

#UNHARMABLE

Reading One: My Story

From the Preface of Conscious Recovery

I've found that every spiritual advance I've made was preceded by some sort of fall—in fact, it's almost a universal law that a fall of some kind precedes a major shift. An accident, a fire that destroys all the stuff we've worked so hard to accumulate, an illness, a failed relationship, a death or injury that causes deep sorrow, an abandonment, a serious addiction, a business failure, a bankruptcy, or the like. These low points actually provide the energy needed to make a shift in the direction away from an ego-driven life to one full of purpose.

— Dr. Wayne Dyer, *The Shift*

To begin, I am sharing my personal story, which took me from a life of struggle and addiction into a joy-filled, meaningful existence. A movement from loss to recovery, from darkness into light, from a sense of brokenness to reconnecting with my wholeness—from an outer-directed life to an inner-focused way of being and seeing. I start with my story not because it's unique, or even unusual, but because it is not unique. It's possibly a lot like your story. So, I'm starting with my story in the hope that you will find in it things you can relate to and connect with. And from that point of connection, we'll follow the trajectory of our stories through the rest of this course, looking at addiction and its roots and then at how to untangle those roots to rediscover how to live our best lives.

"I've never met a happier child. You laughed all the time." That's what my mother remembers about me. What I remember is lying on the ground in the back yard, looking, for what felt like an eternity, at a butterfly, in awe at its magic. How is all this life possible? What beautiful wings. How much detail must be here for it to fly? How did this come to be? Look at this tiny little body of this ant. Wow, it takes all those ants to build this pile that they call their home. I felt like the luckiest person alive.

I also wondered what the universe was like before life. Before animals, before insects, before plants even—what existed before them? I suppose I was wondering about consciousness before manifestation, the pure consciousness that children have an innate knowledge of. I was probably also asking why the grownups weren't noticing life like I was, why they seemed to be so busy and so angry. But mostly I was filled with curiosity, presence, and awe. Looking back, I believe I was perfectly connected with truth of who and what I was.

Then I started to lose that truth, to begin believing that I wasn't enough, that I was broken in some way.

In first grade, my classmates and I had to change into our tennis shoes before recess. I didn't know how to tie my shoes, and the teacher said, "You need to learn how to tie your shoes by tomorrow." She sent me home with a pair of shoes attached to a piece of wood. I remember, like it was yesterday, feeling "stupid" and "less than" because I had to carry this board home. So, I tried to learn at home. I'm left-handed, and it was difficult, but by the end of that day I thought I had it down. However, when the time came for recess the next day, I couldn't do it. And everyone else could. I felt

like everybody knew how to live life but me. This was one of the first times I remember feeling different than everyone else, and somehow less capable.

I remember another poignant experience. This happened when I was seven years old. I sat one evening with my mother and my sisters at the dining room table. As I sat there, I began to shut down. I don't remember what was said or what happened in that moment, but I do remember distinctly the sensation of being overwhelmed with fear, a sense of terrible wrongness, and then a closing down and a walling up. Two distinct thoughts came to me: "This is not safe" and "I have given too much." Looking back, I can surmise that the circumstances of my life had finally overwhelmed my natural joy and resilience. I began to develop beliefs that I was broken or damaged in some way and that the world was not safe. These limiting beliefs were quietly erasing my deeper, instinctual truths. Maybe I was also starting to notice that I wasn't like a lot of the other boys—I was more like many of the girls, and of course I didn't know what to do with that.

So, my experience at the dinner table that evening was the feeling I'd had about the shoelaces, magnified a hundredfold: everyone knows how to "do life" but me. In that moment, I made a decision—to close down, put a barrier around my heart, to disconnect in some way. Of course, this was not a conscious choice, but it happened nonetheless. At that moment, I entered a world of toxic shame, in which I believed myself to be flawed and broken. In the process, I lost my curiosity and my joy—I lost sight of my genuine self.

We come into this world as beings who know and live in acceptance, openness, connection, presence. We are those joyful little children who know in their hearts that they are whole and perfect and that life is wonderful and wonder-filled. But life has a way of teaching us the opposite;

traumatic experiences teach us that we are broken, and this pushes us further from our oneness with Source. Think about what little children are taught about the world, especially children who experience cruelty or who live in a threatening environment. They are taught to be mistrustful, to devalue themselves. They are taught that “might makes right”, that strength lies in conquering, in overpowering people and situations. They learn that life is a struggle, it’s something to be resisted, and at best it’s a challenge—a problem to be figured out and solved. They are taught that there is not enough, and that people need to fight and compete to get what they think they need.

I recently witnessed an event that brings this point to light. I saw a young boy, probably 3 or 4 years old holding the hand of his father while watching a parade. The boy started clapping and jumping up and down with joy as a float approached. The father looked down at him and said, very sternly: “Don’t cheer for this float, they are not our team. Our team’s float will come later.” It was so shocking to me, and yet all too familiar. We often, unconsciously, teach our children to judge, and to separate from their inherent joy.

If we absorb these concepts and live by them as if they are true, we can get stuck in a very painful cycle. What’s worse, many of us are taught that not only have we done wrong but that we are wrong. We are taught that we are not worthy and are undeserving. When we believe that there is something essentially wrong with us, something that will never be fixed because it’s a part of who we are—that’s an incredibly heavy and painful burden to carry. If we hold “I am wrong” as our central self-definition, how can we thrive? How can we nurture healthy relationships? How can we experience the joy that is our birthright?

The tendency is to numb the very real pain that comes from this self-identity. And, using drugs, alcohol or other addictive behaviors is an effective way to do this, at least initially. Another tendency is to search for external validation, to strive to show the world a different face than the one we believe we have. "If only I can act good enough or be successful enough, then maybe people won't notice how awful I really am." We try to hide the central "truth" about our brokenness; we live a lie. And that too, is a terrible burden to live with. It's no wonder we find ourselves trapped in addictive behaviors. Addiction has been called "the great ache" that we are trying to soothe and fix from the outside in.

I discovered drugs and alcohol when I was fourteen. And, at the time, it felt like a great and awesome discovery! When I took that drink, I relaxed for the first time in seven years. I often hear people say that when they started drinking or using drugs they felt better-looking, smarter, or more on top of things. I don't know if I felt any of that, but I do remember feeling immense relief—a numbness—like all the things that made me feel "wrong" just didn't matter anymore. I felt relief from the disconnection that I was experiencing, and some relief from that excruciating pain that was at the core of my life's perspective.

Drugs and alcohol were more than a relief for me; they saved my life, and I suppose if they had continued to work for me I might have never gotten sober. In truth, if drugs and alcohol continued to work the way they did in the beginning, I would possibly still be using them. We all look for ways to cope with difficult circumstances, and for many people, drugs and alcohol are one such coping mechanism. I think it helps to look at these coping mechanisms not so much as bad or wrong choices but as brilliant strategies.

Even though drinking and using drugs didn't give me the lasting healing I was longing for, they were actually a brilliant strategy, because they literally saved my life. Without them I think I could have snapped in some way; the core false beliefs I had picked up, such as "I'm worthless" and "The world is a dangerous place"—were too overwhelming otherwise.

I believe, in retrospect, that this period in my life was a low-level search for spiritual connection. In other words, I was seeking to fill the inner emptiness by grabbing something outside of myself to gain relief. It was as though I had my umbilical cord in my hand and was trying to find a place to "plug in." I felt there was something wrong with me, and I was looking outside myself for a fix, a cure, a source of relief from the sense of spiritual bankruptcy that I was experiencing. You see, I have come to understand that drugs and alcohol were never the problem. They were a solution to something that felt broken within.

Drinking and using drugs worked for me for awhile, and I drank from the age of 14 until I was 20. But what started out as a brilliant strategy eventually stopped working. What once helped me to feel a sense of connection eventually led to me feeling more and more disconnected. And so, in June of 1986, when I was just fifty-two days away from my twenty-first birthday, I got clean and sober. That was the beginning of an incredible spiritual journey. I've been blessed with continuous sobriety ever since, and now have over thirty years clean and sober. I'm eternally grateful for that because it has been the foundation of a new life and a new way of being.

When I first got sober, I was incredibly rigid, incredibly afraid and shut down. I was trying everything I could to control the externals of my life because I felt so out of control internally. Without the drugs and alcohol to help me

cope with the experience of emptiness and disconnection, I began, once more, to experience all the fear and alienation, all the judgment that had driven me to drink in the first place. Ever since I was a young child I had created a life based on a set of false beliefs and perspectives. I believed that I was broken, and I had been attracting people who seemed to be confirming that belief. In other words, I had created my external life based on internal, fundamental lies about myself and the world.

Fortunately for me, two things happened to direct me on the path to sustained recovery. Soon after I got sober, I met a remarkable woman named Mary Helen Brownell. She was the most enlightened being I had ever met. There was a magical quality about her that I had never experienced before. In her gentle and loving way, Mary Helen introduced me to a new way of being, which wasn't about looking outside myself for validation, but about embarking on an inward journey, looking first at what I needed to unlearn and release.

Then, in 1988, two years into my recovery, I walked into a Unity Church, and the trajectory of my life was changed once again. I became a spiritual seeker. Eventually, I traveled to southern India to stay and study at the ashram of "the hugging guru" Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known as Amma, or Mother. I studied both Eastern and Western philosophy and religion extensively during those early years. I developed a meditation practice, and I continued to use metaphysical spiritual principles to wake up to a new way of living. I deepened my recovery and felt more and more grounded in the truth of my being.

But my journey did not follow a straight line. Around the age of 30, I reached a point in my spiritual life that called for deeper inner clearing, but I

hesitated. Rather than stepping forward and doing the work, I pulled back. I moved into reverse. I once again became outer-focused. Egoism snuck into my recovery, and I began to forget the importance of my spiritual practice; I began to forget what was truly important to me, which was maintaining a connection with Source (or love, or light, or whatever word you use). I went back to outer seeking, but this time it wasn't with drugs or alcohol. This time my addiction was to success and achievement.

I had always grappled with money and longed to advance my social status. I knew people with money and privilege, and I wanted what they had. I believed if I just got the perfect house, the perfect car, and the perfect partner, all would be OK, and I would be OK. And now, with ten years of sobriety under my belt, I was ready to “manifest” what I believed was the life of my dreams. I opened a furniture business that soon became very successful. I moved into a two-bedroom home in San Francisco, with a big deck on the hill overlooking the Castro. It was decorated with designer furniture, original artwork by well-known artists, and perfect lighting. I got the new charcoal-colored Lexus; I went to the big Gold’s gym in the Castro and worked to perfect my body. It was as if I, once again, had my umbilical cord in my hand trying to find something outside of myself to plug into and fix something that felt broken within.

Interestingly enough, I took the metaphysical principles I had long been studying and shifted them to fit my outward-looking search. I misinterpreted these principles and truths, and heard them through my egoistic lens rather than exploring the deeper meaning. When I heard people saying, “Thoughts held in mind produce after their kind,” I interpreted that to mean that if I used affirmations in the “right” way, I would amass more material possessions. I believed if I was “spiritual enough” I could create the life of

my dreams. I started to believe that the metaphysical principles of manifestation were only about creating the perfect life on the outside.

But as a friend of mine says, "Using affirmations without doing the deeper inner work is like putting icing on stale bread and calling it cake." Sadly, but not surprisingly, I still held onto my own stories of essential brokenness. I still felt, deep down, that I couldn't make it, that if people knew me they would judge me and leave me. So, I didn't share myself, not authentically at least. I didn't tell anyone, not even my boyfriend, what was going on inside; with him, as with everyone around me, everything was "fine." I felt like a fraud.

Instead of doing the necessary deeper inner work, I slipped into an old pattern, now camouflaged to fit my new identity as a spiritual person. I didn't have the tools to deal with my external success. The more successful I became, the more I believed I needed to acquire. I felt emptier and emptier and lost contact with my essential nature. The trajectory of my life took me way off course, and I found myself isolated and afraid once again.

In 2004, I first heard the calling to go into ministry. Every time I was at Unity, I felt this inner knowing and desire to become a minister and spiritual teacher. For a good year, I said no to that calling, because I had created a life that seemed to be incredibly successful in the outer realm, and I didn't understand how I could possibly shift into ministry and let go of what I thought was the life of my dreams. I didn't understand that my inner vision would lead to the true life of my dreams. Finally, I spoke my desire to go into ministry out loud. I began my formal ministerial and spiritual counseling training in 2005. Once I began this process, my inner life began to open up in beautiful ways. My outer life began to crumble.

There's a wonderful concept in metaphysical teachings called "chemicalization," which is when our consciousness evolves to a point beyond our current level, and our material world crumbles as a result. What can happen is a lot of difficulty, because the old way gets "burned off" in order for us to step fully into this new consciousness. That was certainly my experience. In retrospect, I can see that this happened because I had built my life on a very shaky foundation, and saying yes to this higher vision for my life required the old paradigm to collapse. As I continued taking classes toward ordination, my world continued to fall apart.

My business collapsed and the debt I had incurred caught up with me. I owed people money; the rumor mill was going nuts; friends were walking away. It felt like a nightmare, and it was, from one perspective. I kept going to classes, kept listening to the calling, but I still could not let go of my outer-directed vision. I started another business, thinking, "This time it will be different." It was not. Same story, same outcome. I had a falling out with my business partner, and then I lost the second business, even more dramatically than the first.

"What we resist persists." I had been hearing this for years, I knew it in my head. So why was it so difficult for me to stop resisting the call to a deeper inner life? We are taught from a very early age a specific vision of what strength looks like and what weakness is, and what many of us learn is pretty much the opposite of the truth. The willingness to be vulnerable, to genuinely let others see us, to be capable of true intimacy—we are often taught that these are weaknesses. Strength, we learn, is having all the answers, figuring things out, and using force to get what we think we need. Strength is hiding your brokenness in the "stuff" of external success.

My core false beliefs were very deeply rooted in my unconscious, so it makes sense that my spiritual growth and recovery took time. I needed not only to unlearn the false beliefs, but to learn the true power and courage of flowing with life, of letting go, of being present. And to learn this, I needed to experience it, and I needed to deepen my spiritual practice. At that point, I resisted it, even though I knew it was important. I played hide-and-seek with the truth, with Source.

One such deepening experience happened some years ago when I traveled to India. Varanasi, in northern India, is said to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Built along the western banks of the Ganges River, it is a pilgrimage site for thousands upon thousands, who believe that if you die and are cremated there, your karma will be removed and you will achieve nirvana, and be released from this physical realm. This is where I found myself in 2006, on a spiritual quest with about thirty other seekers.

In the oldest parts of the city, roads are too narrow for cars, so we entered the city by bicycle rickshaw. I could feel the spiritual energy intensifying as we moved along the twisting streets, popping with colors, crowded with people, cows, and vehicles of every sort. A chill went up my arms, and my heart began to open. Once we reached the oldest part of the city, we were escorted to the river on foot by twin boys, about twelve years old. They had short dark hair and no shoes, and they wore simple, plain colored dhoti. Both were deaf. Their gentle energies were incredibly striking. In the midst of all the chaos of the city, they had a wordless presence—kindness and love shone in their eyes as they gently helped us get to our destination.

By the time we reached the river, it was getting to be dusk. We all got in a boat and pushed out onto the water. Looking back at the river bank, we could see the places where people bathe, perform ceremonies, and cremate the dead. We were just in time for the Ganga Aarti, the festival of lights, which happens every evening at sundown on the main Ghat, the Dashashwamedh. Light, singing, bells, incense, movement—all came together to pay tribute to the mighty Ganges and the spirits of the departed. All around us, lights floated on the water. And all along the river, the cremation fires burned. As I settled in, a profound peace entered my body and, in that moment, my ego seemed to be stripped away. Suddenly, I knew there was no separation, no us and them, no place where I ended and someone else began. There was no good, no bad, no right or wrong, and there was no judgment. I knew I could at last let go. I began to sob. It felt like years of trauma and sadness were being washed away.

Suddenly, the electrical power went out and shrouded half of the city in darkness (not uncommon in many parts of India). The only things that lit up the night sky were the ceremonial lights and the fires of cremation. Our guides quietly steered the boat until we were just a few feet away from one of the Ghats, and there we sat for what seemed like an eternity, watching the funeral ceremonies. The flames filled up the otherwise dark night with beautiful, sparkling light. The experience of my sudden awakening lasted with the same intensity for several hours. I awoke the next morning to discover my life had permanently shifted into a new way of being.

Since that experience, my ego has continued to make its appearance in my life, but that moment allowed me to have a permanent change in my relationship with my ego. My ego has not died, I simply changed the way I see it and the way it plays a role in my life. In other words, I was restored to

the truth of who and what I am, which is one with Spirit. From that moment, my life has been filled with more love, more connection, more joy, and more happiness than I knew possible.

It's not that I always had it easy after my experience in India. In fact, after I returned home my life, in many ways, became more challenging, at least in the short term. The difference was that I was able make the commitment to doing the inner work, to dedicate myself to the spiritual practices that this effort requires. Over time, I could see and accept that my life's work is to joyfully share this experience of my awakening, to share my own journey of moving through darkness and into light so that others can experience their own light and love. And once I got clear on what was mine to do, the outer circumstances of my life began to fall into place. I discovered that spending time in the silence, staying true to my inner calling, and taking conscious actions were tools that allowed my dreams and visions to naturally manifest in the outer realm.

Here's how it looked: I continued to answer my calling to the ministry, serving as the Ministerial Associate at Unity San Francisco while continuing my studies. Around that same time, I started working in the addiction treatment field as a spiritual counselor. In my addiction work, I created and implemented full-scale spiritual care programs within residential treatment centers. My experience from the beginning of that effort was that people were hungry for a spiritual approach to their recovery that guided them to break free from the cycle of addictive behavior and return to a place of peace and happiness. This was very exciting for me, as it seemed to be just what I was meant to do.

In 2012, I founded the Awakened Living Spiritual Center, and in 2017, our community was given the distinct honor of being selected by Michael Bernard Beckwith and the Agape International Spiritual Center to become Agape Bay Area: A Center for Awakened Living. Agape Bay Area is a twenty-first century movement for people who consider themselves spiritual explorers and have a deep hunger for personal and global transformation.

Today, I am truly living the life of my dreams. I am the author of three books and multiple workbooks, and I am privileged to speak to audiences around the world about spiritual awakening and addiction recovery. I am also blessed to have created The Conscious Recovery Method, which is a groundbreaking treatment modality facilitated at treatment centers all over the U.S. All of this has manifested in my life because I have trusted my inner knowing. I have dedicated myself to spending time in silence and taking conscious action based on the internal messages I have received through vision. What I have discovered to be true is that this is not only possible for us all, but it is also our divine birthright.

Internally, I have also experienced a tremendous transformation, which took many years and included some seemingly sudden shifts—from resistance and fear to openness and presence. And, the greatest paradox is, once I released the expectation that I needed my outer life to look a certain way in order to be OK, my outer life started to manifest with a greater abundance than ever before. Once I surrendered my egoic structure (the old beliefs that kept me feeling stuck and limited) and became clear on my inner purpose, my outer circumstances aligned with my inner knowing. Life seems to work that way. My experience has shown me that when we do our inner work of awakening, when we learn to flow with life instead of resisting it, we can enter into a life filled with love, gratitude and joy. Additionally, as more and

more of us are waking up to this and committing to practicing spiritual principles, it has a ripple effect on the collective as well; on politics, on the health of the planet, on everything.

We do have a choice in how we view the world. All those early decisions we make, all the ideas we carry around that keep us small and keep us limited—we can take responsibility for those and let them go. We can experience oneness. Because love is the ultimate truth of who we are, peace is the deepest truth of who we are. We can restore the innate knowing we had as children, and together we can facilitate a continuation of the awakening that is already underway on this planet. This is what I wish for you. If you are in one of those periods of darkness, or if you are struggling with addiction in any form, you can also have this incredible life filled with joy and connection.

My sincere hope is that working through this course will be helpful to you along the way.