



# STORIES OF CHANGE

Finding my purpose  
on the planet



My life has felt like a long journey, but I've so wanted to be the person I am now. I feel like I'm in charge.

For most of my life I've felt as though everything has been happening to me. I was raised to take responsibility for others. In our very traditional, patriarchal, religious home, women were responsible for other people's feelings. We were there to serve. My mother was an incredibly loving person, and she was the reason I stuck it out in that environment for so long. I never wanted to lose her. But when she died, when I was 28, my life changed. I felt released.

Two things happened soon after. First, while listening to something on the radio I realised I'd been sexually abused. I'd never named it before. My family had never acknowledged it. That's when I started counselling. Second, I decided to go to art school. I'd wanted to study art at college but Dad had talked me out of it because it wasn't practical. So, as sad as it was, I think Mum's death liberated me to do both these things – deal with my abuse and follow my own path. My relationship with Dad has always been difficult so I didn't feel I'd lose anything by walking away.

It was a great decision to go to art school, but it was also party times, and wasted times. I'd married very young, and had always been doing the right thing. I think I lived my teen years from

twenty-eight to my early thirties. And I'm so pleased I did, far better late than never.

My child's father was one of the party people. He was a controlling guy, but I was raised to manage difficult people: a little violation here, a little boundary-pushing there. I was primed to take responsibility for his actions, and that was my inner experience. He just needed to be loved up some more, because if you love a man enough they're going to come right. He was definitely no worse than my father. I was also really in love with him.

But he became harder and harder to manage, especially once I had my daughter. That's when I entered straight land, while he remained in the party world. The contrast got greater and greater, and I wasn't able to manage him like I could before. It would start with him punching the wall

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right beside me, or throwing something, and over an 18-month period it escalated.

The first time he hit my daughter and me, I somehow still didn't see the whole pattern. I still had hopes for us. It amazes me now how unsafe that was, and how I didn't take charge. He'd thrown my daughter on the floor and knocked her out, and I let him back in. Then a month later he went out of his way to kick over the highchair she was sitting in, before he hit me. I'd somehow still felt safe after the first time or, not safe, but as though I could still manage him. Now I knew I couldn't, that he was his own person and there would be another time.

We properly broke up. He still sifted around, but I never trusted him again, and he could feel it. It was pretty devastating because I had to let go of the idea that we could make it work and be a family. I felt a lot of grief, but I also didn't really let myself go there. I realise now that's because it was trauma, and I went into coping.

For four years I just coped, not wanting him around but letting him see my daughter while I was there. When I realised he was beating up his new girlfriend, and wanted time alone with our daughter, I told him no, and he said he'd take me to Family Court. That's when I lost it. I went to the police, who directed me to Women's Refuge. They

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were amazing: they got me a lawyer, we organised everything, and my daughter's father didn't even show up to court.

That was when I started the process of rebuilding my life, really. It was Refuge that put me onto Stopping Violence Services (SVS), where I was educated about what power and control was. I began to understand my story. What an absolute relief to know that it wasn't just me, and that it was a really predictable trail of events, and that I'd been responding like a normal person! It put my whole life in perspective.

Some mentors from SVS encouraged me to do the Social Work and Counselling Certificate at Tech, which otherwise would never have crossed my mind. When I decided to do it, I saw it as a way to turn my life around. I certainly didn't understand that the experiences I'd had could be an advantage, or that counselling would fill me up like nothing else ever has. My five years at Tech were a slow process of realising that I relate well to people, because of who I am and what I've been through. They value what I bring and I'm learning as much as they are.

Life remains a challenge, but I tell my clients that now I know there is life outside of that pit. I'm not in the pit anymore, but sometimes I'll still flop in. But it's never as deep, and it's never for as long. And now I can tell myself things, and do things, that help me get out of there quicker. It's about self-managing. Life can get really good, but you've got to be deliberate about bringing that into your life. Whatever it is, we need to find our passion. I have two – counselling, and my art.

It does sometimes feel strange that I've found meaning in my life by serving others, when I was raised to be servile. But I also remember watching my Mum with people, and she was such a loving person, she would just make them blossom. That's an amazing thing to do for someone, if it's coming from a place of love.

So now I think maybe those shoes were always there, only now I've stepped into them willingly and found my purpose on the planet. It really does light me up. ●

