

CHAPTER 1

THE RETREAT

CONFRONTING FEAR AT THE PUNCHING BAG

ONE BY ONE, I WATCHED THEM STRUGGLE AND FALL TO PIECES in front of this bag and knew this would also be my fate. I sat there wondering what I was so afraid of. How could the anticipation of hitting a punching bag elicit such fear and sadness that it took my breath away? I was overwhelmed.

I was very present and aware of my reaction, of my fear. I'm a yoga teacher, after all. What I teach is awareness. But how did I get to this point? How did I get to this moment where the thought of hitting a punching bag while shouting YES or NO stirred up so much emotion that I wanted to run out of that room like a prisoner from her cell? I would have done anything to avoid that moment. And I have, many times before, avoided such moments of confrontation.

I had that feeling people describe as their life flashing before their eyes, everything compressed into a single moment. As I tried to make sense of it, there was no doubt that being the biological child of gay parents contributed to what I felt, as did my father's death over twenty-five years earlier. I was aware of that. More recently, there was my divorce after twenty years of marriage and

raising two beautiful boys, now young men. My role as a yoga teacher has offered me grace, challenge, and a beacon of light to guide my way. One would think that as a yoga teacher, I'd have been better prepared for a moment like this. And in a way, it did, by making me more consciously aware of all that past and the pain it left me to carry. But being aware of the fear doesn't make it any less daunting.

I am a yoga teacher and a good one at that. I am respected. I was technically in this workshop as my friend's assistant. I was there to support her in the weekend retreat she was creating for her clients—and me. I have attended many classes, workshops, and retreats over the years and taught many classes, workshops, and retreats. I am very comfortable in the role of instructor. That's where my confidence lies—where my soul is at its best—where I am most authentic. It's a powerful feeling to know your true calling and passion. I believe I have found mine as a yoga teacher. I always knew I would be a teacher, but I never imagined it would be yoga.

When I was young, I watched my father practice yoga and meditation. He ate only a macrobiotic diet and was a self-proclaimed *channeler*. He believed in psychics and the power of affirmations. I remember him taking me to an event to hear a powerful, up- and-coming motivational speaker. This woman stood before a large conference audience and told us to go home, look at ourselves in the mirror, and say, "I love you!" The woman was Louise Hay.

Louise Hay was the queen of affirmations. She pioneered the idea that our thoughts create our reality. She is known to have cured herself of cancer by changing her thought pattern. So, the first chance I got, I went to the bathroom to practice saying "I love you" to myself. I looked at myself in the mirror and attempted to say those three powerful words. I couldn't believe it. All I could do was cry. I couldn't say those words to myself.

In many ways, my dad was a typical baby boomer hippie. He was a psychotherapist and had a private practice in the basement of his home. My parents were divorced, so my older sister and I would spend every other weekend with my dad in a beautiful part of northwest Washington, D.C. His office could be accessed through a separate entrance in the back of the house, and on one wall in his waiting room was an oversized picture of a man in about a hundred yoga poses. This picture was so large that it took up the entire wall. That's how I remember it. It was a chart of possible yoga poses created as a work of art—not like a table out of a textbook. At the time, it was foreign to me—just an oddity representing so many things I didn't understand about my dad that intrigued me deeply. The other wall had a 3D map made of thick wire bent into the shape of the United States, large enough to take up the entire wall. There was a couch for patients to sit on and magazines to entertain them while waiting their turn.

Lots of beautiful, thriving plants were all set up with sun lamps on timers to ensure the plants were well taken care of.

Part of me thought it was cool that my dad had his office in his home. He seemed important. So much happened in this portion of the house that was a mystery to me. We weren't allowed there often. And when we were, it was like going on a field trip full of excitement and wonder about what was in store.

As you descended the stairs from the waiting room to the basement office, you'd be captured by the artwork filling the stairwell wall, so there was almost no wall to be seen. Imagine a stairwell full of family photos, but instead of baby pictures and graduation caps, there were Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, and Woodstock posters. One specific picture etched in my mind was of Marilyn Monroe's eyes—just the eyes. All made up, it must have been a four-foot by two-foot framed image. Once you got to the basement, in addition to the typical therapy couch, you'd find massive pillows in a large empty space. I never found out what he did with those pillows, but my sister and I spent many times tossing them about and rolling

over them. For us, the field trip was like being in a modern-day ball pit or trampoline park.

My father not only practiced yoga but was also an avid meditator. He owned what seemed like every tape recording known to man with endless guided meditations on them. He had an entire cabinet in the dining room wall to wall with cassette tapes— usually of his own making. He recorded every meditation, talk, or panel discussion that he possibly could about yoga, meditation, nutrition, and spirituality. My father even had cassette tapes of himself in meditation, often channeling spirits. All of this was a huge mystery to me. At the time, I thought it was all a bit ridiculous and very “out there.” I felt like I should be embarrassed, like this was all very unusual and weird. He was eccentric, to say the least, but somehow, somewhere inside me, I understood or appreciated what it all was. I found myself curious and intrigued.

Since Dad ate only a macrobiotic diet, he spent many hours preparing food in the kitchen. Living a macrobiotic lifestyle took education, commitment, and dedication.

There was always some new, weird recipe he was trying that would fill the house with the smells and sounds of home cooking. Sometimes, it would smell of basil and parsley, sometimes of turmeric and ginger, and sometimes of curry and garlic. He loved to cook. I loved to go out to eat, but going to a restaurant with Dad was an adventure. There were only certain places we could go because they had to be able to accommodate his unique dietary requirements. This was long before the days of gluten-free, vegan, fat-free, everything-free mania. He was very unusual for that time, and we just accepted that as part of our going-out-to-eat experience.

My dad was an incredible father, and I loved him dearly. And yet, a part of me knows he had a rougher side. Looking back, I don't think it was that rough, but I was fragile and sensitive and, at a young age, took things personally. When he raised his voice even just a little, I

felt afraid. I didn't like to make him mad; somewhere along the line, I learned I didn't want to make anyone angry.

My sister, Lisa, a fiery redhead, also had a very strong personality. She was the alpha sibling, always taking center stage, always challenging everyone. As a result, I took a back seat to be the easy child and keep everyone happy. I was comfortable in the back seat.

My dad hadn't always been so eccentric, but recalling memories before that time is hard. One of my fond kitchen memories is of him making homemade donuts and crepes. Using biscuit dough, my sister and I would poke a hole through the center and mold them into donut shapes. Dad would fry them in Lord only knows what. And then the real fun was getting to shake them in a zip lock bag with whatever "topping" we wanted. My favorite was cinnamon sugar. I'd place the warm fried dough in the baggie, make sure it was sealed really tight, and then shake. I'd shake until it was *just right*. And then, of course, I would indulge. Even though I was the size of a toothpick growing up, I thought I could eat an endless supply of these donuts. And the crepes were equally fun because you could fill them with whatever you wanted—chocolate or strawberry and, of course, topped with powdered sugar. I suppose because my dad liked to cook, he'd make a production of this. It was as if you were dining out by the time you were done.

He spared no expense or effort to make it just right.

Who knew—certainly not I—that I would be teaching yoga and meditation one day and discover myself as a deeply spiritual person? I recognize now that my father and I are not as far apart as it felt sometimes as a child. Even though I didn't understand him and he seemed weird to me, I always felt interested in him, drawn to these preoccupations of his.

One of my regrets is that I didn't appreciate his uniqueness as a child. But how could I have? I was just a child, and he was my father. Children are not meant to "understand" their parents. Parents are meant to be embarrassing and annoying. We aren't meant to comprehend all the lessons our parents try to teach us—at

least not necessarily in that moment. It's usually not until much later that we have any clue what our parents were trying to do. This has given me hope with my children—teenage boys—as I notice how little they think I know or have to offer them. I have to trust that someday, they, too, will come to understand all the lessons I have tried to teach them over the years. I hope I will be around to witness it, unlike my dad.

My mom was definitely a bit more mainstream if you can call a lesbian from New England “mainstream.” She was calm and nurturing and everything you could possibly want from a mother. She listened to me. She hugged me. And she always made me feel safe. She's like the oak tree: strong, fierce, rooted, and connected to the earth but quiet, peaceful, always aware but rarely reacting. It's no accident that my mom's family name is Oakes.

I idolized my mom. I grew up thinking she could do no wrong. She always seemed to know just what to say to make everything okay. There were many family conversations in the bathroom where we would talk for hours. We were all women in the house, and somehow, we always wound up lounging all over the bathroom to talk about some major concern or issue. It was just our thing. I could talk about anything with mom and knew it would be okay. Even today, with my kids, when I don't know how to handle a situation, I call her, and she knows just what to do or say. And she's always right.

She came from an amazing family. My grandparents were incredibly kind, generous, and loving people. Still New Englanders, they were stoic, especially my grandfather, but loving nonetheless. You just knew you were loved. That was never in question.

One of my favorite times of year was the week after Christmas. My mom's family tradition was to meet the Sunday after Christmas to celebrate the Oakes family Christmas. Mom and her partner,

Lynda, and my sister and I would pack up the station wagon and head to Connecticut, an eight-hour drive. Before it was illegal not to wear a seatbelt, my sister and I would lay out blankets and pillows in the back of the station wagon along with the games and books we brought and spend the drive trying not to touch each other. One of our favorite pastimes on this annual drive was pointing out all the Christmas light displays we saw. Inevitably, it was dark when we got close. You'd hear, "Ooo, look at the lights!" And then, "Ah, look at *those* lights." One was always better than the next. We couldn't get enough of it. My sister and I fought a lot when we were young, but I only have fond memories of these drives. And when we got there, we were greeted with such joy, even if it was the middle of the night. And we were taken care of and treasured while we were there.

On the day of the celebration, the entire family would gather and catch up on the year's events. There was always so much love in that family, and it was palpable.

Clearly, that's where my mom got it. An acorn doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say. To this day, my mom and I are best friends. We are so much alike that when I share something intimate with her about what I'm feeling, I know she understands exactly how I feel because she's been there; she's felt it herself. That's a cherished experience; to know someone always truly gets you.

I remember crying on my bathroom floor, hidden from the rest of the house where my son, still living at home, might hear me. I had decided to get divorced, and this was the first time I was shedding the tears. And I was weeping—the big, loud, ugly cry you'd expect from someone on the brink of turmoil. As I shared my most intimate details about the fears of breaking up my family and the fears of staying married, my mom offered nothing but the reassuring word, "I know." And I know she meant it, having had to make that same decision for herself when I was just two years old.

I don't believe in accidents, and even though there was no conscious choice to teach yoga based on my father's practice, I

know it was meant to be. As a stay-at-home mom with young children, I needed a way out of the house. And as a result of having two children, I was beginning to put on weight. So, I took myself to the gym. It was perfect. Childcare was included, and I could focus on myself while getting back into shape at the same time. I loved group fitness classes and usually planned my trips to the gym around the classes I wanted to take.

A little community is created naturally in these environments, with the same people coming to class regularly. I made friendships and established routines.

Then, one day, after months of going to a boot camp-type strength training class, my teacher pulled me aside after class.

“I have to move because of my husband’s job, so I won’t be able to teach here anymore. You’d make an amazing teacher and a great replacement for me. If you were willing to take the training, you’d be guaranteed a job here teaching my classes.”

It’s funny how people can influence and change the trajectory of your life. I can’t say it never crossed my mind to teach, but I certainly didn’t expect anyone else to know that. It was a synchronistic experience. I said yes to her suggestion, got my certification, and began teaching the class.

With my fitness certification, I am required to take a certain number of continuing education units (CEUs) to stay current. Even though it can be expensive and a challenge to find the time, I enjoy learning new things. One of these new things was yoga, which changed my life forever. I’m sure the fact that my dad had practiced yoga for all those years enticed me to want to know more. It was only a weekend yoga training, but it gave me an appetite for more. I knew almost immediately that there was something unique and special about yoga. It just made me feel good. The amount of detail and awareness brought to oneself through the practice of yoga was new to me as a form of exercise—compared to what I’d been teaching—but at the same time, it was very familiar. I had learned to meditate before this time, and this practice gave me a similar

feeling of calm and knowing. I began incorporating yoga into all my classes, eventually got my teacher training certification, and became a yoga instructor exclusively.

I am comfortable in my role as a teacher because I am in control. And I need to be because that's part of what makes for a good instructor. I know how to manage any situation and allow it to be a teaching moment for all. An obnoxious cell phone ringing becomes a thought we must let fade into the distance, like a cloud floating by. We notice it, acknowledge it, and then let it go. We can't always control our surroundings, but we can control our reactions. A yoga class is analogous to real life, and I knew how to incorporate that into my classes.

But teaching also gives me a reason to neglect myself because I'm not the priority if I'm there for everyone else. I recognize when I teach that it is not about me, which again helps make me a good instructor. I don't bring my drama to the studio. I share enough to show empathy and compassion, which is done with sincerity. But I don't over-share where it becomes all about me. I taught classes just after my dog died, after a car accident, and even within hours of discovering my husband was having an affair—all without the students ever knowing. When I teach, I'm not there for me. I have an uncanny ability to put all my emotions aside and be there for others instead. I have a compassionate nature, and as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Compassion is a verb." It takes effort and desire to be there for my students.

This focus is part of the goal of a yoga practice. Yoga is a form of moving meditation, so in theory, when you step on your mat, you want to set everything aside and focus your attention only on that moment. The goal is to let go of all the thoughts, worries, fears, and stresses and just do the practice. As a teacher, it is crucial that I be able to set everything aside so that I can focus on teaching—on guiding my students through a powerful journey. If my mind and emotions are all over the place, teaching becomes very difficult—and uncomfortable for the students.

On the occasions when my mind wanders, because I've gotten caught up making my grocery list or analyzing a conversation from the day before, the silence during centering lasts much longer than it should. Students get left in difficult postures until they begin to complain or fall out of the poses. When I'm distracted, it just doesn't flow.

The class looks and feels very different when I'm in my head and not my body. As a result, teaching has become my form of meditation. I've learned to stay in my body and get out of my head no matter the circumstances. I've learned to stay present to be a conduit between Infinite Love and my students. I stay in my body, tune into the needs of the class, and just flow, trusting it will serve the students in all the ways they need. It often feels like how I imagine an out-of-body experience would feel.

At this moment, sitting in that circle of women staring at that punching bag, I was there for me, not anyone else. And the self-talk was astounding. I told myself to embrace this moment and recognize that this was a safe environment to let go.

I've had these opportunities before to express incredible joy and also incredible sadness. I've attended drum circles, fire dances, and kirtan chants where I had complete permission to dance and sing my heart out, yet something held me back. And I've watched people die like my father at the hands of a tragic, unnecessary disease.

And yet, through all this, I have learned to keep myself together, to appear as though everything was okay. And in this moment, I knew I had another opportunity to surrender to emotion completely. This time, it looked like many others, but something was different. I was different. I felt different. I knew I couldn't miss this chance. I knew it was time to make a different choice.

My friend, the retreat leader, had even said before we began,

“Don’t waste this opportunity to express yourself.” And I knew she was right. “When it’s your turn, just go up there and let it go. Just wail and scream and cry to your heart’s content.”

That’s what I was telling myself. I wanted it so badly. I wanted to let go. Something was guiding me, giving me the courage to be free. But at the same time, I was brutally present with feelings of fear and shame. I was scared to death to show my emotions, to feel them, and to show myself fully with all my imperfections and insecurities. What would happen if the dam opened? If I felt all the raw emotions of my past and not-so-distant past? What would happen if I was honest and revealed the unpleasant truth of everything I felt? I was afraid to find out.

When it was finally my turn to kneel in front of the bag, I confessed to the group that I was scared to death—that I was frightened to feel these intense emotions. It was like being on trial, having put my hand on the Bible, afraid to perjure myself. I had convinced myself that to let go of my emotions and express myself fully was the same as losing control. And it went even further: To express pure joy, or sadness, or anger, or even love, was to lose control. Who would I be without that control? I had lived so many years of my life under control, controlling myself and my environment—not because I wanted to—at least not at first—but for survival.

See, I’m not just the daughter of a gay parent.
I’m the daughter of *two* gay parents.

Let me explain in case this seems hard to believe. Both my mother and my father are gay. They were married for several years, and I’m sure that some of their bond and the love that drew them to one another was on some level due to intuition and an understanding of each other’s feelings about love and intimacy.

I was only two when my parents separated; my sister would have been four. I don’t have any memories of my parents together.

I've heard stories that, over time, have morphed into my memories. But actual memories of that time just aren't there.

Apparently, both my mom and dad were struggling with recognizing their attraction to people of the same gender, but back then, people didn't talk about being gay. There certainly wasn't a vocabulary for what they were feeling and experiencing in their marriage. And there was no possibility of living a life—accepted by the culture—that was anything other than the norm.

Not only was my dad a psychologist, but my mother was a social worker, so they knew that therapy was an option for managing these feelings. As I understand it, my father went to therapy to try to get over his feelings—to learn how to *not* be gay. He did love my mom and wanted a family and a happy life. At that time, a happy life was only seen as possible in a traditional nuclear family. He wasn't interested in breaking up his family or creating pain for everyone involved. He wanted to learn how to manage his feelings within the framework of his family and marriage.

On the other hand, my mother wanted to explore the feelings she was noticing toward certain women in her life. She went to my dad and talked to him about it to get his permission, so to speak, to explore these other relationships. And I guess my dad sort of agreed, thinking this might be one way to manage their feelings within the confines of their marriage.

I have thought about how difficult this must have been for them. Would I even be able to identify my desires, much less express them to the very person who had no possible way of meeting my needs? Would I have the same courage to think outside the box? Would I be willing to entertain a life different from what was “acceptable?” Eventually, I would find out.

With this sort of open relationship (as we'd call it today), my mom began to explore. This led her to the realization that she would never be truly happy staying married to my dad. She had fallen in love with another woman.

We wrote a family book once. We knew our family was unique and unusual, and we often spoke about writing a book about our family. This was a genuine desire of my dad's, but we kids were never quite ready to be so open to the world. It didn't happen until my father was approaching fifty. That year, we decided to each write something about our family. We collected it in a binder and presented it to my dad on his fiftieth birthday. Every family member contributed to this story. My mom wrote an entry that has been embedded in my mind ever since.

I sat on the swing in our backyard, watching the children play. They were so cute, so alive, so trusting, so secure. They were doing great. As they climbed around on the jungle gym, I considered the enormity of what I was about to do. I was breaking up our family . . . I was about to inflict pain on everyone I loved. On my parents, on Paul, but mostly on these innocent children. It wasn't fair—I couldn't do this to them. They would be children of lesbians. What did that mean? I had never heard of such a thing. What would this do to them—could they survive? Would any of us survive? Why was I even considering this drastic step? Because I was in love with a woman. On the one hand, I felt totally irrational, selfish, and cruel. On the other hand, it felt right and brave. I was jumping off a cliff. Would I be able to fly?

My mother did not make her choice lightly. And later, when I thought about leaving my husband, I could relate to every word my mother had written many years before. I guess there is a sort of universal feeling about marriage and divorce in our culture that plagues all of us in a relationship at one time or another. Many of us choose to stay to avoid inflicting that pain on the ones we love. And others decide to jump. I truly admire my mom for taking the leap and knew there was no other choice for her. It was necessary

for her survival. And when it was my chance to leap in that sacred circle of women, I knew it was for my survival.

Eventually, both of my parents were in committed, long-term same-sex relationships. I only ever remember my dad being with Reese. Reese was a handsome, young black man who was a bit more flamboyant than my dad ever was. And Reese was hysterical. He was such a good balance to my dad who was pretty serious and thoughtful. He was, after all, a psychotherapist, meditator, yoga practitioner, and spiritualist. He was a pretty intense guy who took life seriously. And Reese was this fun-loving, joyful man with an enormous smile that always lit up a room. They brought balance to one another in a way I can only reflect on now.

I remember going to Rock Creek Park one weekend when my sister and I were at my dad's house. It was one of the most beautiful places in all of Washington, D.C., and wasn't far from where my dad lived. It was a beautiful fall day with the sun shining and people excited to be out enjoying it.

My dad had recently bought a video camera. He was a gadget junkie and always had to have the latest and greatest of everything new. He was the first person I knew to own a video camera and a videocassette recorder (VCR). He loved recording and documenting everything that happened. I still have a few video-home system (VHS) tapes he created of us one Thanksgiving. He would set up the camera on a tripod in the corner of the room and press "record." Eventually, throughout the day, we would forget it was there, and he would capture everything about the day—the conversations, the dinner, the guests coming and going—the exciting and the boring, all recorded to be saved for eternity. Now, I'm grateful for those recordings because they allow me to see my father's face, hear his voice, and remember how we were as a family.

Dad was experimenting with his new camera on this particular day at the park.

Reese thought it would be fun to give him something entertaining to record besides the usual mundane daily activities that my dad usually captured on film. Just like that, Reese began to imitate a strip tease right there in the middle of the park. He did the walk, made the flirty smile, and began to remove articles from his body one by one— first his hat, then one driving glove, followed by the other. He teased the camera with his light brown leather jacket, slowly removing it like a professional would. Halfway down his back, he slid it back and forth along his back, then lowered it off his shoulder as he lowered his chin with a big grin. I can almost hear the stripper music in the background. My sister and I were teenagers and thought this was just hysterical—at least at first until we realized we didn't know how far he was willing to take it for the good of my dad's recording.

That's who Reese was: edgy, witty, daring, unpredictable, and charismatic. These were among the many qualities we all loved about him. And it's just these qualities that quite possibly contributed to his death and my dad's.

It was the eighties, and gay men had a reputation for being promiscuous. I don't know and will never know the arrangement that Dad and Reese had in their relationship—how much was betrayal and how much was accident or ignorance, but after many years together, we learned that Reese had acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). And after a short time, my dad had AIDS, too.

My sister and I were both in college. I was a sophomore and Lisa was a senior.

We were at different small liberal arts colleges several hours from our homes. It was the middle of the fall semester and we had no plans of returning home soon. My mom contacted me at school to schedule a four-way conference call between my sister, mom, dad, and myself. This was before the days of cell phones, Face-

Time, and Zoom, so this was no easy undertaking. I remember thinking, *Why are they going through all this trouble to put a phone call together?*

Of course, the call was to tell Lisa and me that Reese had been diagnosed as “HIV positive” (human immunodeficiency virus), and it had progressed to full-blown AIDS. My self-aware parents wanted to tell us at the same time and all together so we could process this news as a family. If there’s one thing my family has always been good at, it’s processing our feelings. I guess they knew on some instinctual level that Reese wouldn’t be with us much longer. I imagine my parents wanted us to have the opportunity to come home and see Reese, knowing that his health was rapidly failing.

None of us had any idea just how true this would be.

This conversation took my mind straight to the elephant in the room. Lisa and I were shocked, sad, and overwhelmed, ashamed to be wondering what this meant for Dad.