

Foreword

We first met Meg when she reached out to us with regard to helping with our nonprofit organization, the Love Button Global Movement (Love Button). We founded Love Button in 2013 to inspire people to reach out to others in loving ways both big and small in order to overcome differences and foster social cohesion. When we extend our love to someone in an act of kindness, there's an instant connection, a moment where we realize we all have the same needs in which we recognize our shared humanity and interconnectedness. We were not surprised that someone like Meg wanted to be part of Love Button, and since then, she's been one of our greatest ambassadors.

Of course, letting love lead us through life is easy when things are going well. When our personal world is turned upside down, when we're angry, sad, confused, and scared, that's when the real challenge begins. Can we remain in our loving with others, as well as ourselves, as we stand in the eye of a storm where everything seems to be coming apart? Can we resist the urge to become resentful or bitter while seeing our challenges as what they really are—opportunities for personal growth?

Love is what keeps us grounded in the stillness when everything else is spinning out of control around us. It's only in that neutral space where the answers can be found and we're able to see that in every loss there is always the chance to gain in some other way if we're willing to remain open to it. This is what the poet John Keats called negative capability or the ability to be okay with things not being okay . . . until they're okay again. Only living from love can do that.

As Meg takes you through her extraordinary journey, you'll be inspired by seeing how living from a loving consciousness brought healing, reconciliation, and resolution to her life after moments of great loss and struggle. She's really someone who walks her talk and did so literally when she walked part of the famous El Camino del Santiago in Spain, an ancient pathway

stretching from the northern border with France to the northwest corner of the country ending at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia where Saint James is buried. Since the ninth century, the path has attracted hundreds of thousands of travelers to take the pilgrimage that is said to lead to spiritual growth. Most make the journey on foot; Meg walked over 111 km in six days, completing the final part of the pilgrimage on a sprained ankle.

Even during this immense challenge, Meg remained dedicated to love, handing out our trademark Love Buttons for people to wear all along the way, while listening to an MP3 player of inspirational songs we sent to keep her spirits up and motivation high. As she checked in with us from time to time during the walk, what impressed us even more about Meg was her determination to keep going day after day, even in spite of the weather, fatigue, and those pesky blisters.

In the end, we're not surprised that Meg accomplished such an incredible task because in a very real way El Camino de Santiago is symbolic of how she approaches her entire life with perseverance, belief in her own inner strength, and of course, love. Both her pilgrimage and her personal story are inspirational examples that prove reaching a better place in life has nothing to do with how many times we stop because the burden is too heavy, but how many times we choose to start again.

Dr. Habib Sadeghi & Dr. Sherry Sami

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Prologue

“I dreamed I was a butterfly, flying in the sky; then I awoke. Now I wonder, am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?”

~Chuang Tzu, c. 369 BC–c. 286 BC, Tao dream master

Call me Butterfly—this may not be my real name, but its symbolism aligns with my soul. You see, the soul story is so much bigger than just a given name anyway. And, daring to share my story of transformation, I hope my soul story will outlast me and my name. For we all need to awaken to question who we are, why we are here, and perhaps why we go through what we do.

One thing is certain. Whether we think so or not, we all have a story to tell. Maybe my story will resonate with you. Maybe it won't. But something within me beckoned to share, nonetheless. My life has shown me that everything does have a purpose. And my hope is that by being open with my journey through personal loss, health challenges, and professional struggles—and overcoming these adversities—my story will serve as a ray of hope for anyone struggling to find their own light at the end of the tunnel.

What I know for sure is that we will always find extraordinary in the ordinary if we are paying attention. And we all have amazing dreams that will astonish us if we let them. Once upon a time, I dreamt about a beautiful butterfly flying free. It just took me half my life to realize that the extraordinary, beautiful butterfly I dreamt about could actually be me.

When I was a kid, especially during those awkward, formative years, I used to live in closets, both the literal kind and the ones in my mind. Even before I retreated to protect myself from the constant ridicule and harassment of my young peers, I preferred to live in my imagination. When I was five or six, I pretended I was a magical fairy granting wishes to anyone who sought my assistance. Other days, I set out to discover the world, taking journeys to the far

corners of the globe. Free to create, my active imagination opened magical doors where incredible stories were about to unfold. Other imaginary friends would greet me there, welcoming and joining me in celebration. With eyes wide open, I stepped into possibility and felt incredibly lucky.

But my imagination didn't prepare me for the unwelcoming world to come. When I turned ten years old, others brought to my attention how unappealing they thought I was. I saw the disdain for my appearance on the faces of some of my classmates when I walked into a room. In fifth grade, on the first day of school, it was as though others had nominated me as a focus for humiliation and judgment. With thick eyeglasses, a mouth full of metal, slicked-back hair pulled tightly by two Goody barrettes, accompanied by a round face and a thick waist, my changing body and sense of self took a giant hit. While I dreamt of being the belle of the ball, their incessant snickering and ugly name-calling blew up my fantasy. As I grew more and more uncomfortable in my own skin, I looked around at the other awkward children and wondered why I was the one who was constantly belittled. I had no earthly idea what I had done to deserve such nastiness from my peers. Why was I made to feel I needed to apologize daily for my existence?

Elementary school was not a kind place for me. I never even had a chance to defend myself when the deciding votes against me were cast. Showing up in other children's estimation as a blend of ugly and insecure, I was a perfect target. With no idea how to respond, I concluded that their opinion must have been right, even though my mother would tell me how beautiful I was. Almost every day, in this tale, those who declared themselves the fairest of them all harassed me. I so desperately wanted to be liked, so desperately wanted to be a part of something that I thought being kind would shift the tides. *Be nice to them, Meg . . . Be a good girl, Meg . . .*

Move along quickly, Meg, they will go away . . . Ignore them and don't pay attention, Meggie, the little voice in my head desperately advised. Unfortunately, the bullying did not stop. Yet I kept smiling, even though the joyful, carefree part of me started to die.

After school, I returned to the safety of my home. I would glom on as the third wheel to my younger sister Aimee and her best friend as we rode our beat-up bicycles up and down the cul-de-sac, arguing over who got to play the glamorous Farrah Fawcett's Jill, Jaclyn Smith's Kelly, or Cheryl Ladd's Chrissie of *Charlie's Angels*.

When I wanted to be alone, I went to the room I shared with my older sister Mary where my Shetland sheepdog, Fred, awaited me. He, like me, was sure to be labeled less than perfect by others. He had mange, a disease that had caused infections of the skin since Fred was two years old, and my father would painstakingly bathe him to relieve the itching and sores when a flareup attacked his immune system. Shelties (imagine a miniature Lassie) are known for their beautiful sable-and-white fur. Not Fred, though. My father had to shave him bald to clear up his skin. Fred and I were quite the pair.

In my room, I would grab from my closet the boxes that contained my Barbie dolls, lay each one on the carpet, and spend hours constructing lives for them. Fred lay patiently by my side as sunlight spilled in through my bedroom window. Busily sewing little dresses for them from the sheets I liberated from the linen closet, I created a lovely wardrobe. Crafting furniture out of discarded shoeboxes with festive wrapping paper, I set up a happy home.

In the black artist's workbook that my aunt Pat had given me, I designed elegant ball gowns that I imagined wearing to fabulous galas where I would dance the night away. I got lost in the colors of painting and design, mostly princess gowns with full skirts and lots of tulle. I drew models with long flowing hair and delicate crowns on top of their heads. If I didn't feel like

drawing, I wiled away the hours creating a series called *Hello, Fellow*. Making up the life of a successful, attractive, and smart young lady, I set out to create wonderful stories. Upon completion of each chapter, I bound the loose-leaf pages together with pieces of rope I found in one of my mother's junk drawers. With each of these activities, I escaped my reality and entered a fantasy world that was far more appealing.

That happiness only lasted until the next weekday morning at six, when I had to return to school. My mother would sing, "It's time to get up, it's time to get up, it's time to get up in the morning." I rustled around in my bed and covered my face with a pillow. Pretending not to hear, I hoped to delay as long as I could. Because I dreaded going, I was late on purpose. Running with my shoes in my hand out to the bus, I summoned the courage to pull myself together for another day.

In my first year of middle school, the worst of the bullying began. It was another excruciating experience as an awkward preteen, getting through the day. While I had accepted the proverbial dark cloud that hovered over me, when the last class ended, I could finally escape and go home. I moved quickly to the metal fence where the bus waited. Once I got in, relieved, I looked out the window, holding back the feelings of shame that were the result of the day's humiliation. When I arrived at my front door, I raced into my house and fell into the arms of my mother, Mary Jo. As I sobbed uncontrollably, my mom would hold me, caress my hair, and tell me everything would be all right. And I believed her when she said, "I don't know why you're going through this. I am so sorry, my Meggie. I do know that everything has a reason. You're a beautiful, smart girl. You'll be okay. And because you know how it feels, your wisdom will help others someday. I'm so proud of you. I love you so much!"

Mary Jo, my mother, was the most beautiful lady I knew. While she and my father,

Michael, had high expectations for their girls to excel, she did share with me her own challenges. She too had a hard time fitting in and finding her place in this world. *She had grown up in New York in a family whose patriarch led a very public life as a congressman. She was the oldest daughter of five, a second-generation Italian American born into a family where my great-grandfather had left the poverty of Southern Italy in the late 1880s to travel to the United States to realize his own American dream. An expectation of excellence and an ethos of perfection were passed down for each child to accomplish great things and make the family proud. Politicians, lawyers, judges, doctors, teachers, educators—these were the traditional fields of study to choose from, requiring nothing less than a strong work ethic, each doing their part to serve. She would tell us stories about my grandfather, a man who believed in social justice and who championed the rights of the Italian Americans in New York during a time when Italians were unwelcome immigrants. Because her father ran for political office, she and her siblings were forced into the public arena where presentation was very important. She told me stories of how critical her relatives were of her. “Mary Jo, you are not smart enough.” “Not as beautiful as your sister.” “Enunciate your words.” She wanted to escape this too.*

My relationship with my mother, especially early on, had its ups and downs. While I wanted so much to be like her, some days it felt too hard to meet her expectations. I hoped she wanted the best for me. But trying to establish my own identity, I rebelled against her, as that was the only way I thought I could save myself. I was so angry that my defenses were constantly up.

Yet, when I needed her most, my mother never let me down. When I was depressed and despondent, she had the perfect words to shift my perspective. She paid attention and motivated me to figure out what interested me. Because I loved learning different languages, she

encouraged me to participate in a cultural exchange program where I lived with a wonderful family in Colombia, South America, the summer before my senior year in high school. Because no one knew me there, I got to start over, creating a narrative I chose for myself. That experience changed me. I began to believe her when my mother said the sad times would indeed pass and lead to something wonderful. I was grateful to her for that. Having survived middle school and finding my footing in high school, the night before I left for Boston College, I sat down and wrote to her:

August 14, 1987

Dear Mom,

In my heart, I want you to be pleased with me. I am getting ready to start a new chapter, I need to know you are proud of me. I'm so scared, Mom. I feel I will never be good enough. Please continue to be there for me. I want us to be friends. I want to be able to call you when I need to talk. I really need to know that you love me.

I love you, your Meggie

Leaving my safe place to venture out into a world that early on proved to be unkind was still terrifying. I looked for a champion day after day who would protect me from the many verbal lashes, sometimes handling it, other days not. My mother was that champion. While damage to my self-esteem was done, as I grew into adulthood, my mother encouraged me to forgive and let go of the past so I could have a wonderful future.

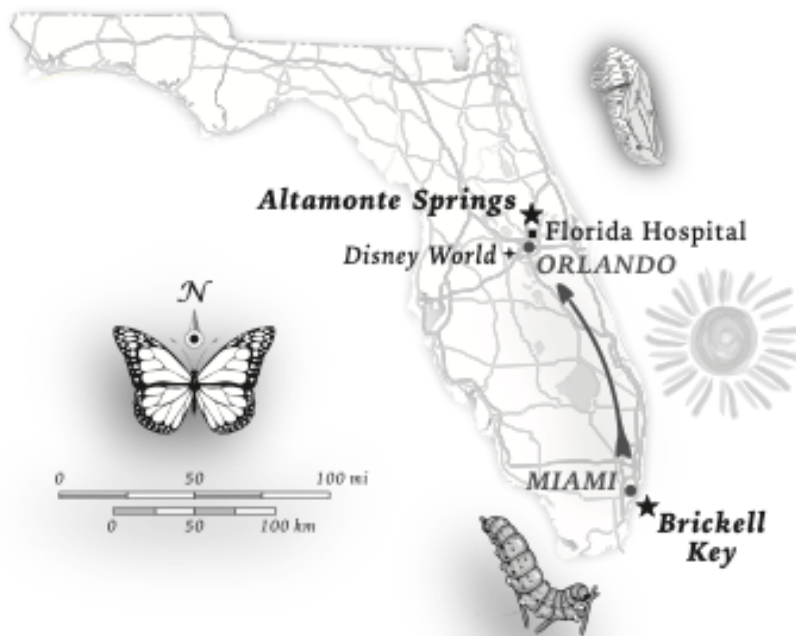
It took a lot of time to find my way. And it took a lot of time to heal the wounds of my adolescence. But with my mother by my side, I learned how to build a better life founded upon unconditional love of self and for others. As an adult, my mother shared with me wisdom that freed me to move forward. We were good friends, and I depended on that friendship. Not a day went by that I did not pick up the phone to talk to her and get my daily insight, love, and support—until a very sad day in April of 2011. When she took her last breath, I had to figure out something that had been unimaginable previously, how to navigate for the first time facing the

world without her. This is the story of how, as grief enveloped me, I had to trust the process through the darkness and allow myself to transform and heal, so that my soul could have a chance to awaken to a new sunrise and fly free. To have taken that chance is true bliss! Read on.

Part One: Grief—Trust the Process?

“Death consists, indeed, in a repeated process of unrobing, or unsheathing. The immortal part of man shakes off itself, one after the other, its outer casings, and—as . . . the butterfly from its chrysalis—emerges from one after another, passing into a higher state of consciousness.”

~Annie Besant, 1847–1933, British women’s rights activist



From Miami, Fl. to Orlando, Fl.