

*This story originally appeared on the Man Talks blog in 2016. It has since been minimally revised and now appears on [thebravemanbook.com](http://thebravemanbook.com).*

## **How I got the dad I always deserved**

by Joan Tu

In 2013, I walked away from a good, normal, well-paying, desk job. I had been working there for over seven years, but it had always been a dead end for me. I always had the nagging feeling that I was destined for something else. What is my purpose? I asked myself that question on a regular basis. I didn't know who I was, but whoever I was, I had to find myself... fast! That is why I pursued personal growth in the beginning, for professional reasons. It was all just business to me.

Part of the way through my year-long personal growth program, I became aware of a deep-seated anger within me. I was extremely angry with my father. I was angry with him for things that happened over a decade ago, and over 30 years ago. My role in the family was always the supportive one, the one who had everything together when everyone else was falling apart. I was the one who no one had to worry about. And I was very, very angry.

I tried to work through my anger, but it seemed to seep out of me at every opportunity. My dad didn't know where the anger was coming from, but I couldn't tell him either. I regret that I was hurtful towards him at times. He would try to reach out to me and call me to have lunch together every few weeks. Still, the anger wouldn't go away.

As I continued on my journey of personal growth, I became more self-aware, and I also made efforts to learn about the events that had happened over the course of my life and that still affected me in the present. I wrote out my entire life story in 10,000 words. As I wrote and re-wrote my story, I realized that some things were not necessarily the way that I had interpreted them. I didn't really know why this person or that person did what they did. I became aware that I was living my life upon a layer of beliefs, and that some of those long-held beliefs were false all along.

I also went to therapy where I was able to express my anger, and this lessened its power over me. But what actually happened over time, was I began to remember other events that had always been in the background and were slowly moving front and centre. I remembered a few times when my dad had sat me down and admitted to making mistakes. He was sorry. I also remembered in a blurry sort of way, that my dad had taken us on many bike trips, and road trips, picnics, and fishing trips, and plane trips to Europe, and Asia, the United States, and Eastern Canada, because he wanted to show us the world and spend time as a family.

I remember sitting on the hot seat during my personal growth program and talking about how angry I was. My personal growth mentor asked, "Do you think your dad loves you?" A distinct memory flickered at the back of my mind, the scene at a car accident several years ago. I paused. "Yes, I know he loves me," was the answer.

Many people with adverse childhood experiences remember things in a different way than others. But there is an incredible healing power in our most cherished childhood memories, the ones that remind us that we are or were loved. When I feel angry, I focus on these memories.

Along my journey, I came across Dave Pelzer's books. Dave Pelzer is a survivor of child abuse who wrote several autobiographical/self-help books over the course of his life. There is great wisdom in books and I wanted to know what I could learn from his story and journey that could perhaps help me. I read his latest book *Too Close To Me*. In his book, Dave shares a recurring memory of a time when he knew his mother actually did love him. At the end of the book, Dave acknowledges that he loved his late mother who had severely abused him, and that she was also worthy of love. He found it in himself to have empathy and compassion for his mother, and so his story didn't end in anger, nor in workaholicism which was a persistent theme in his life.

Another important book I read was *Invincible: The 10 Lies You Learn Growing Up with Domestic Violence, and the Truths to Set You Free* by Brian Martin. This book is notable because it is the first book ever published for adults who grew up with domestic violence as children, estimated at approximately one billion people worldwide according to UNICEF. One thing that this book did for me is that it gave me a name and language for an important storyline in my life. In its empowering messages, it helped me to see the gift I received from my suffering. I understand the pain of others who have lived with family violence. It also told me that the way forward for me was to contribute somehow to making the world a better place. I had a choice: to do nothing or to help others like me.

It was hard not to notice, however, that my story of childhood domestic violence ended differently than the stories of many others, because my dad also had a choice, and over ten years ago he chose love over violence. Unlike many men, my dad changed his ways. In several years of trying to keep it together while resenting every minute of it, and in the midst of my anger, I was not fully engaging in the relationship with my dad or with anyone else in my family. But after so many years I could finally recognize the magnitude and the impact of my dad's choice to change. I could appreciate the strength and the fortitude that it took for him to change out of his love for us.

Having empathy for my dad has helped me to reconcile with the things I did or didn't do that I was ashamed about or blamed myself for. I gained access to the deepest, vastest, most plentiful reserves of forgiveness, compassion, and love for myself that I have ever known.

The therapist I visited once asked me, "Can you give Little You, the things she didn't have?" In that moment, my initial reaction was, *Are you kidding me? Little Me was never going to get those things she didn't have*. Then I realized that if Little Me didn't get those things, my children wouldn't get those things either. In spirit, I gave Little Me, the dad she always deserved, the dad who did the best he could with what he had.

It was not my dad's fault that I worked at a job that didn't fulfill me for so long. Many of my life choices were not his fault.

From time to time, I hate my story so very much and I still struggle with stigmatization of the very reason I am on this earth. But my story has shaped my identity and has guided me to know my purpose. It allows me to understand something very profound.

In the numerous stories I have read and conversations I have had, I often discover common ground with people who have stories of family violence in ways I never could have expected, and themes that have yet to meet the public eye. How can the problem of family violence be addressed when there are still so many untold stories, each with their own nuances and intersectional challenges?

Stories like that of my dad who chose to change his ways are an important, but often overlooked part of the big picture in the conversation on family violence. These stories demonstrate that there is a path to change for those who choose to take it, and can prevent further violence by inviting other men and people to choose love over violence. However it is not only up to brave men to travel the difficult journey. My story matters too, and so does yours. It is up to each one of us to mindfully respond with love, however that looks to us, and to find love and compassion within ourselves along the brave path.