

How to Take the Worst Kind of Pain and Transform It Into Light

By Beverly Donofrio



Photo: Mackenzie Stroh

I've spent a lifetime making mistakes, messing up, falling apart and falling on my face. Even though I've been taught by masters and smudged by shamans and prayed till many dawns, time and again I've learned the same lesson: When bad things happen, the seminal question is not "Why me?" but "What am I going to do now?"

Back when life threw its first sucker punch my way, I thought that God or the Universe had it in for me. It was 1968, the country and the world were in turmoil, and so was I—17 years old and stuck in a little Connecticut town I couldn't wait to leave. I planned to move to New York City as soon as I graduated from high school, to be a bohemian anarchist poet, or a movie star. College was not an option. My father, a hot-tempered Italian-American cop, and my mother, a feisty factory worker, never finished high school. They lived paycheck to paycheck in a public housing project, supporting four kids. "As soon as I get my diploma," I thought, "I'm gone."

Instead I got knocked up by my boyfriend, who had dropped out of high school. Not fair, I raged. Why, when all my friends were having sex, too, was I the one singled out for public

humiliation?

Even if I'd wanted an abortion, it wasn't legal, and I didn't know how to get one illegally. Giving up my child for adoption would have felt like having a limb amputated. So in April of my senior year, I stood at the altar with Stephen, whom I'd gone out with only because nobody else ever asked me and whose favorite expression was "How come that?" My parents wept behind us, while next to Stephen stood his best man, the guy who'd told us, "Do it again in 24 hours; you're safe the second time."

My son was born half a year later, and by the time Jason was 13 months old, Stephen confessed he had a heroin addiction, which he'd been committing burglaries to support, and that every penny of our savings had gone straight into his arm. I divorced him, and by 19 I was a single mother without a car in a town without daycare.

Cutting Stephen loose had been a smart move, but I was still pretty stupid. One day in 1971, in exchange for a Baggie of pot, I agreed to let a friend sell a garbage bag full of the stuff from my living room. The music was too loud, the neighbors complained, and the cops showed up and arrested me. I was a bullheaded, wild girl who never wondered if there was something to learn, something I should change. Everybody I knew was using drugs. Why was I the one to take the fall?

Seeing yourself as a victim is like being punched in the face and, while you're sprawled on the ground, hauling off and whacking yourself again to make sure you stay down. Feeling sorry for yourself and looking for someone to blame takes away your power.

My father wept as he tore my "Love the One You're With" poster from the wall. I was named the leader of a drug ring on the front page of the newspaper and convicted of possession with intent to sell—a felony. On a bench in the town hall, waiting to see my probation officer every week, I sat next to thieves, derelicts and, for all I knew, child molesters. One night, feeling depressed and helpless, I decided to kill myself, and began popping pills. But then I stopped: I didn't want my mother to find me; I couldn't desert my son. Nowhere to go, nowhere to look but up, I dropped my self-image as a wild girl, sensed that there was help out there, I needed it, and I could get some.

The next morning I called the local psychiatric clinic, and in my first session a social worker said, "You're a bright young woman. You should be in college." Music to my ears, nectar from the gods. And with a combination of loans and aid from the Connecticut Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, she helped make it happen. In January of 1974, when I was 23, I began community college, and by sophomore year I was awarded a scholarship as a nontraditional student to Wesleyan University.

I did realize at the time that the university was so generous because I'd been a teen mom who was turning things around, and that such a person would spice up their student body. I did not yet realize, however, that struggle produces gifts.

The university set me up in my own apartment in a neighborhood with other single-mother

students, PhD candidates and assistant professors with their young families. My son and his pack of friends ran through the athletic fields while I ran through Western literature. I met a few regular people who'd written their own books, and I began to believe for the first time that being a writer—an ambition I'd secretly held since I pushed my infant son's stroller to the library and checked out *David Copperfield*—might actually be possible.

A few months after graduation, I headed to New York City. My son and I lived in a tiny apartment with a couple hundred cockroaches, and I worked odd jobs, modeling nude for art classes, collecting the money at Persian rug auctions, and transcribing computer code for a software company on the graveyard shift. The idea was never to have a full-time job so I could reserve my energy for writing. But I was exhausted and depressed, except when I was drinking in bars, and the only writing I ever managed was letters and short entries in my journal.

Then one evening, racing to my night job, I stepped onto the street, heard the blare of a horn, and saw headlights a few feet away. I thought, "Now I'm going to be hit by a car and die." I was hit by a car and did not die, but I did end up with a ravaged foot that swelled to the size of a football, which prevented me from going to my jobs or the bars or to the store for milk. I sent my son out for pizza and Chinese. By then, I'd been derailed so often, I didn't rage at God or the Universe or my terrible luck. I lectured myself: "You nearly died. You've been acting as though this is the warm-up, but it's the ball game." I noticed an ad in *The Village Voice* for the MFA program in creative writing at Columbia University. I applied, was accepted and suddenly had deadlines, guidance, a writing community.

I couldn't borrow enough money to finish on time, so I extended my credits and loans into an extra semester. I completed my thesis and chose as my reader a famous author of popular novels. I submitted an early draft of what would later become my first memoir. The famous author accused me of creating cardboard, cartoon characters from a TV sitcom and failed me.

A mountain of dreams collapsed on my heart. Who was I kidding: a teen mom, a girl from the projects with a smart mouth and no smarts. I cried for weeks, then gave up writing and found a full-time job as a copy editor for a national magazine. After a few months of close reading, I thought, "I can write as well as at least some of these writers," and soon I began publishing short pieces there. The editor-in-chief was a woman my age who seemed to hire only good-looking young male writers from Princeton. She flirted in the halls, had the last say in everything, and barely acknowledged my existence. But when I contributed a piece to another magazine, she fired me.

By this time, I had rejection chops, I had disappointment chops, I had experience enough to realize that this was not the end of the world. Which is not to say I didn't cry, a lot, but I was soon on the phone hunting down freelance copyediting work. I met people. I made connections. About a year later, when I published my first essay in *The Village Voice*, my mentor from graduate school, Richard Price, called to say, "You can get a book contract with this. Call my agent's office." I did, and soon landed a deal to write [*Riding in Cars with Boys*](#).

To recount: I got pregnant in high school, became a convicted felon, almost killed myself and ended up in college. I graduated from college, was hit by a car, then went to graduate school. My

thesis was flunked, so I quit writing, found a full-time job and was finally published. Fired from the job, I got a book contract.

Again and again, pain and disappointment launched me in a different direction, opened doors, seasoned me.

Yet, at age 55, even though I knew all of this, even though I'd been on a spiritual path for a while, and I knew that good can come from bad; even though I'd learned that the important question is not "Why me?" but "What now?"; even though the attacker was a serial rapist in the Mexican town I'd moved to seven years earlier, targeting gringo women between 50 and 60; and even though I, along with the entire population of my adopted town, felt like evil had come for a visit and it was not personal, I was absolutely shocked that he chose *me*.

The Virgin Mary icons I'd painted as a form of prayer stood vigil on the wall behind the bed where, in the middle of the night, the rapist woke me up. "Don't scream. I have a knife," he said. I'd heard from his other victims that he liked to have a conversation after the attack to kill time before he got it up for another round. So I refused to talk to him and instead said Hail Marys aloud, which, miraculously, made him leave. By the next afternoon, I already was thinking: "If he had to attack somebody, I'm glad it was me."

I'd been evicted, twice; fired from jobs, twice; I'd been so broke once, I'd considered becoming a prostitute to pay for a dentist; I'd been a single mother since my kid learned to walk; I'd been a convicted felon. All those mistakes, missteps, hard knocks had made me tough, tough enough to survive this latest blow.

I wrote about the ordeal in the local paper, which included the words to the Hail Mary. People cut the prayer out, they memorized it, they prayed it and five days after the article appeared, the rapist was caught.

For the next six months, I retreated to monasteries to be silent and still and to heal. Then I remained in a Carmelite hermitage in Colorado as a lay member of the community for three and a half years. All this time, I kept asking what I was to learn from being raped, and wondering what, if any, good would come from the horror.

I meditated and prayed, read Scripture, studied mystics, took hikes 12,000 feet up the mountain to a pristine alpine lake, watched an ermine play in my birdbath, saw a bobcat pounce on a baby bunny and a hawk lift a rabbit into the air by its shoulders and then lay it on a patch of snow and tear at its flesh. I understood that in this world I'd come to believe was made and sustained by a creative force of love, beauty, and violence, good and bad were inextricably bound, as were peace and terror.

There's no denying that when tragic things happen, they rob us of the life we would have lived and of the person we might have been. One of my greatest fears when I was raped was that it would ruin me, that I'd never again be the same woman who'd gone innocently to sleep that night. Then one morning, years later, I was struck by a lightning bolt of insight: Why on Earth wouldn't I *want* to be changed by a powerful experience?

Is there ever change without loss? Is there ever *not* pain before recovery? I find life infinitely more interesting—and tolerable—when I believe I may find some gift in tragedy. As theologian Richard Rohr says, "Faith is not for overcoming obstacles; it is for experiencing them." Pain may provide the greatest incentive to grow, and perhaps picking ourselves up, moving on and learning is what we're called to do with our lives.

Beverly Donofrio is the author of the best-selling memoir [Riding in Cars with Boys](#) (Penguin). Her latest, [Astonished](#) (Viking), released in March, continues her story.

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