—and my birthday had come and gone.

One afternoon, I drove over to his apartment after work. This was part of my typical routine: after leaving work, I would drive to my partner's to "check-in" before going home to let my dog out. This specific afternoon, I was feeling particularly lonely. I hadn't spoken to Leigh, or any of my other friends, in weeks. In six months, my world had become progressively smaller until the only other person in it—the only other thing in it—was my partner and our relationship. I was tired, worn down, and alone.

I sat in my car in the parking lot behind his apartment wringing my hands. A song played softly on the radio and I blinked back tears as I thought about the effort it would take to climb the stairs to his apartment, knock on his door, and smile as he opened it.

"I can't do this," I said aloud to myself, to the universe, to whatever higher power may have been able to intervene and save me. I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead against my steering wheel.

"*Flee*."

The hair stood up on the back of my neck and goosebumps shot up on my arms as I heard the word. It was a simple command, a single word spoken clearly and authoritatively without judgement. *Flee.* I spun around in my seat, looking for the person who uttered it. There was no one else in my car. I was alone. However, I heard the word—*flee*—as clearly as if I had been sitting next to someone having a casual conversation.

Flee.

To this day, I am unsure exactly who or what told me to flee that day. But I do know this: I was not alone in my car, or in my relationship, no matter how much I thought I was at the time. I was being watched over, protected, and held by something much bigger and more powerful than myself every moment of my eight months with him. And that something or someone was determined to see me come out of that relationship alive. And I did.

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I have often been asked, especially after people learn my partner became physically violent, “Why didn’t you just leave?” I wish it was that simple. Statistics show that a woman will leave an abusive relationship seven times before she leaves for good.[52] Throughout my eight-month relationship, I tried to end it multiple times. Over the years, I have lost track of how many times I told him it was over, only to find myself stuck in the same cycle of abuse with him.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline has a whole page on their website dedicated to the question, “Why Don’t They Just Leave?” People who are or have been in an abusive relationship are often asked this and it is important to understand that leaving an IPV situation is drastically different than leaving a healthy relationship. Leaving the relationship is often the most dangerous time[53] as abusers repeatedly go to extremes to prevent their partner from doing so. The first time I tried to end my relationship with my partner, he started to stalk me. He would sit in his car outside my condo, show up at my work place, and stand outside the gym when he knew I would be there. While we never spoke, his presence instilled a fear in me and reminded me that he was still in control of me. The third and fourth times I tried to leave, he broke into my apartment when I wasn’t home. I came home to my clothes and belongings strewn all over the place and my things broken. Thankfully, he never hurt my dog when he broke in. To try and stop him, I changed the locks on my front door three times and called the police twice. Both times, I was told there was nothing they could do to help me.

[52] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, *50 Obstacles to Leaving: 1 – 10.*
[53] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, “Why Don’t They Just Leave?”

In a 2015 study conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Professor TK Logan from the University of Kentucky, 637 women who had survived IPV were interviewed about their experiences reporting IPV to police. Of those women who contacted the police, "1 in 5 victims felt safer; 1 in 3 victims felt less safe; and 1 in 2 victims felt there was no difference in safety."[54] 43% of the women who contacted the police explained they were discriminated against due to: "not being the perfect victim; gender; lack of understanding by police about partner abuse and sexual assault; race/ethnicity or immigration status; and/or politics, offender connections."[55] In the worst case scenarios, "1 in 4 women reported they had been arrested or threatened with arrest during a partner abuse incident or while reporting a sexual assault incident to the police."[56] Like many of the women in this study, my experience of reporting IPV was similar. I didn't live with my partner and I didn't have any bruises either time I called, so I could not prove there was abuse. The message I received from the police was loud and clear: I needed more bruises to prove he was abusive. The lack of help from law enforcement, a system that in theory is meant to protect me, stalled my ability to leave and stay safe when I tried to do so.

Regardless of whether or not survivors choose to contact the police, there are multiple reasons why people are either unable or choose not to leave an abusive relationship. In many cases, abusers have threatened their partner—"the abuser will hurt them or kill them, they will hurt or kill the kids, they will win custody of the children,

[54] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, *Who Will Help Me?*, 6.
[55] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, *Who Will Help Me?*, 7.
[56] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, *Who Will Help Me?*, 8.

they will harm or kill pets or others, they will ruin their victim financially,"[57] etc. —if they leave. Fear that an abuser will follow through with the threats they have made is very often based in reality.[58] Anderson, Renner, and Davis report that survivors often experience their abusive partner becoming increasingly controlling, even after they try to leave the relationship. Women in their 2012 study explained they experienced "stalking; [their partner] breaking into their homes; and [their partner] harassing [their] employers, friends, and family."[59] If emotional abuse has been present in the relationship, the survivor may experience low self-esteem, depression, and feelings of responsibility for the abuse, all of which could prohibit them from leaving. As abusers often isolate their partners, survivors may feel they have nowhere else to go or anyone else to turn to for help. There may be apprehension of how friends and family would respond if they were to share they were experiencing abuse in their relationship. In addition, many people are financially dependent on their abuser. Without adequate funds to leave and start over, survivors may feel trapped.[60]

It is also important to remember that survivors often have feelings of love for their abuser. Abusive relationships are often a mix of good and bad times and in good times, the survivor can catch glimpses of the person they fell in love with before the abuse started. Survivors may hope that their partner can change and they can be in a happy and healthy relationship together. I have to admit, even now, that my relationship with my

[57] NCADV, "Why Do Victims Stay?"
[58] NCADV, "Why Do Victims Stay?"
[59] Anderson, Renner, Danis, *Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence,* 1288.
[60] NCADV, "Why Do Victims Stay?"

partner was not all bad. There were moments sprinkled throughout our relationship that were fun, even good, where I laughed alongside him until my stomach hurt. My partner was a talented musician and we spent many evenings together in his apartment writing songs together. I am an okay singer, but I am not someone who will ever sign up for karaoke or sing in front of people. However, my partner encouraged me and taught me how to strengthen my voice until I was confident singing while he played various instruments alongside me. We even ended up recording a demo of a song we wrote together. Those evenings, sitting next to my partner listening to him play music as I sang along, were little reprieves in our relationship when I felt comfortable and remembered why I was drawn to him in the first place. It was evenings like this that I would think maybe, just maybe, things could get better between us. Yet, those good moments never lasted.

The list could go on and on to explain why survivors stay in abusive relationships. IPV is a complex issue, as is the process of leaving it. The reasons for staying vary from survivor to survivor. However, it is vitally important to remember that, regardless of the reason someone stays in an abusive relationship, the abuse is never their fault and leaving is not as simple as "just leaving."

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For me to leave my partner for good, three things happened within a month of each other. First, I heard the voice in my car tell me to *flee.* The next week, my partner's company took on a large project out of state and offered him to lead the team responsible

for completing it. My partner readily said yes, which meant he would be gone for ten days. The week before he was scheduled to leave, I received an email from Leigh.

Leigh's letter arrived in my e-mail inbox on a Friday evening. Within her words, I could feel her anguish and fear as she wrote about how much she loved me and how worried she was for me. Near the end of her letter, she told me that she was terrified that one day, she would get a call with the news that my partner had murdered me. It was like I had been punched in the gut. She was right. In that moment, I finally allowed myself to realize that if I didn't end my relationship with him—for good—he would kill me. I called Leigh the next morning when my partner was visiting his mom in a neighboring town and asked her for help. I told her about my birthday, about the constant put-downs, and about my fear of my partner. Together, we came up with a plan on how to get me as far away from him as possible, as soon as possible.

The following Monday morning, I walked into work and quit my job effective that Friday. I spent the week acting as normal as I could with my partner and packing secretly whenever I had time in my apartment. I was lucky that he and I didn't live together during our relationship and that when we saw each other, he preferred for us to be at his apartment. Since I also had my dog, I often had to go back to my apartment to take care of him, and spent most nights at my own place. This allowed me the freedom to pack without him knowing.

That Saturday, my partner was booked to fly out at 8:00 a.m. He had asked me to drive him to the airport and I agreed, hoping to avoid any suspicion. As we pulled up to the curb, my partner asked me to put the car in park and told me to get out of the car. On

shaky legs, I did what I was told. I remember thinking: *Does he know? What will he do if he does?* Stepping out of the car, I watched him take his bags out of the trunk. When he caught me looking at him, he smiled. He placed the bags on the curb and walked towards me. I felt my heart jump to my throat as he wrapped me in a hug and kissed me on the cheek.

"I'll see you soon," he said.

All I could do was nod and return his hug.

I waited until he was inside the airport before getting back in the car. As I drove home, I hoped, I *prayed,* that would be the last time I ever saw him.

Leigh, her husband, and an empty U-Haul were waiting for me when I got back to my apartment. Within an hour, all of my belongings were loaded in. I blocked my partner's phone number and email. I deleted all of our mutual friends from my social media platforms. I told no one I was leaving. No one knew where I was going, except my immediate family.

I locked my apartment door for the last time and followed Leigh to the next chapter of my life. In a day, I became a ghost.

Chapter 2.2: Victims, Survivors, and the Empowerment Theory

You've always had the power my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself.
—The Wizard of Oz

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It takes strength to survive IPV. It takes strength to leave. It takes strength to rebuild your life after abuse. I was unable to see this for a long time.

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It can be extremely challenging to feel strong after leaving an abusive relationship. It can also be difficult for individuals, such as myself, to identify as a "survivor" of IPV when they initially leave. In the past seven years since I left my partner for good, I have been called both a victim and a survivor. I have also felt like—and identified as—both. When talking about IPV with agencies and individuals who support others who have experienced abuse in their relationship, I have often heard the words victim and survivor used interchangeably. Yet, these two words carry enormously different connotations. When I close my eyes and picture someone I would label a victim, an image of a helpless, weak person springs to mind. I think of someone who is feeble, needy, and unable to help themselves in desperate times. The descriptions I ascribe to the word "victim" are negative—pathetic, fragile. On the other hand, when I close my eyes and picture someone I would label a survivor, a completely different image comes to mind. I see someone who has carried on, despite the hardships they have faced. I see someone strong and capable, who is able to overcome whatever is thrown at them. The descriptions I ascribe to the word "survivor" are positive—resilient, tough. So which one am I: victim or survivor? Can it change?

For many years after leaving my partner, I did not feel like a survivor. Instead, I felt like and identified as a victim. By the end of my relationship, I was living in a state of constant terror and walking on eggshells. I was doing everything I could think of not to upset the beast inside of him. In addition to distancing myself from family and friends, I stopped participating in all of the things that once brought me joy. Except when I was at

work, I spent nearly every waking moment with my partner during the last few months of our relationship. I was a prisoner in my own life.

Perhaps the most damaging outcome of my time with him was the slow destruction of my emotional health. Over the course of eight months, through deliberate and premeditated thought, my partner broke me down, little by little. I saw myself as weak and as somehow deserving of what he had done to me. Over time, my partner brainwashed me to believe I was undeserving of love and being treated well. I remember being thankful that he loved me because I believed I was unlovable. I saw myself as a victim.

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It takes strength to survive IPV. It takes strength to leave. It takes strength to rebuild your life after abuse. I was unable to see this for a long time.

***

For many organizations and individuals who work with those who are experiencing or have experienced IPV, they often rely heavily on the empowerment theory. One of the goals of implementing the empowerment theory is to help an individual gain or regain control in and over their lives. Social Worker Dr. Katherine van Wormer explains, "…the process of empowerment [is] a means of increasing the personal, interpersonal, political, and economic power so that people [can] take action to improve their life situations."[61] In practice, using the empowerment theory in IPV-related work focuses on building up the strengths of those who have experienced abuse within

[61] Van Wormer and Besthorn, "Human Behavior in the Social Environment: Groups, Communities, and Organizations," 44.

their relationship. It aims to help survivors feel strong and recognize that although what they went through was horrific, they had the power to overcome it. It aims to help survivors rebuild their lives in positive ways after leaving abusive relationships. This could mean empowering survivors to live on their own, find a new job, go back to school, take parenting classes, build community and a support system, etc. It draws on the resources individuals have both within and around them to create a fulfilling, happy, and full life. It aims to help survivors reclaim their voices and feel empowered to share their experiences. Ultimately, the empowerment theory aims to help survivors grow and heal from their experiences, recognizing they are strong, capable, whole human beings.

When I started going to therapy after leaving my partner, my therapist continually referred to me as a survivor. At first, I fought this label because I felt more like a victim. However, by implementing the empowerment theory, her goal was to shift my perspective and help me move past the victim mentality to the other side of identifying as a survivor. She worked to help me identify as a survivor so I could rebuild my life and learn to thrive in the aftermath of experiencing abuse. She wanted me to recognize that I was strong for surviving what I had been through and wanted to empower me to use my strengths to live a full and happy life after my relationship with my partner.

Before going forward, I want to stress that there is nothing wrong with identifying as a victim after a traumatic experience or event such as IPV. I believe it is normal and sometimes needed for healing and growth.

It took me a long time to realize how strong I was to go through what I did and survive. I had to find strength and resilience within myself not only to survive my

relationship, but to leave it for good and rebuild my life afterwards. This was a deeply difficult, uncomfortable, and challenging process. In order to recognize my strengths, I had to sit with all of the negative emotions—anger, hurt, disgust, misplaced guilt, etc. I had to allow myself to feel these feelings and confront them. I had to ask myself *why* I felt the way I did and work through my answers. I had to untangle what my partner did to me with my own sense of responsibility for our relationship. After that, I had to rebuild my life on the rubble left over. I had to find a new job so I could pay my bills and support myself. I had to learn a brand new town and state—where I got groceries, where I got gas, and what was the best way to get from point A to point B. I had to create new relationships, which required a level of vulnerability and trust that I felt had been lost. And I had to look at myself in the mirror, every day, and try and find myself behind a stranger's eyes. With help from my therapist and a few close friends, as well as an insane amount of self-reflection, I was able to slowly shift my perspective and see that I was strong.

I was a survivor.

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It takes strength to survive IPV. It takes strength to leave. It takes strength to rebuild your life after abuse. I believe this now.

***

Back to one of my original questions for this section: can one's identity as a victim or survivor change? For me, yes. For everyone, I don't know. While I believe in using the empowerment theory when working with individuals who have experienced

abuse, I also believe that it is up to the individual to define how they choose to identify. For some, they may immediately recognize their strength in successfully surviving and leaving an abusive relationship and identify as a survivor. For others with similar experiences, they may always feel like a victim. There may be individuals who, when they initially leave a relationship, feel like a victim. Then with support, time, growth, and healing, they feel like a survivor. And there may be individuals who some days feel like a survivor and the next day feel like a victim, regardless of how long ago they left an abusive relationship. However a person chooses to identify in any given moment after experiencing IPV is up to them. The purpose of the empowerment theory is not to discount or discredit someone's identity as a victim. As Anderson, Renner, and Davis explain,

> The intent is not to deny the real trauma of domestic violence and its consequences. However, helping women reformulate life stories that feature their strengths and resourcefulness does refute that people who endure such hardships are lacking in resilience or are unable to achieve their aspirations.[62]

The empowerment theory and practical application aims to help them shift their perspective to recognize their internal strengths and the external resources available to them to help them rebuild their life in a positive way. It does not dictate how a person identifies, but helps them see their own resilience in the face of trauma.

While I now identify as a survivor, there are still moments, although rare, that I feel more like a victim. I have learned that regardless of if I identify as a survivor or a

[62] Anderson, Renner, and Davis, ""Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence," 1295.

victim in any given moment, I have to be gentle with myself. Healing and growth is a life-long journey after experiencing IPV. There will be good days and bad days.

And that is okay.

***

It takes strength to survive IPV. It takes strength to leave. It takes strength to rebuild your life after abuse. I believe this now.

Chapter 2.3: Sharing My Story with Other Survivors

It's important that we share our experiences with other people. Your story will heal you and your story will heal someone else. When you tell your story, you free yourself and give people permission to acknowledge their own story.
—Iyanla Vanzant

Courage is born and passed along through sharing stories.
—Wind Paz-Amor

***

By talking with others about my experience with IPV, I was able to truly start my journey towards healing. It was also through sharing my story that I started to feel like a survivor. For eight months, I had kept this experience locked inside myself. The burden of hiding the abuse in my relationship quickly became too heavy for me to carry alone. When I first started sharing my experience, it was a way for me to purge what had happened; I needed to get it out of my head and put it out into the universe. Verbally processing what happened during those eight months of my life allowed me to make sense of it as best I could. Shortly after I left my relationship for good, I found myself frequently talking aloud to myself, putting the pieces of the story together, trying to make a linear timeline that allowed me to understand how I got from point A—a regular 23-

year-old just trying to live her life—to point B—a survivor of IPV. I also spoke to a few trusted friends and a wonderful therapist regularly, as I have mentioned. I was blessed to share my story with people who showered me with love and support as I sorted through my experience and who never once made me feel like any of the abuse was deserved or my fault. This support in particular was vital to my healing.

To re-quote Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D., "…in the aftermath of abuse, we often see the powerful resilience of the human spirit, as well as our deep-seated drive to convert personal trauma into compassion and kindness, to help others heal."[63] While Rosenthal is speaking specifically about survivors of sexual abuse, I believe this thinking can be applied to survivors of IPV as well. Rosenthal goes on to explain that survivors of abuse are often more empathetic to other victims and more likely to help them. Rosenthal shares the example of one woman, Lauren, who was raped while attending boarding school as a young girl. Now in her late twenties, Lauren talks to others about her experience and the journey of healing she took afterward to live a happy, full life. Lauren recognizes that her story has value, and that through sharing it, has the power to transform the lives of others, as well as her own. She uses her own traumatic experience to bestow healing and hope upon others, as well as continue in her own journey of growth.

When I first started sharing my personal experience with IPV, I did not believe, as Lauren did, that my story had value or had the power to transform the lives of others. To be honest, I still struggle with fully believing that now. However, once I started to work

[63] Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections*, 82.

through my own trauma, I realized that I could use my experience to help others who had experienced similar situations. Two years after I left my partner for good, I started volunteering at Steps to End Domestic Violence (Steps). Formed in 1974, Steps' mission "is to assist in the transition to a safe, independent life for all those who have been affected physically, sexually, emotionally, or economically by domestic abuse and to promote a culture that fosters justice, equity, and safety."[64] Steps offers a 24-hour confidential hotline that provides support not only to survivors, but also to the family and friends of survivors. The staff provides emotional support, safety planning, educational information, and referrals to multiple services both within Steps and the surrounding community to all individuals who call the hotline. In addition, Steps offers legal advocacy, transitional and emergency housing, a children's program, and a weekly support group to all those who have been affected by IPV. The organization is also committed to raising awareness about IPV through their education and prevention program. In all of their work with survivors, Steps implements the empowerment model, which allows survivors to decide what services they will use if they are currently, or have, experienced IPV.[65]

In my role as an Emergency Housing Advocate, I worked in the transitional housing shelter Steps offered for female-identified survivors of IPV. I provided information, advocacy, and support to the survivors residing in shelter and through the hotline; I collaborated with the Economic Justice, Children & Youth, and Legal Advocacy programs to coordinate service provision for individuals and families in shelter

[64] Steps to End Domestic Violence, "What We Do."
[65] Steps to End Domestic Violence, "Hotline."

and safe home housing; and I met regularly with individual survivors in shelter and the safe home housing program to provide emotional support, case work, and advocacy. I not only wanted to try and make sense of what had happened to me, I was also motivated by a deep desire to help and support other survivors. Song and Shih report that many survivors of IPV also, "took a brand new attitude of proactivity toward their life world, and further transcended their own personal suffering and became helpers for other abused women."[66] Similarly, my desire to be on the forefront fighting against IPV and working alongside other women to support them through their healing process led me to this work. I also found incredible healing through working with and sharing my story with other survivors.

When appropriate, I shared a little about my own experience of being in an abusive relationship with the women at Steps. There were times that I found immense healing through sharing my personal experience. I was reminded that I was not alone and I did not have to carry the pain and hurt I felt by myself.

As I listened to the stories of other survivors, I heard their strength. I heard their resilience. I watched them continue fighting, despite their fear and trauma. I watched them rebuild their lives, one step at a time. Within every woman, I saw hope. I saw a fighter. I saw a survivor. It was their strength, resilience, and determination that inspired me to continue to move closer to healing. It was listening to them share their stories that encouraged me to continue to share my own. It was their deep self-reflection that pushed

[66] Song & Shih, *Recovery from Partner Abuse: The Application of the Strengths Perspective*, 29.

me to dig deep and make meaning out of and from my own experience. It was their processes of healing that invited me further into my own healing.

Sharing some of my own experience also helped me and the women I worked with find a common ground, as they saw that I personally understood what it meant to be a survivor of IPV. This mutual understanding helped my relationship-building process with each of them. My hope was that through sharing, I would model a level of vulnerability and trust that was vital to the dynamics of our work together. Throughout my exchanges with these women, I frequently asked them to share extremely personal stories with me. By making myself vulnerable alongside them, my hope was to show them that I acknowledged their vulnerability and I wanted to meet them in that place as well. While I saw the positives in doing this, it was also extremely important to me that I maintained boundaries, as in this particular role, I was the helper, not the survivor.

As a survivor working with other survivors, the work at Steps became extremely personal. At times, it was easy to relate to some of the women as if they were friends instead of service users needing my help in a professional way. Through conversations with my supervisor, I was able to navigate these boundaries as best I could. It was important to me to remain aware that my role was a helping role and while I had two-way relationships with these women in many ways, it was not always the appropriate place for me to share details about my personal experiences. However, in the moments that it was appropriate to share my story, I felt as though all the pieces of me that had been broken during my relationship with my partner were reconnecting and healing.

CHAPTER 3: THEMES OF POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Researchers have identified three areas of positive change related to post-traumatic growth: *perception of self, relationships with others, and general life philosophy.*[67] Individuals who have experienced trauma, including IPV, have reported newfound resilience, deeper relationships with others, and an increased appreciation for life after facing and overcoming their traumas.[68] In this chapter, I will examine the positive changes I experienced after leaving my abusive relationship as it relates to the three domains of PTG.

Chapter 3.1: Perception of Self

In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love. In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile. In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm. I realized that through it all that in the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.
—Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* 1968

***

On a random cloudy afternoon, I am the only human on a usually busy mountain. I have been struggling with anxiety for the last two weeks and need some time by myself to process the thoughts constantly swirling in my head. At noon I leave work, pick up my dog, Pickles, and drive to the mountain.

[67] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 4.
[68] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence."

As I pull in, the state park is deserted except for the park ranger and myself. I pay him the $4.00 entry fee and find the sign denoting my favorite trail head. Unhooking Pickles from his leash, I follow behind as he bounds up the dirt path. My mind is clouded. My attention is divided between thoughts of work deadlines, the cost of upcoming home renovation projects, and the busyness of the upcoming months. I check my phone and, seeing multiple messages I haven't yet responded to, my anxiety spikes. I stop walking, call Pickles back to me, and kneel on the path. I take a deep breath. I am enveloped by trees reaching so far above me, I can just make out the sky. I hear birds calling out to one another from the branches and a small animal scurries over the leaves on the ground to my left. I smell the earthy scent of a recent rain shower on the soil under my feet. I take another deep breath. Panting, Pickles looks at me expectantly and wags his tail. I scratch behind his ears and breathe deeply again. Reaching into my pocket, I put my phone on airplane mode and place it in my backpack. Immediately, I feel the anxious energy in my body start to subside. I am disconnected from the outside world with only Pickles and the path in front of me to focus on.

"Let's go, bug," I say to Pickles and restart my hike in a clearer mindset.

As the trail becomes rockier and steeper, my heart beats faster and I feel a familiar burn build in my calves. As I climb, I focus my attention on my breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

The higher I get on the mountain, the further my anxieties and worries are from my mind. I breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

Pickles races along the trail in front of me, stopping only to sniff fallen branches and bushes along the way. He periodically looks behind him on our way to the summit to make sure I am still there. I smile at him and do not slow my pace. As we near the top of the mountain, miles of untouched countryside come into view. I stop on a rock ledge, drinking it in. The sun pokes through the clouds and lands on my shoulders like a butterfly kiss. I am breathing heavily, but my worries are lighter.

"Ready to go to the top?" We follow the sign to the summit. There is only a narrow rock path to guide me and I am surrounded by mountains on all sides. Untouched hills and land for miles. Blue and green hues overtake my vision. There is nothing but the sound of the wind in my ears. I breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

I have forgotten my work deadlines, house projects, and all of my social engagements in the upcoming months. I am present, connected to the mountain rocks under my feet. For as far as I can see, it is just Pickles and I. He sits down at my feet and looks up at me.

"Today was a pretty good day, huh?" I say to myself, to Pickles, the wind. Pickles just wags his tail.

***

I am not the same person today that I was during my abusive relationship. During my time with my partner, I lost many parts of myself. Loosing oneself while experiencing IPV is typical. In a study published in 2018, D'Amore et al. documented the PTG female survivors of IPV experienced. Before explaining their growth after leaving an abusive relationship, the women were asked about their experiences of IPV. D'Amore et al. report, "The women expressed a common sentiment of feeling that they 'lost' themselves when they were experiencing IPV."[69] When I was with my partner, I lost sight of my independence and the ability to make my own decisions about how I spent my time and who I spent it with. I stopped engaging in activities that once brought me peace and joy because my partner dictated what I did with my time. I lost my desire to experience new things and, instead, became afraid to step out of my comfort zone. As my partner's behavior was sporadic and volatile, I was unsure how he would respond to new situations. The fear that he would become violent if I tried something new, such as picking up a different hobby, prevented me from doing anything outside of my normal routine. My main goal was to keep him as calm and happy as possible, even if that meant denying myself the things I needed. In addition, I lost sight of my inner strength and was plagued with the belief that I was weak and helpless. I also lost my confidence and the

[69] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 15.

ability to spend time by myself, something that I enjoyed before meeting my partner. My identity started to become intertwined with his during our relationship. He was the one who dictated our routine, our social calendar, and how we spent our time. At the end of our relationship, I had almost completely lost myself.

Within the study conducted by D'Amore et al., survivors were asked how their perceptions of themselves changed after leaving their abusive relationship. D'Amore et al. report, "With few exceptions, the women discussed changes in their sense of self and identity, their feelings of empowerment, or their health and lifestyles."[70] In addition, they found that many of the women discussed efforts to rebuild their sense of self and that the women experienced a "return to self" after leaving their abusive relationships.[71] Once I left my partner for good, I was faced with the process of becoming reacquainted with myself, as well as rebuilding my identity without him. At times, this was an overwhelming challenge. I asked myself: *How did I want to spend my time? What brought me joy? Who was I without him? Was I capable of being independent?* Many days, I wasn't sure I had the inner strength to be alone. However, I was determined to reconstruct myself and not only survive, but also learn how to thrive after experiencing IPV.

In the early months after leaving my partner, I spent a lot of time by myself. Part of this was due to the fact that I had lost touch with the majority of my friends over the course of our relationship. I was also living in a new state, so I did not have a large

[70] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 12.
[71] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 16.

community to reach out to. In some ways, this was a blessing. In order to rebuild my identity, I needed to get to know myself again, so I made a conscious decision to spend time alone. It was not easy. There were days I was so anxious I could barely function and I felt a crushing loneliness surround me. However, with the help of a wonderful therapist I recognized that by learning how to spend time alone again, I would be able to tap into my inner strength and confidence. I started to do things that I loved to do before meeting my partner—reading novels, taking my dog for long walks, writing creative fiction, and working out. As I returned to the things I once loved, I started to find myself again. Allen and Wozniak report that the women in their study experienced a similar "reclamation of self"[72] on their journey towards PTG after experiencing IPV. They explain, "This involved the integration of the past with present, a resumption of past life trajectory and interests…This was often expressed by returning to skills and hobbies that the women had been involved in when they were younger."[73] By once again finding solace in things that brought me joy, I felt closer and more connected with myself for the first time in eight months.

As I was rebuilding myself, I also spent a lot of time outdoors. For the first time in my life, I hiked solo. To some, this may not seem like a huge feat. However, for me, it was a big step. It was the first time in eight months that I pushed myself out of my comfort zone, challenged myself, and did something completely on my own. In Allen and Wozniak's study, they reported that establishing autonomy was essential to the healing

[72] Allen and Wozniak, *The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering from Domestic Violence*, 48.
[73] Allen and Wozniak, *The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering from Domestic Violence*, 48.

and growth of survivors of IPV. They explain, "This was expressed in various ways as the women described feelings of empowerment that enables them to make choices with the freedom to take risks."[74] Solo hiking was a risk, however, it empowered me to be on my own. It reminded me that I was independent and possessed the ability to do things alone and stand on my own two feet. The more I hiked, the stronger, both physically and emotionally, I felt. This recognition was vital to my growth and healing after experiencing IPV.

D'Amore et al. explain, "Some of the participants' narratives illustrated how they have (re)built themselves, not only through a renewed and reconstructed sense of self and identity, but also through a change in their sense of their own power."[75] On the mountain, I reconstructed my sense of self and identity. I worked through what my partner had done to me. I questioned how my experience with IPV impacted other parts of my life. I asked myself what I wanted my life to look like and how I wanted it to be different. Over time, I started to enjoy spending time on my own. I reclaimed my independence and inner strength. I remembered that I was a whole human being, regardless of what had happened to me and regardless of my relationship status. Most importantly, I became friends with myself again.

I took this knowledge off the mountain and applied it to the rest of my life. I started to feel more confident in who I was, as me. I started to step out of my comfort zone and push myself to grow in new ways. I tried new things and took up different

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[74] Allen and Wozniak, *The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering from Domestic Violence,* 46.
[75] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 12.

hobbies. With each new experience, I learned something new about myself and got to know myself better. As many of the participants in D'Amore et al.'s study experienced, over time, I found my inner power and personal strength both on the mountain and in my everyday life.

To this day, if I am feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or sad, I go for a hike and reconnect not only with nature, but with myself. When I hike, I focus on my breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

I listen to the sounds of nature envelop me. I feel the sun on my face and my back. I taste the tangy flavor of sweat on my lips, a physical reminder of how hard I am working. With each step up the mountain, I feel more grounded and connected to the world around me. It is like meditation. There are days when I speak aloud to myself and there are days when I am completely silent. No matter how I show up at the mountain, I am welcome. The women in Allen and Wozniak's study reported developing inner peace and serenity as they healed from IPV. They note survivors experienced, "An emerging sense of calmness, improved mood, less reactivity, and improved coping skills."[76] Through solo hiking, I have reconnected with my inner peace, which allows me to cope better and come back to my center when needed. On the mountain, I feel independent. I feel confident. I feel a deep connection with myself and find comfort in being alone. I also feel a deeper understanding of what I need to be whole, happy, and healthy. On the

[76] Allen and Wozniak, *The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering from Domestic Violence*, 49.

mountain, I feel calmness, clarity, and peace. It is like returning to an old friend. It is where I find myself again and again.

Chapter 3.2: Relationships with Others

"You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing."
—E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*

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"We have to put our feet in the ocean," Leigh says. It is midnight and we're standing in the Thrifty Car Rental lobby. Even though it's late, Florida's humidity clings to our skin. I fan myself with a brochure that features minivans, SUVs, and convertibles available to rent.

"Yes!" I respond. I'm exhausted, but the thought of submerging my toes in cold salt weather is too tempting to resist. We've been traveling since noon and the clerk behind the desk is taking his time looking up our car rental reservation.

"Which one of you is driving?" he asks.

I raise my hand and wink at Leigh, who rolls her eyes slightly.

"That would be me," I say.

I answer questions about insurance and hand over my license for the clerk to copy.

"You two are all set," he says, passing me a set of keys. "Have fun."

In the car, Leigh fumbles with the radio until we find a station playing 90's hits. We sing along with Britney Spears, TLC, and Alanis Morissette as the GPS directs us to the beach. It's a short drive and I start to get my second wind as we get closer. Before we can see the ocean, we smell it. We roll down all the windows and breathe deeply, the

salty air filling our lungs. My hair twists and turns with the wind and Leigh giggles in the passenger seat.

"That's it! We're here!" She points to a parking lot in the distance. I follow the signs to the entrance and find a spot right next to where the asphalt meets the sand. Before the car is officially in park, we're taking off our seatbelts. We jump out of the car and I dig my toes in the warm, gritty sand. Leigh comes around to my side and together, we run down the beach until we feel the ocean water kiss our toes. I let out an excited shriek as we wade in.

As the salt water licks my knees, I look over at Leigh and smile. I kick water at her and she splashes me back, laughing. I stretch out my arms and swing my head up towards the sky and try and count the thousands of stars that dot it, little and big constellations on a black tapestry. The moon hangs low, swollen and round, illuminating our silhouettes as we breathe in the sweet smell of the sea. We stand together, saying nothing for a moment, and I try and make out where the ocean meets the sky on the horizon. We're the only ones on the beach.

"Let's take a picture," I say. "I want to remember this night."

Leigh takes out her camera and we huddle together, our backs to the ocean.

"Smile!" she says.

The camera flashes, capturing us. Our smiles cover most of our faces and our hair whips in the wind. The ocean stretches out behind us, limitless.

Standing with my best friend, I feel content. I feel connected. I feel free.

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After my experience with IPV, there were multiple shifts in how I approached and engaged in relationships, both romantically and platonically. During my abusive relationship, my once full world became so small that there was only room for my partner in it. I was isolated from my support system; I stopped engaging in community activities; and I lost contact with the majority of my friends and family. With my partner, I often struggled with feelings of loneliness and felt as though there was no one I could reach out to for help. In D'Amore et al.'s study they found, "An established consequence of being in an abusive relationship is isolation from friends, family, and community."[77] While I was alone during my abusive relationship, I am among many survivors who experienced the same isolation during their abusive relationships. Once leaving their relationships, D'Amore et al. note that part of each woman's healing process was an improvement in their relationships with friends and family. It was explained that all of the women found an "increased intimacy and connection" with friends, family, and their communities in the aftermath of leaving their abusive partners.[78] My experience was similar, however it took me three years to begin to truly let other people in again and foster deep, meaningful connections. Coming out of an abusive relationship, I struggled with trust issues. *Who could I trust? Was someone trying to get close to me so they could control me? Hurt me? Who was I safe with?* I asked myself these questions frequently, especially when meeting new people.

[77] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 17.
[78] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 17.

For three years after leaving my abusive partner, I gravitated towards toxic, unhealthy people. It may sound counter-intuitive, but at the time, this felt safer to me. The people I surrounded myself with took up all the space in my relationships with them. Their drama, crises, and meltdowns became the focus of our friendships—not mine. With all the attention on them and their issues, I wasn't asked or required to become vulnerable. I spent my time talking with them about their baggage, so I didn't have to divulge any of mine. It was a way for me to have people in my life and have so-called friends to hang out with on Saturday nights, but never let them in below the surface-level things in my life. For three years, this worked well. It worked really well, actually. But then, it didn't work anymore. Hiding within surface-level, toxic relationships worked until I met my now-husband.

When I first met my husband, I was a mess. I was terrified of commitment, of letting him in, of giving him any part of myself that he could hurt. Recently, we talked about the beginning of our relationship, now over four years ago. Laughing, he reminded me, "You tried to break up with me once a week for the first three months of our relationship." I'm glad we can laugh about it together now. However, in the beginning of our relationship, I continuously tried to run away from it. I fought his gentle persistence; I fought his questions that asked me to dig deep, to reveal myself. I tried to keep it casual and surface-level. When I was concerned I was getting too close to him and starting to rely too much on him, I tried to end our relationship. As I was doing with my friendships at the time, I tried to keep him at arm's length. Similar to my experience, the women in

D'Amore et al.'s study report their "healing processes took place over the long-term."[79] Just as changing my perception of myself after experiencing IPV, building deep and meaningful relationships with others after experiencing trauma was not easy. It took time. It took effort. It was messy and uncomfortable and downright ugly at times. However, working closely with my therapist, I slowly started to learn how to let my guard down with other people. I slowly started to learn how to trust myself and recognize I was capable of choosing healthy people to surround myself with. And I slowly started to trust the people who showed up for me, saw my darker sides, and stuck around.

Over time, I re-learned how to set healthy boundaries with others in relationships. Love Is Respect explains,

> Creating boundaries is a good way to keep your relationship healthy and secure. By setting boundaries together, you can both have a deeper understanding of the type of relationship that you and your partner want…Creating boundaries is not a sign of secrecy or distrust—it's an expression of what makes you feel comfortable and what you would like or not like to happen within the relationship.[80]

While Love Is Respect is talking about boundaries within romantic relationships, I have worked to create healthy boundaries within my friendships as well. Creating boundaries allows me, as well as the other person within the relationship, to feel comfortable expressing what each of us needs and wants within and from the relationship. It encourages open communication and vulnerability, which helps create trust. This trust, in turn, deepens relationships as both parties feel free to be themselves with the other person.

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[79] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 18.
[80] Love is Respect, "Healthy Relationships."

I have also re-learned how to ask for what I need in relationships—both platonic and romantic—as well as discern which people I let into my inner circle. In addition, I made a commitment to never find myself in a similar situation than the one I experienced with my abusive partner. I believed one way to prevent getting stuck in another abusive relationship was to surround myself with people who knew me intimately and who I could trust explicitly. I set goals for myself—reconnect with old friends; build a new community of support; and foster deeper, more meaningful relationships with friends and family. I wanted to be connected with and surrounded by people I could trust, who gave me space to be myself, and who I could be vulnerable alongside with. This also meant walking away from the surface-level, toxic friendships I had been hiding behind for three years. Tedeschi and Calhoun explain, "The experience of deeper and more meaningful relationships can occur along with the loss or disappearance of other relationships."[81] As I started to set boundaries and recognize healthy relationships, it became easier to walk away from unhealthy ones. I cut off all contact with one possessive and controlling friend and stopped communicating with another friend who only brought drama into my life. I did this unapologetically and in one instance, without explanation. The loss of some relationships after experiencing IPV, in my case, was a choice. I ended relationships that brought chaos and uncertainty into my life and instead, chose to surround myself with positive, healthy people.

Since meeting my husband four years ago, I have built a new community. I am surrounded by friends—both women and men—who I trust, who I can be vulnerable

[81] Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6.

with, who I can share my baggage with, and who continuously show up for me. These people have become my chosen family and my friendships with them are intimate, deep, and real. Now, don't get me wrong. I still have moments of anxiety when I question if I have said too much or revealed too much of myself. However, the difference is now I can talk to my friends about my anxieties. Tedeschi and Calhoun explain, "Closer, more intimate, and more meaningful relationships with other people can also be part of the individual's experience of post-traumatic growth."[82] For me, this has been true. The relationships I now share with my friends have positively impacted my life in numerous ways. I am more confident, more willing to try new things, and more adaptable to change. Loving others, and being loved by them in return, has welcomed healing and growth into my life.

My relationship with my husband is also completely different from my relationship with my abusive partner. With my ex-partner, I lived in fear. It was not safe for me to share my anxieties or insecurities with him. I was unable to be myself and unable to decide how I spent my time and who I spent it with. With my ex-partner, I lost myself. My husband, on the other hand, encourages me to pursue the things I am passionate about and spend time with other people. In a healthy relationship, it is important that both partners "feel free to spend time alone or with friends and family without having to get permission from their partner or check in and explain their whereabouts."[83] In my relationship with my husband, I am free to be an individual human being, as is he. We also have a relationship built on "safe communication, trust,

[82] Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6.
[83] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Setting Boundaries."

boundaries, and mutual respect,"[84] which are all essential within a healthy relationship. Again, don't get me wrong. My husband and I both work hard to make sure our relationship is one of equals. It is not always easy and there have been many nights we have stayed up late to work through issues. However, we are both committed to having a supportive, honest, loving relationship where both of us feel safe and valued. It is hard work, but it has proven to be worth it.

It is important to emphasis that I was lucky. I *am* lucky. My husband was, and continues to be, a genuine man who is patient, kind, honest, and trustworthy. In a conversation with Leigh, she once told me, "I've never seen a man so consistent in his feelings for you or so patient as you process what happened with your ex-partner." His patience and consistency encouraged me to let my guard down and opened the door for me to learn how to trust again. It allowed me to fall in love again. In addition, I have the most amazing friends on the planet. Leigh's friendship and support never wavered, despite the fact that while I was with my ex-partner, I cut off contact with her. The friends I have met in recent years are kind, understanding, and continuously give me the space to be myself unapologetically. It was the strength and love of others that helped me trust again. The strength and love of others continues to be one of the main reasons I am able to trust, love, and feel free in relationships.

I did not do this all on my own.

[84] Love is Respect, "Healthy Relationships."

Chapter 3.3: General Life Philosophy

You have to decide what your greatest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, nonapologetically—to say 'no' to other things. And the way to do that is by having a bigger 'yes' burning inside.
—Stephen Covey

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"I need a night off," I say. I'm sitting at the kitchen table across from my husband, listlessly pushing my half-eaten dinner around on my plate. The past few months have been packed with social engagements and graduate school assignments. Our side business has been growing exponentially the past few months, keeping me up at all hours of the night. I notice a dust bunny in the corner and make a mental note to vacuum—later. Our life is full. Our life is good. So good. However, I hear the soft familiar voice in the back of my mind telling me I need to slow down for a bit. I'm exhausted. I need time to disconnect from the world around me, unwind with my husband and my dog, and just *be*.

"Let's plan a date night. Just us," He says. He reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. "What are you doing Thursday?"

I smile. "Sounds like I got myself a date."

The days leading up to our date night, we are bombarded with invitations from friends. *Trivia night? Concert at the local vineyard? Dinner double date?* It is summer and our group of friends is more carefree, open to getting together a few times a week. As an introvert with multiple extroverted friends, it can easily become difficult for me to keep up with their levels of social interaction, especially in the summer. I politely decline all requests for my time, battling with my internal anxiety that comes with saying "no" to

people I care about. Yes, I love my friends. Yes, I always enjoy spending time with them. However, right now, listening to what I need to do to take care of myself is more important. When anxiety whispers in my ear, I remind myself that I have been going non-stop lately. I need some time to myself. I can't remember the last time my husband and I had a date night. Most importantly, I remind myself that it is okay to say no. It is okay to take care of myself. It is okay to devote time to my marriage above other social commitments for an evening.

I repeat—it is okay to say no.

Thursday arrives. After work, my husband and I meet at home to divide and conquer the preparations for our evening. As I simmer garlic and cherry tomatoes, following the instructions for my mom's homemade pasta sauce, he packs a picnic basket with ice cream, drinks, and treats for Pickles. Once I drain the pasta and mix the sauce into the noodles, I pack our meal into Tupperware containers and add it to our basket. The three of us—my husband, Pickles, and I—climb into the car and drive to the local beach. Leaving our phones in the car, we are disconnected from the busyness of our everyday life.

The beach is quiet. There is a father grilling burgers as two young children build sand castles next to his feet. A young woman throws a ball to her chocolate lab, who frantically runs into the water to retrieve it. We find a shaded spot near the end of the beach and lay down our towel. Unhooking Pickles from his leash, he bounds to the water's edge and cautiously wades in. My husband and I kick off our sandals and follow him, testing the temperature of the water with our toes before walking in. The lake is

warm and the water laps at my ankles and up my calves as the small waves crash and kiss the sand. Pickles runs through the shallow water in circles, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. He stops briefly between my husband and I and looks up at us, his smile splitting his face.

The evening passes lazily. The weariness that has wrapped itself around my spine and settled into my bones slowly releases its grip as I focus only on the present moment. Pickles begs at my side as we eat dinner on the sand. We count the number of boats on the horizon and take a walk hand-in-hand along the lake, pointing out the houses we like, imagining what life would be like in one of them. We split half a pint of vanilla ice cream, letting Pickles lick the remains of the container. Pickles digs holes in the sand around our towel as my husband and I talk about nothing and everything—family dynamics, work stories, movies we want to see, anxieties, memories, and our hopes for the rest of the summer. There are periods where we sit quietly, not saying a word, listening to the rhythmic beat of the waves hitting the shoreline, each lost in our own thoughts, content to just be, together. Anxiety, my familiar friend, recedes into the background as I become more comfortable with just being. There is no agenda, nothing to cross off my to-do list, no one who expecting anything of me, no next thing to run off to. There is just the sound of the waves, the warmth of the sand beneath me, and my little family around me.

The young woman with her dog walks past us, leaving the beach. The father with his two children packs up his grill and beach chairs. My husband and I lay back and

watch as the sun throws hues of pink and orange across the sky. As the stars begin to poke out, he asks, “How are you feeling?”

I breathe deeply. I have said no to further demands on my time and to activities with people I love, but would have further drained my already low energy level. Instead, I have chosen to not only listen to what I need to be whole and happy, but taken action to achieve it. I have yes to myself. I have said yes to taking care of myself. I have said yes to inner peace, clarity, and calmness. The soft familiar voice in the back of my mind is silent, as if approving.

“I needed this,” I respond.

Without the sun, there is a nip in the air and I rub my hands on my arms, warming myself. We sit quietly for a bit longer before packing up our basket and heading home. Listening to music on the drive, I roll down the windows, letting the wind blow through my hair. Pickles sticks his head out of the window and watches the passing scenery. My husband holds my hand over the center console.

I repeat, without being prompted, “I needed this.”

***

When I started to think about this section and what my general life philosophy was—and how it has changed since experiencing IPV—I didn’t know where to start. How does one sum up their general life philosophy in a few hundred words? As I was ruminating on how to begin, a print from Brian Andreas came to my mind. Given to me by my mother a few years ago, it hangs next to the mirror in my bathroom. It reads, “Her whole life shifted the day she started to tell the truth about what made her happy. I never

knew it could be that simple, she said." Under the text is a lopsided drawing of an orange and yellow sun with the title, *Simple Truth.* This simple truth is the first thing I read every morning as I get ready for the day and the last thing I read every night as I brush my teeth before bed. The more I thought about it, the more I recognized that these words have been a guiding principle in my life since leaving my abusive relationship. Furthermore, these words continuously frame how I try to live my life every day. Within this final domain of PTG, Tedeschi and Calhoun explain that people who have experienced trauma—including IPV—often report, "a major shift in how they approach and experience their daily lives"[85] after said trauma. I, like other survivors, experienced a shift in the way in which I approached my life after surviving IPV.

In D'Amore et al.'s study, survivors describe, "reevaluating their priorities and experiencing increased appreciation for life"[86] as an integral part of their growth and healing after leaving their abusive relationships. When I was with my abusive partner, my life was not my own. I did what he wanted me to do, often without question, in order to protect myself emotionally and physically. Since this experience, I have learned how to create a life that I love, I have made my life my own, and I continuously work to live with intention. Valdez and Lilly explain,

> In a world that is not comprehensible, controllable, or predictable, survivors are confronted with the fact that living can no longer be taken for granted and human life appreciates in value. In response, survivors embrace life and create meaningful existence through goals (interpersonal, spiritual, altruistic),

[85] Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6.
[86] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 4.

> commitments (to friends, family, and community), and self-determination that serve to provide a sense of meaning and purpose.[87]

My life is not perfect. My life is not always easy. But, my life is completely my own. And this has made all the difference. Being in control of my own life allows me to appreciate the things in it—large and small—in a way that I was unable to before, because *I* decide what I let in and what I don't. Now, I determine what my priorities are and what is important to me. I ask myself: *What is most important to me? What do I need to feel whole, healthy, and content? What is going to welcome peace into my life? What brings me joy? What is causing unnecessary stress and anxiety? Are there things in my life—commitments, responsibilities, habits, relationships—that I need to let go of in order to live more fully?* Asking myself these questions—and being honest with myself about the answers—helps me prioritize what I consider important in my life. Similar to my experience, Tedeschi and Calhoun explain, "A changed sense of what's important is a common element in the experience of many persons who have struggled with major difficulties."[88]

While I was with my abusive partner, the most important thing in my life was survival—I needed to do whatever it took to keep myself safe. This meant that almost everything else became less important, including relationships and hobbies that I once enjoyed. After leaving him for good, I was able to re-evaluate what I wanted my life to look like and what my priorities were. For me, some of the most important things became—and continue to be—consistently growing as an individual; cultivating deep and

[87] Valdez and Lilly, "Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: An Assumptive World Process," 255.
[88] Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6.

meaningful relationships with my husband, friends, and family; engaging in activities that bring me inner peace; traveling and being a global citizen; and staying healthy and active—to name a few. Knowing what's important to me helps me say no to the things that aren't. This allows me to live the life that *I* want, not the life that others expect of me. I am learning—slowly and haltingly—to truly listen to myself about what I need and what I want out of my life. And I am learning—again, slowly and haltingly—to have the courage to go after those things. Sometimes, this means saying no to people or activities I love because I need a night off. Sometimes, this means stepping out of my comfort zone and booking a spontaneous trip with my husband or taking up a new hobby. Sometimes, this means going to bed at 8:00 p.m. and not feeling bad about it. Regardless of what it looks like in action, living the life that I want for myself means listening to myself in every moment to understand what I need to be whole, healthy, and content. D'Amore et al. report that survivors of IPV "transformed their perspectives as they created lives of contentment, peace, and happiness in the years after they left their abusive relationships."[89] Through listening to my own needs and making intentional decisions about what I want my life to look like, I, like other survivors, have learned to create a life of contentment and peace. This, I have learned, has shaped my general life philosophy and led to immense healing and growth since leaving my abusive relationship.

Let me be clear—I do not do this perfectly. I am an imperfect human, just like you, stumbling along, trying to figure out how it all works and where my place in the world is. There are days that, despite my best intentions, I utterly fail to live intentionally.

[89] D'Amore, Martin, Wood, and Brooks, "Themes of Healing and Posttraumatic growth in Women Survivors' Narratives of Intimate Partner Violence," 14.

I say yes to activities I don’t want to do, I give undeserving people too much of my time and energy, I overbook my schedule, I drain my emotional resources, I try to live up to the expectations of others instead of the expectations I have for myself, and I put my own needs last on my priority list. However, the more I try to live intentionally, the easier it is for me to recognize when I am not. From there, it is easier for me to come back to center and get back on track.

CHAPTER 4: SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

In this chapter, I have written a letter to my fellow survivors, with the hope of reminding them that they are not alone and that healing and growth are possible after experiencing IPV. From there, I explain how educators can help survivors move closer to PTG through SPN writing in the traditional American University classroom setting. I also provide practical tips on how readers can support survivors of IPV, whether or not they are an educator.

Chapter 4.1: Takeaways for Survivors

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;
the most massive characters are seared with scars.
—Kahlil Gibran

***

My Dear Fellow Survivor,

You are a brave and beautiful soul. You have strength pulsating through your veins. You have power hidden within your bone marrow. You have resilience written into your cells.

You can overcome. You can survive. You can thrive.

Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, internationally recognized artist, minister, and psychologist says, “You are worthy of love and respect. You are beautiful, gifted, and intelligent. Don’t let the storm make you forget that.” When she said this, she was speaking to all survivors. She was speaking to me. She was speaking to you. Right now, you may be in the midst of a storm. But your beauty and strength still remain inside of you.

You can overcome. You can survive. You can thrive.

Do not lose sight of that, no matter how hard it is to see.

I will remind you again: You are not alone. I know it may feel like it now, but you are not alone. And you do not have to carry the burden of your experience on your own. I have been there. I have walked in your shoes. I know what it feels like to scream at the top of your lungs and feel like no one can hear you. I know what it feels like to shrink inside yourself out of fear of being exposed. I know what it feels like to hide from those who love you, truly love you, to protect someone else. I know what it feels like to feel as though you are completely on your own. But, I will remind you again: you are not alone.

There are individuals and agencies available to help you. If you are not ready to leave your relationship, emotional support and safety planning is available through confidential hotlines with advocates who undergo extensive training to support you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. If you want to leave your relationship, but are unsure how to or are unable to for whatever reason, there are resources that can house you as you find a job, an apartment, and save money. If you are unsure of how to make an income, there are programs that can help you write your resume, look for jobs, and prepare you for interviews. If you need legal advocacy to obtain a relief from abuse order, there are individuals and agencies who can provide this service free of charge. If you need to remember that you are not alone, there are confidential support groups for survivors to gather, share their stories, and gain hope and courage from each other. IPV is not something you need to navigate alone, whether you are currently experiencing it, in the process of leaving your partner, or left an abusive relationship a long time ago. There

is help out there. At the end of this chapter, I provided the contact information for the National Domestic Violence Hotline. They are there to listen to you, support you, and walk alongside you through all of this. If you reach out to these resources and start talking to others about your experience, it can help you move closer to healing and growth.

On the National Domestic Violence Hotline website, there is an entire page dedicated to the stories of survivors of IPV. Within these stories, heartbreak, pain, and suffering are interwoven with strength, determination, positivity, and change. Survivors share their experiences of rape, beatings, brutality, and emotional abuse. They are heartbreaking and hard to read. However, within every story shared, there is hope. There is resilience. There is survival. There is strength. Shana, one of the women who shared her story, said, "Surviving domestic violence is one day at a time. I believe that forgiveness is important in moving on but not forgetting because this made you a stronger person. You lived through something that most people couldn't."[90] Her last sentence illuminates the strength it takes to survive IPV. You have survived something most people could not. Take a moment to recognize the strength it has taken you just to survive up until this point.

You can overcome. You can survive. You can thrive.

Not only have you survived, but it is also possible to thrive after experiencing IPV. It is possible to heal after this experience. It is possible to learn how to love yourself again. It is possible to forgive yourself if you hold yourself accountable. It is possible to

[90] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Share Your Story."

laugh whole-heartedly again. It is possible to live without fear. It is possible to develop new, healthy, loving relationships with others who see and value your worth. It is possible to have a full, wonderful, fulfilling life. It is possible. It will not be easy and it will not happen overnight, but it is possible. It will require every ounce of strength you possess, but you know what? You have shown an incredible amount of strength and resilience to survive to this point. You are strong. And you can find healing and growth if you are willing to put in the work to get there. Even though I may not have yet heard your unique, individual experience, I know there is strength in you and in your story. I truly believe that it is through the sharing of our stories that we connect to others, that we find hope for ourselves, and that we bestow hope upon others. I hope through reading my story that you, my dear fellow survivor, recognize that you are not alone. I hope you come to realize, if you have not already, that your story—your messy, original, dark, unique story—has value. And it is worth sharing.

I recognize that it is not easy to share your story of IPV. And that is okay. Remember that it has taken me seven years to write about my own experience. Writing this thesis has been difficult and challenging because it has pushed me to dig deep, to examine my experience, to make sense of it, and try and find meaning from it. There have been times when I had to step away from writing and clear my head. There have been times when the words refused to come. There were times that it was too painful to write about certain interactions, so I had to stop and come back to my writing at a later time. It has not been easy for me and I don't expect it to be easy for you.

And that is okay.

There is a quote on the National Domestic Violence Hotline website that motivated me to continue writing about my abusive relationship when it became difficult. It reads, “Survivors can find strength and healing in telling their stories to others. Their insight and inspiration can save lives.”[91] Sharing your story can heal you. It can unburden you. And it can heal others. Sharing my story has helped me heal. It has unburdened me in ways I didn’t think it could. My hope is that it moves you closer to healing as well.

If you have experienced or are currently experiencing IPV, please remember this:

You are powerful.

You are resilient.

Your story has the power to change the world.

Sharing your story has the power to heal you.

Share it.

Thank you for sharing mine.

[91] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, “Share Your Story.”

Chapter 4.2: Using Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing to Encourage Post-traumatic Growth for Survivors: Implications for Educators

I understand.
How a voice trembles.
How thoughts can race.
How easy it is to doubt your very own words for fear that what you have to say or write doesn't matter to anyone else.
I understand.
—Wind Paz-Amor

***

Traditionally in the American university, students have been prohibited from using "I" in their writing. Instead, they are required to seek out the words and ideas of experts. The elimination of the "I," in the traditional American university's eyes, gives validity to academic writing. As Nash and Viray explain, "The 'I,' we have been told, is incapable of discovering and dispensing wisdom without the support of the 'Them,' the certified experts.[92] In other words, students are discouraged from using their own voices within their writing in the traditional American university classroom. The message students receive is clear: you do not have the level of knowledge or wisdom that the experts do; therefore, we—the American university—don't want to hear your stories, opinions, or thoughts. This message leads to students silencing their own thoughts, experiences, and ideas and strictly relying on the thoughts, experiences, and ideas of the so-called experts. I have often questioned where the personal growth is in this type of writing.

[92] Nash and Viray, *Our Stories Matter: Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students Through Scholarly Personal Narrative,* 17.

Enter Scholarly Personal Narrative writing. SPN writing creates an opportunity for students to share their own stories, while still drawing on current literature and research. As opposed to traditional academic writing, the SPN format puts the voice and experience of the author in the center of the writing. It encourages students to draw upon their past and make meaning of it *before* researching what experts have to say about their chosen topic. For example, when writing my thesis, I started with my own experience of surviving IPV. I wrote stories about being in an abusive relationship, leaving the relationship, and rebuilding my life after it. Once I wrote my own stories, I researched scholarly literature regarding IPV, the correlation between IPV and PTG, and the stories of other survivors. SPN writing provided an opportunity for me to learn more about IPV and the experiences of other survivors while also sharing my own story and using my voice within my writing. Ultimately, examining my own experience, along with the experiences of others, through SPN writing allowed for, and encouraged, my personal growth and healing—PTG—within an academic setting. Weaving my experience together with statistics, facts, and the experiences of others led to richer writing, a deeper understanding of my own past, and stronger knowledge about IPV in a broad sense.

SPN, therefore, offers educators a way in which they can support survivors of IPV in the classroom. It should be emphasized that educators should never *require* a survivor to share their experience in the classroom, or at all, if the survivor is not comfortable doing so. However, SPN writing offers one way for survivors to share their experience if they so choose, which has the potential to lead them to experiencing PTG.

Sydnee Viray, a co-professor in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, once wrote about her experience of being in raped in high school. Years later, this experience led her to become a rape crisis counselor and help others who had had similar experiences. However, it was still difficult for her to share her own story of surviving sexual assault. She explains,

> I still struggled to recount this tragedy. It wasn't until I sat down to write an SPN essay that my own survival story materialized. I learned that through our stories we can achieve mastery in our lives and we can reframe our tragedies to rise above our fears to believe in ourselves and in our own stories. This is the greatest healing of all, in my opinion: to allow our stories to heal us no matter what others may think or believe to be true.[93]

SPN offers students a way to, as Sydnee explains, write their "own survival story" and move closer to PTG. By allowing students to share their own experiences in their academic writing, while still examining and referencing scholarly literature, educators are encouraging students to use their own expertise; think critically about events and topics that are important to them; make meaning of their own lives; make connections between their own experiences and the experiences of others; and gain confidence in using their own voice. When educators allow survivors of IPV to share their experiences in the SPN format in the classroom, survivors are given the opportunity to share their story, make meaning of their experience, connect with others, and learn more about IPV. This process hopefully leads students to recognize the strength and resilience they utilized to overcome their experience and ultimately, move closer to PTG. Geral T. Blanchard explains,

> For the process of [post-traumatic growth] to get under way usually it is valuable to tell the story of the actual facts surrounding the trauma without an *awfulizing* editorial quality, and then explain how the victim plans to address the experiences

[93] Nash & Viray, *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning and Wholeness in the Academy,* 122.

> thereafter… When the tumultuous circumstances have ceased, it is time to remember and reflect, and make sense of what has happened—both the damage that was done and the potential development that awaits.[94]

SPN writing can be an opportunity for survivors to tell the story of what happened to them, reflect on their experience, and then make sense of it. This process is essential for PTG. This opportunity, provided in a classroom setting, has the potential to not only deepen students' personal understanding and growth, but also enrich their education as a whole. Candace J. Taylor explains,

> SPN affirms that we all have a story to share that is worth hearing, can be learned from, and that is connected to others' stories. It's empowering, validating, and refreshing; it's broadening, opening and making room within academia to another way of knowing, understanding, and learning about the world we live in and are a part of shaping.[95]

My graduate school experience changed when I was introduced to SPN writing. As I was required to center my writing around my own experiences, I was encouraged to dig into my own past, examine research to better understand and make meaning of and from my experiences, and make connections with others through my writing. I became more engaged in the classroom and looked forward to my writing assignments. I became more comfortable using my own voice, expressing my opinions and experiences, and asking more questions. As I became more confident in myself as a result of SPN writing, I took more initiative over my education and time in the classroom. SPN writing made my education personal. It made my education mine. It also provided me with an avenue

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[94] Blanchard, *Transcending Trauma: Post-Traumatic Growth Following Physical, Sexual, and Emotional Abuse,* 38.
[95] Nash and Viray, *Our Stories Matter: Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students Through Scholarly Personal Narrative,* 163.

to personal healing and growth—PTG—that I had never before experienced in the classroom or in my life.

Chapter 4.3: Not a Survivor, Not an Educator: How to Support Survivors

One of the greatest things you can do to help others is not just to share and give what you have, but to help them discover what they have within themselves to help themselves.
—Rita Zahara

***

If you are not a survivor or an educator, there are still many things you can do to help someone who is currently experiencing, or has experienced, IPV. When I started sharing my experience with a few trusted friends, I was met with love, support, and understanding. Never once did anyone make me feel like the abuse was my fault or that I deserved what happened to me. Never once did anyone make me feel that I was stupid or weak for staying. Never once did anyone say I should have tried harder to leave for good. Never once did someone question if I was telling the truth or exaggerating the details. This support and belief of those I trusted was integral not only to my personal healing, but also to my ability to cultivate healthy and meaningful relationships after experiencing abuse at the hands of someone who claimed to love me.

In many cases of IPV, including my personal experience, the abuser isolates their partner from family and friends. This is a manipulation tactic that makes the survivor dependent on the abuser, so the abuser can maintain their power in the relationship and over the other person.[96] The more dependent a person is on their abuser, the harder it

[96] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "What is Domestic Violence?"

becomes for them to leave. Having the support and belief of family and friends can be lifesaving.

Often, when people who experience IPV start to share their story with friends and family members, those who love them don't know how to help and/or respond. It can be incredibly difficult for friends and family to hear that someone they love is being abused in any form. In some instances, survivors can be made to feel like the abuse is their fault and/or they should "just leave." In other scenarios, people who experience abuse are not believed by the friends and family they confide in. This can cause survivors to retreat further into their relationship and become more dependent on their abuser because they have no one else to rely on. This has the potential to lead to deadly consequences.

So, what can you do if someone you know is currently experiencing IPV? First and foremost, it is important to listen and believe them.

Listen to them. Believe them. Support them.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline website suggests,

> Let them know that the abuse is not their fault. Reassure them that they are not alone and that there is help and support out there. It may be difficult for them to talk about the abuse. Let them know that you are available to help whenever they may need it. What they need most is someone who will believe and listen.[97]

When I started sharing with my friends that I had been in an abusive relationship, I did not expect them to save or rescue me. In those vulnerable moments of sharing, all I wanted was someone to listen to me, to believe what I said, and tell me that they loved me and that they were there for me no matter what. It is important to remember that if someone you know and love is experiencing IPV, it is not your job to save or rescue

[97] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Help a Friend or Family Member."

them—you are not able to do that. One of the best things you can do is listen to them, believe them, and tell them you are there for them.

Follow through by being there for them. In practical terms: Research local agencies that provide services for victims and survivors and connect them to those organizations. Offer to go to meetings and appointments with them. Invite them over and cook them dinner. Go for a walk together. Talk about other things. Tell them about your life. Treat them like a friend. After leaving my abusive relationship, there were times when I needed to talk about and process through what had happened with those I confided in. Other times, I just wanted to be treated like myself and go to the movies with a friend, drink a glass of wine, and catch up on gossip. If there are things you liked to do together before they experienced abuse, do them! And please remember, it is okay if you don't always know exactly what to say. And it is okay to tell them that you don't know what to say. Just be there for them as best you can. Your simple presence can be more healing than you realize.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline also lists the following ways in which to offer support:

- "Be non-judgmental;
- "If they end the relationship, continue to be supportive of them;
- "Encourage them to participate in activities outside of the relationship with friends and family;
- "Help them develop a safety plan (a plan that includes ways for them to stay safe whether they are still in an abusive relationship, preparing to leave, or after they leave);
- "Encourage them to talk to people who can provide help and guidance, such as a local IPV agency that provides counseling or support groups."[98]

[98] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Help a Friend or Family Member."

Remember to take care of yourself as well. It can be extremely difficult to hear that someone you know is experiencing abuse. If needed, talk to someone about it without breaking the confidence of your loved one. Many IPV agencies have hotlines that provide emotional support for the friends and families of victims and survivors. These hotlines are often confidential and can be an incredible resource not only to survivors and victims, but for their friends and family as well.

Chapter 4.4: National Resource for Survivors

> You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." You must do the thing you think you cannot do.
> —Eleanor Roosevelt

***

If you or someone you know is currently, or has experienced IPV, below is a wonderful national resource that offers support and services for survivors.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
Hotline: 1-800-799-7233
Website: www.thehotline.org/

"Our highly-trained advocates are available 24/7/365 to talk confidentially with anyone experiencing domestic violence, seeking resources or information, or questioning unhealthy aspects of their relationship."[99]

[99] The National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Home – The Hotline."

COMPREHENSIVE PERSONAL REFLECTION

A serious life, by definition, is a life one reflects on, a life one tries to make sense of and bear witness to. The age is characterized by a need to testify. Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one's own life signifies.
—Vivian Gornick

***

For the comprehensive exam requirement for the Interdisciplinary Studies program, I was required to write a letter to my advisor, and the creator of the program, Robert J. Nash. Within the letter, I was to explain why I chose this graduate program in particular and what I got out of being a member of the Interdisciplinary Studies community. I chose to include this letter in my thesis because it details how I came to enroll in the program, documents the growth and healing I found during my time as an Interdisciplinary Studies student, and explains what I plan to do with the experience and knowledge I accumulated during the program.

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Dear Robert,

You have asked me to write about what I got out of the Interdisciplinary Studies program here. In all honesty, I'm not completely sure where to begin. It is impossible for me to separate what I got out of the program itself with what I got out of scholarly personal narrative (SPN) writing, because the two, in my mind, are so intertwined and interdependent on one another. The program would not be the same inspiring, supportive, wonderful program that it is without SPN writing. And the process of writing in the SPN format, and then sharing that writing within the classroom setting, is so enriched by being

a part of the Interdisciplinary Studies community. So, in order to answer your question fully and honestly, I have to talk about what I got out of both the program and SPN writing. It is simple, really.

Over the course of the past year, the Interdisciplinary Studies program and SPN writing brought me back to life.

For that, I will be forever grateful.

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Before starting the Interdisciplinary Studies program, I was enrolled as a part-time student in the Masters of Social Work (MSW) program for two years. I had eagerly started the MSW program with the desire to help survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) work through and overcome the trauma they had experienced during their abusive relationships. During the MSW program, I grew exponentially. I immersed myself in literature and theories, confronted my own privileges, and continued to develop my deep passion and commitment to enhancing social justice for all people. In my second year of the MSW program, I was honored to be a graduate student intern at the Women's Center on campus. During my time there, I co-chaired the planning committee which hosted the 12th Annual Dismantling Rape Culture Conference, an event that drew over 500 attendees and offered more than 25 different workshops throughout the day. I planned and hosted campus-wide events for Domestic Violence Awareness Month; co-taught Sexual Harassment and Consent classes for undergraduate students; and supported the Women's Center student staff. I honed my ability to build trusting relationships with students from diverse backgrounds and engaged in thoughtful and honest discussions about difficult

topics including the multiple "-isms", challenges, and successes of each student's academic and personal journey during their college experience.

In addition, I co-facilitated and prepared curriculum for a weekly empowerment group for female-identified survivors of sexual violence with the Campus Victim's Advocate. As my end goal, at that time, was to work with survivors of IPV, I was ecstatic to step into this co-facilitator role. However, within a few weeks of leading this group, I started experiencing anxiety attacks.

During the weekly empowerment group sessions, I was flooded with memories of my own experience with IPV, six years prior. While I was able to keep it together for the group itself, I would return home afterwards and break down each week. I had flashbacks about my own experience, which caused anger, fear, sadness, and debilitating anxiety. My anxiety got so bad over the course of the empowerment group that my primary care physician prescribed me daily medication to try and manage it. When the group ended, I was completely defeated and worn out. I still had two years of the MSW program ahead of me and the thought of two more years of crippling anxiety made me cry. Speaking with my then-fiancé, my mom, and my best friend, I realized that if I wanted to work with survivors of IPV, then I would first have to revisit my own experience, confront it, make meaning of it, and learn to heal from it.

I recognized that I was not able to help others unless I first helped myself.

In order to do this, I took a leave of absence from the MSW program and started going to weekly therapy sessions again. Speaking with a close friend and colleague about reconsidering my graduate school career, she told me about the Interdisciplinary Studies

program and SPN writing. I was immediately intrigued. As you know, Robert, I have always loved to write and it has always been through writing that I process and make sense of my life and the world around me. I wondered if this program, and SPN writing, could be an avenue for me to confront my own experience with IPV. After meeting with you and learning more about the program, I enrolled, was accepted, and signed up for my first class—*Writing to Make Meaning*.

As you and your co-instructor, Sydnee Viray, handed out the course syllabus on the first night of class, you included a letter the two of you had written to the students about the journey we would all undertake that semester. You wrote, "SPN friend and student, we ask you in this course to do perhaps what could be the most courageous act—we ask you to write, and, specifically, we are asking you to write your *own* story."[100] I was both excited and terrified. As my goal was to work through my trauma surrounding my experience with IPV, I knew I would have to write about my abusive relationship in depth throughout the course of the semester. Up until that point, I had never been able to write about my experience—it was too difficult and painful. However, I knew that putting my story to paper would be a step in moving closer to healing and growth. For my very first weekly reflection, I wrote the following poem:

[100] Nash and Viray, EDFS 200 Syllabus.

Untitled

I have mourned for my voice.

I have mourned for my voice that I allowed others to silence.
My voice that I allowed others to deem
unimportant, not good enough.
Silly.

I have mourned for my voice that I buried deep within myself.
My voice that I believed wasn't worth sharing,
wasn't worth speaking, shouting, singing.

That I believed was unimportant, not good enough.
Silly.

I have mourned for the voice that I lost,
overlooked, forgotten, and
silenced myself.

But today, I no longer mourn.

Why?

Because things that were once lost can be found, and,
things that have been forgotten can be remembered.
Things that have been silenced can learn to share,
to speak, to shout, to sing.

Today, I no longer mourn.
Because things that were buried may, in fact, be seeds
that have taken deep root.
And with courage and nourishment and love
can grow and flourish and become a garden of stories.

Today, I no longer mourn.

Because I have a voice, and,
it is my time to share.

Without being aware, this poem set the tone for the rest of my time within the program.

In my first-ever 10,000 word SPN manuscript, I wrote about my experience with IPV, which became the starting point of my thesis, although I did not know this at the time. Before starting the Interdisciplinary Studies program, I could count on one hand the number of people who knew the intimate details of my abusive relationship. It was a topic I avoided in my personal circles for many reasons. At the core of my avoidance—I thought—was fear. I was fearful of how others would respond if they knew I was a survivor of IPV. *Would they look at me differently? Would they blame me for what happened? Would they think I was weak for not leaving sooner?* These questions restricted me from opening up about my relationship and ultimately, prevented me from growth and healing.

I chose to write about my experience with IPV in my first class with you for three reasons. First, I wanted to put my story on paper for the first time in years. Second, I wanted an opportunity to learn more about IPV. As SPN writing focuses on both the writer's experience, as well as draws upon scholarly literature and research, I was eager to learn about and from the experiences of other survivors. Lastly, I wanted to remind myself and my fellow survivors we aren't alone. In my first SPN manuscript, I wrote:

> *I came to this manuscript anxious, unsure, and scared. I also came to this manuscript with a belief that there is power in my story, that it has the ability to connect with others and evoke positive change within the world, even if just a small slice of the world. I believe that when people gather and share their stories, relationships are built, healing is welcomed, and hope is born.*
>
> *The process of writing this manuscript has not been easy. I have felt sadness and rage and disgust and emptiness. Despite these feelings, I have also felt a profound sense of healing, growth, clarity, peace, and calmness. Putting these words on paper has unburdened me of this story in a way that I have not been able to in the past seven years.*

When I finished my first SPN manuscript, it was as though I was finally free from the chains that had bound me for seven years. I felt lighter. I felt the broken pieces within me starting to heal. I felt more whole, happy, and healthy than I had in years. And I made a commitment to myself to continue to write about my experience with IPV in the SPN format during the remainder of my time in the Interdisciplinary Studies program.

Over the course of the past year or so, I have undergone a profound personal transformation as I wrote about my experience with IPV in SPN. The more I wrote about my experience, the more I welcomed healing into my life. As I wrote and unpacked my relationship, I realized it wasn't fear that was holding me back from sharing my story with others; it was shame. I was still, seven years later, blaming myself for what my partner did to me over the course of our relationship. The more I wrote about my experience and learned about IPV, I realized that simply wasn't true. What happened to me was not my fault. Over the course of being enrolled in this program and through my SPN writing manuscripts, I let go of my guilt and my "what ifs."

This unburdened me in ways I didn't even know I needed.

As I wrote, I also recognized the strength I had within myself to survive IPV. As I re-read my own words on the page, I was—and continue to be—stunned. I had been emotionally abused and survived. I had been strangled and survived. I had been isolated from friends and family and survived. I had been told I was worthless and survived. Not only did I survive, I learned to thrive in the aftermath and found post-traumatic growth (PTG) in ways I didn't realize were possible before I started writing my story. No, it was

not easy to write about my experience. However, within my words, I found the same resilience and strength I've heard in the stories of other survivors.

Nancy Slonim Aronie writes, "As writers, we must be willing to feel our sadness, our anger, our terror, so we can reach in and find our sweet vulnerability that is just sitting there waiting for us to come back home. Then and only then are we able to create the perfect weaving, the masterful mix, the ideal harmonizing of our wounds and our words."[101] As I wrote about my experience with IPV, I felt—truly felt—sadness, anger, and my past terror. I wrestled with these emotions as I put my story to paper. As I confronted these feelings, I made myself nakedly vulnerable on the page. It was terrifying at times. However, I also learned a valuable lesson—my most honest and effective writing is the product of pain. It is during my times of struggle, of sadness, of hurt, and of anger, that my voice appears most honestly on the page. I have no choice but to show up bruised and broken through my words. I wonder, sometimes, why this is. Perhaps it is because my guard is down. Perhaps it is because, when I am in pain, I don't have the energy to try and pretend to be something or someone I'm not. I can only be me. Perhaps, when I am in pain, it is when I am, somehow, my most honest, perhaps even the most myself. I don't fully know. However, I do know that when I write during my struggles, my writing benefits. My writing becomes more vulnerable, raw, and real. And I, in turn, experience deeper healing and growth as an individual.

I have learned, through writing in the SPN format, to be thankful for the pain I've been through. It is through pain that I experience increased maturity, personal growth,

[101] Aronie, *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice*, 30.

and deeper resilience. It is through pain that my writing is strengthened as well. As Aronie states, "The good thing about pain is that it serves the artist, it serves the work, it serves the growth of the whole human being."[102] While pain is uncomfortable, I have found it is necessary for deeper writing, as well as my own personal growth. For me, the personal growth I experienced from being in this program and writing in the SPN format, materialized both within and outside of my time in the classroom. Aronie writes,

> "If you develop an honesty in your relationship with your words, you will begin to find the courage to stand up for more of what you believe in your life. The writing will be like a little rehearsal for when you decide to take a big stand. After you've written it you'll be surprised how much easier it will be to let those thoughts just roll off that courageous silver tongue of yours."[103]

As I wrote more about my experience, I started to live more authentically, unburdened by my past. I started to live the life *I* wanted to live, without fear and shame. Over the course of my time in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, I was deeply drawn to the philosophy of minimalism, simple living, and living with intention. I became extremely intentional about what and who I let into my home, my mind, and my inner circle. I also became more intentional about what I spent my money on and who I gave my energy to. I continued to distance myself from toxic relationships and instead, invested in the people who invest in me. While I may now have fewer "friends," the people I surround myself with consistently support me, show up for me, love me, and accept me without judgement or conditions.

I also started allocating my time in drastically different ways. I started spending less time rushing from one commitment to the next, drinking, over-thinking literally

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[102] Aronie, *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice*, 30.
[103] Aronie, *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice*, 72.

everything, in front of a screen, and doing what others expect of me. Instead, I invested more time in nature, hiking, camping, writing, and reading. I committed to partaking in activities, surrounding myself with people, and filling my mind with thoughts that feed my soul, challenge my body and mind, and quiet my spirit. Since I have started to remove the guilt and shame I carried for seven years after leaving my abusive partner from my mind, unnecessary obligations and commitments from my calendar, and toxic, surface-level relationships from my life, I have found greater inner peace, a quieter mind, and a calmer spirit. I have started to believe—genuinely believe—that I am a beautiful, frustrating, broken, inspirational, resilient, paradoxical mess of a woman. And regardless of what I went through during my relationship seven years ago, I am deserving of love, kindness, and respect. I would rather embrace my messy past and live fully, than strive to hide my story and never truly live.

This program helped me embrace my ugly, painful past and start truly living.

During this past semester, my last in the program, I took two courses with you. In our *Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing* class I wrote my thesis. I truly committed to putting "my butt in the chair" and wrote. I don't think I ever actually *stopped* writing during those 15 weeks. By writing so much over those three months, I fell in love, all over again, with writing. While I was ecstatic to learn my thesis was complete, I found myself asking—*What's next? What am I going to write about now that this project has come to a close?* I started researching local writing groups to join once the semester was over because I didn't want to stop writing. And I wanted to be a member of a community, similar to the community within the Interdisciplinary Studies program, which supports

the growth and development of other writers. Being a member of that class helped me realize that, in order to live my life fully, I need to be writing. I thank you, Robert, for that reminder.

In our *Religion and Spirituality in Education* class, I explored my own religion and spirituality, divorced myself from my need to be perfect, and processed the death of a close family friend, as well as a past family trauma. While, in the past, I was motivated to be a "good" student in order to get good grades, during my last semester of the program, I was motivated by a deep desire to push myself out of my comfort zone and throw myself into my courses in order to grow as an individual. I realized that the more I put into this class in particular, the more I got out of it. This class was, hands down, the most inspiring, engaging, supportive, wonderful class I have ever taken in my life. I not only looked forward to each and every class session, I truly missed the one class I had to miss—even though I was on an incredible vacation. This was not something I have experienced before and it is something I will always cherish.

This past semester was remarkably different from my first semester in the program. During my first semester, while I was empowered by writing about my experience with IPV for the first time, I was still very closed off and fearful of speaking up in class. I spoke one time the whole semester—and that was because I was forced to. During my last semester of the program, I was, in many ways, a different person. Or, maybe, I was finally myself again. I was freed from the burden of my experience with IPV and committed to being an active and engaged member of the Interdisciplinary Studies program community. I was still fearful of speaking up in class, however, I was

ready to confront that fear head-on. This past semester, I shared my writing—in both classes—for the first time, as well as spoke and shared my opinions, thoughts, and reflections multiple times in each and every class session. In an email to you, Robert, in late September of this year, I reflected on the difference between my first and last semester in the program. I wrote:

> *Robert,*
>
> *…This semester has been very empowering for me as I have become more present in both of the classes I'm taking with you (also, Claire and Jennifer are wonderful!). I have realized that the more I put in, the more I get out this program. I feel that I am getting back ten-fold of what I put in. It has been deeply humbling and I'm incredibly grateful to be a part of this community.*
>
> *You mentioned in our SPN class this past Wednesday that, through writing my first SPN manuscript about my abusive relationship and subsequently being more present in the classroom since, I have found healing. I never thought of it in that light before, but as I reflected on your comment this past week, you are absolutely right. It has been through SPN writing that I have reconnected with myself and found healing that I didn't even know I needed. I wanted to thank you for the space to write, to share my story, and to just be me. This really is an incredible program and I'm so thankful to be in it.*

Robert, writing about my experience of IPV in the SPN format and being a student in your program allowed me to heal. And it freed me of my past.

So, now, I am asking myself: *what do I plan to do with this new found freedom after I complete the program? How do I move forward? How do I apply all that I have learned to my life after graduate school?* Similar to what SPN writing asks, I am asking myself: *So what? Now what?* In many cases, I am unsure. However, the difference is that I am now okay with this uncertainty. Instead of facing the unknown with fear, as I have often done in the past, I am facing it with an open mind and an open heart, ready to embrace whatever it is that comes next.

In other ways, I have a very clear vision of what I want to do and who I want to be after I graduate from the Interdisciplinary Studies program. As I have been asked to do at the start of each class I took with you, I have made commitments to myself for the next phase of my life. They are as follows:

1. I am going to continue on my journey of minimalism and intentional living, seeking activities, people, and thoughts that bring joy and peace into my life.
2. I am going to continue to build and live the life that *I* want to, regardless of what others expect of me.
3. I am going to continue to get to know myself on a deep, intimate level and make self-exploration an ongoing priority.
4. I am going to seek out a career that allows me to work with young people, perhaps high school or college-aged students. I want to empower them to use their voices, share their stories, and grow into healthy, whole, content adults. While I don't know exactly what form this job may take, working alongside and empowering young people, I know, is the calling of my soul.
5. And I am going to write. As I said above, in order for me to truly live, I need to write. So, I will write.

Robert, as I draw near to the end of the program, it is bittersweet. I will miss the deep conversations, thought-provoking readings, and wonderful writing assignments. And I will genuinely miss the community that I found during my time in the program, although I hope that the relationships I have built will continue after graduation. At the same time, I am also excited. I am excited to go into the world and apply everything I

have learned by being your student, colleague, and friend. I am excited to share the transformative power that SPN writing has with others. I am excited to help others move closer to healing and growth through writing. And I am excited for the adventures that await me upon graduation, as I know there will be many.

Robert, I am unsure how to end this letter, because I know that when I stop writing it, I will be that much closer to finishing the program. But, I will leave you with this: being in your program not only freed me, it brought me back to life.

The words “thank you” simply cannot describe my gratitude.

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