

Learning to Trust Myself

By Deborah Kevin

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I sat back in the oversized conference room chair and swallowed hard, wiping tears from my cheeks, as my mentor issued my assignments.

The day had been emotionally grueling. Each question he'd asked required me to write in a journal for forty-five minutes. My hand cramped by the end of the fifth or sixth question. Most queries had me sobbing as I wrote. I felt broken. Devastated. Destroyed.

His only comment during my tear-soaked moments was, "Keep going."

The purpose of the exercises was to strip me of my ego and to force me to feel the absolute worst things that might happen in the future as well as to relive my painful past. As I wrote, teardrops stained the pages. As I wrote, I felt come upon me amazing freedom and lightness. *I would survive these losses just as I'd survived those in my past. **No**, I thought. I won't survive—I will thrive.*

"The sooner you do what I tell you, the sooner you'll be free," he said. He looked up from his notes, his dark eyes glowing. "Are you willing?"

I nodded. "Yes." My voice came out barely above a whisper. Rain pattered against the windows. I'd come here to figure out what subconscious beliefs were holding me back and I was going to do whatever it took.

"First, do improv. Second, speak about the domestic abuse you experienced. Third, take an exotic dance class." He looked straight at me. "Will you commit to doing all three things?"

I looked down at my hands, which lay in my lap. *Dance? No problem. Improv? Sounded fun. Speak about the years of abuse I'd endured?* A pit grew in my stomach. Nausea threatened. I looked into his eyes, my voice firm as I said, "Yes, I will do whatever it takes."

With that, he pushed back from the long conference table which separated us. "We're done here." After a brief hug, he disappeared through the door.

I drove straight to the airport, and, once through security, sent a Facebook message to a former colleague who I knew had performed improv. We hadn't spoken in over seven years yet, to my delight, he responded immediately. Before I boarded the flight home, I'd registered for an introductory improv class. I decided to trust that the right opportunities for the other two tasks would present themselves to me as easily as this one had.

Improv class took place on Wednesday nights. Our instructor taught us how to disengage our brains, stop planning, and just feel the moments where we'd respond.

Disengage my brain? I prided myself on being a deep thinker (okay, an overthinker). It had taken me years to show my intelligence after dumbing myself down in order to fit in. Now I was being instructed to detach my logical brain. *You promised, Debby.* Then I had an epiphany: these tasks were all about trust.

To my surprise, being present and responding to my scene partner was not only incredibly freeing, it was fun. Leaning into possibility and trusting whatever came out of my mouth felt uncomfortable and yet I did it. And I was pretty funny.

As we neared our showcase where we'd perform in front of a live audience, I received an email from a dear friend Ann.

"I saw this opportunity and thought of you," she wrote. Ann held a special place in my heart because she'd texted me daily during the worst period of my life. Her messages were often a lifeline during a time when my then-husband careened out of control.

The opportunity about which she spoke was a 12-week arts therapy course held on Saturdays at a local domestic violence center, the very center which had provided me information and helped me keep myself and my family safe. I applied immediately and soon received an invitation for an interview.

"This isn't therapy," the course leader said. "The groups are carefully curated so as to ensure each person will thrive. We're only working with people who are no longer in an abusive situation and are in the healing process. Do you feel this describes you?"

I paused, biting the inside of my cheek. *Yes and no.* I'd left my marriage eighteen months earlier but I wasn't certain about the healing part. "I think I'd be a good fit." I went on to share that I'd be out of the country for a couple of weeks.

We shook hands at the end of the interview. She said, handing me a schedule, "You'll hear from me within two weeks."

I returned home from France to discover that I'd been accepted into the program. A sense of elation mixed with dread hit me. *What were you thinking?*

I showed up at the first class feeling twitchy and nervous. The large room was nearly empty, a ring of chairs arranged in its center.

"Write a nametag and grab from the table any toy which speaks to you," our instructor said.

I wrote my name, and began riffling through the toys. A Barbie. *No*. Truck. *No*. Hairbrush. *No*. Shrek. *YES*. I snatched up the ogre and took a seat.

Slowly, the room filled up with a diverse community of eight women. Our instructor warmly welcomed us and read a poem. "Let's go around and introduce ourselves, sharing what your object is, and why you choose it."

One by one, my peers answered the questions.

Finally, it was my turn. "I chose Shrek," I said. "First, I love the movie and play. It holds special memories for me. Second, I chose him because there's a scene where Donkey asks Shrek a question to which Shrek replies, 'Ogres are like onions.' He goes on to explain that as you peel away each layer, you eventually get to his soft heart. That's how I feel: like I'm shedding layers of external expectations to reveal my own tender heart."

For the next eleven Saturdays, we gathered and explored our individual stories using poetry, crafts, or animal cards. The purpose was ultimately for us to give testimony on the last day of class. I wrote and honed my words, finally submitting them for review.

"Debby, please come to my office," our instructor said one day as we all sat writing.

I followed her through the warren of hallways to her office, taking a seat on a narrow couch.

"Your story is extremely powerful," she said. "I want you to rework it, though, from the perspective of a journey because the metaphor of being on the trail is so important to you." She paused. "I'd also like to ask if you'd be willing to be our keynote speaker for our Domestic Violence Awareness event."

I swallowed, hard. *Me? Share my story? In public? In a town where my abuser still lived?* My mentor's voice rang in my head, "The sooner you speak, the sooner you'll be free." I had to trust that this was the next step for me. I smiled at my instructor. "It would be my honor."

Four months later, I stood at a podium facing a room filled with friends, peers, dignitaries, and the local police. The newspaper had sent a reporter. With shaking hands and voice, I began speaking my truth. As I finished, I glanced at my dear friends who filled the front row. They wiped tears from their eyes. Then someone in the back of the room stood, clapping. Pretty soon, others followed. My first standing ovation.

I felt gratitude flood me. Leaning into discomfort and trusting had begun transforming my life.