

The Imprint Journey

**A Path of Lasting Transformation Into Your
Authentic Self**

Liliane Desjardins

Foreword by Douglas Ziedonis, MD, MPH

The Imprint Journey: A Path of Lasting Transformation Into Your Authentic Self

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This book is dedicated to Love

The Power of Love
Love that transforms and heals
Love that creates and builds

To my own grandchildren Emmanuel, Samantha, Francesca, Chantale, and Roxanne, beautiful, wise, courageous bright souls; the shining stars and joy of my life.

To my daughter Caroline, the brilliant woman of the world, the enthusiastic, creative scholar devoted to excellence. The beautiful loving soul whose love healed my heart.

To my son Richard, the bright light of recovery. The courageous, committed, and brilliant teacher, the bold and daring heart of service. To my loyal son who is my teacher of integrity.

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Foreword

Ever feel like you are walking through life on autopilot and making the same choices over and over? Our brain can get stuck in repeat mode, which limits our options and potential. Increasing our awareness and better understanding our brain's "imprints" can be the first steps to healing and transformation.

We all have the capability to be more present in the moment—more fully aware of where and who we are. What distracts us? Where is our mind spinning? Is our mind fear-based and over-focused on the future? Or perhaps we are concerned and ruminate about past events? Where does our inner wisdom come from? What shapes our values and beliefs? Imprints! They began with the genetic code we were given at the moment of conception and developed through the many events, experiences, messages, and moments along our journey. These imprints influence our relationships with others, self, and God. They shape our behaviors, expectations, and perceptions. However, with new awareness and understanding, they can be changed.

In *The Imprint Journey: A Path of Lasting Transformation Into Your Authentic Self*, Liliane Desjardins shares her own journey and lessons learned as a therapist in an intimate and humble manner that is insightful, clear, and concise. Her book provides a fresh perspective on pursuing mindfulness and personal transformation. She reminds us that we have "hidden treasures" in our "true identity" and "authentic self" that can be overshadowed by life's pains and fears.

Liliane's book reflects her more than thirty years of clinical experience using the Desjardins Unified Model for treating substance and process addictions. Her work has been built on a strong foundation of traditional therapy with new insights from her clinical and personal experience. She can blend the Desjardins model well with traditional therapy approaches.

The author speaks to us as both a friend and as an experienced therapist, raising useful questions for reflection that will help us better appreciate our imprints and their effect on our thinking, beliefs, perceptions, expectations, and even on our physiological responses to external events. This book will help anyone who desires to transform his or her life through the exploration of imprints. You might read it in one sitting, but you are likely to go back to it many times as you have new ideas, challenges, and experiences.

I have known Liliane and her work for over fifteen years, and I have seen her in action as an amazing clinician who has helped thousands of individuals transform their lives, finding their authentic self with increased awareness, acceptance, and gratitude. From my own conversations with Liliane, I have been inspired and helped to develop into a more effective clinician and person.

As a physician and psychiatrist, I have worked with many individuals, couples, and families who suffer from addiction, mental illness, grief, separation, and other life stressors. The wisdom in this book could be a valuable resource and source of support to all of them as a self-help guide or tool in therapy or a support group. As a leader and teacher at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and UMass Memorial Health Care system (as well as at UCLA, Yale, and Rutgers in the past), I know that students, staff, and faculty benefit from having time for self-reflection and from help with balancing work, family, friends, and community. Increasing awareness, one of the most important things we can all do, is the first step in Liliane's model.

Liliane's transformational guide is grounded in deep healing traditions and also resonates well with modern neuroscience and the cutting edge science of "epigenetics." Recent neuroscience breakthroughs are helping us to understand better how our imprints affect our ability to be aware and transform our lives. For example, our research team at UMass is studying awareness and other key phenomena involved in healing and recovery through the windows of brain imaging and genetic research. Scientists now understand that the genetic material we receive from our parents can be altered and changed in a healthy or less healthy direction due to exposure to physical forces (such as chemicals, addictive drugs, therapeutic touch, and medications) and powerful emotional experiences (such as war, emotional abuse, love, and positive therapy experiences). Encoded through our brain's memory pathways, the imprints of our life's experiences impact all our thinking, feeling, and doing. These changes have a biological basis, but transformation is more than just biology—it is spiritual and encompasses all aspects of being human.

Liliane's book demonstrates the power of personal narrative—the power of authenticity and sharing your experiences to give others strength and hope. Through her and others' personal stories in this book, we can reflect on how our imprints ripple through our lives. During the first part of the book (Chapters 1-7), we connect with Liliane's story as a model for how we can reflect on our own imprints and how they have shaped our perceptions, beliefs, and actions.

Imprints that have affected my own life include a core identity influenced by immigration, acculturation, and assimilation into America. Being a first generation Latvian-American whose parents fled as adolescents from their homeland of Latvia during World War II, I can connect with Liliane's reflections on her own immigration experience and her journey through war, oppression, and forced migration while trying to maintain a culture and core values. Such events can alter

our fundamental view of the world: What's real? Who do you trust? Trauma, disconnection, uncertainty, isolation, and fear can leave their imprint for several generations and cause ripples of post-traumatic stress, dissociation, denial, and minimization of reality. These events can also lead to transformative experiences and new opportunities. For example, despite the heavy imprints of war's traumas, my own parents were able to cope and, through hope, evolve to achieve healthy, spiritual, and productive lives.

Part II of the book turns from Liliane's own story to provide "Tools for Your Imprint Journey." Its mission is to help us uncover the core components of our imprints (Chapter 9), including considering the genetic, familial, societal, cultural, and religious influences. Imprints impact how we perceive, act, and think about love, relationships, family, health, finances, religion, education, social activities, life's purpose, and our sense of accomplishment. Chapter 10, a particularly important chapter, helps us uncover positive imprints—hidden treasures and sources of strength from our parents and other sources. Chapter 11 focuses on our spiritual energy's healing power and shows how it is linked to our capacity for empowerment and transformation. In Chapter 12, this energy or awakening helps us to access our authentic self through awareness, forgiveness, cognitive shifting, gratitude, acceptance, and other important steps in transformation. This core chapter is at the heart of the theory behind Liliane's approach. Her nine core action steps to transformation are awareness, admittance, release, willingness to change, forgiveness, gratitude, meditation and affirmations, enhancing consciousness, and acceptance of love.

Liliane's steps to transformation provide a guide to the journey of transformation and freedom from perceived limitations based on our imprints. Not only does she describe the steps; she offers terrific questions for reflection and goals, strategies, and techniques. For example, she describes the helpful technique of a "Gratitude List" that will help us appreciate what we receive from others. Another example is the use of meditation, including visualization and affirmations. Meditation is a universal way to cultivate awareness, and Liliane respects the contemplative traditions and expands these approaches with other models. Throughout, she offers wisdom, values, and hope. From my own experience reading these steps, I could imagine some readers will follow each step one after another and others will want to modify the order of the steps on their journey. The model allows for flexibility and staying true to yourself.

In summary, this book is a wonderful gift from an outstanding therapist. Liliane has put together a story of her life and a guidebook for others that will help us all on our journey. Your life can be enriched by reading and following the steps outlined in this book, as well as by reflecting on the examples and questions it offers. I am honored to be able to make a very small contribution to this book, and I am grateful that Liliane has shared both her life's story and her wisdom in the

service of helping us all to be more accepting, respectful, and open to our true selves and full potential.

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Introduction

We live in a fascinating time of human development. Our planet and mankind are undergoing a lot of changes and experiencing a lot of chaos brought about by that change.

Governing systems and structures are breaking down. Religious fanatics are fighting wars and killing in the name of God. We experience a daily overload of information. Our news media fails to report with journalistic integrity, but rather, it focuses on sensationalism to get the highest ratings.

Our technology has surpassed our humanity. The Internet has changed the planet's entire communication system, bringing the world into our living rooms, while creating islands of human isolation and escape.

For many, love and intimacy have been replaced by cybersex, sex scandals, sex abuse, and child pornography. We are fighting but losing the war on drugs. Now we have legal pushers: greedy doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and an entire out-of-control healthcare system keeping America medicated. We have become a society of addicts craving instant gratification and instant solutions.

Corporate America, with its lack of accountability, lack of ethics, corruption, and greed mirrors back our own immaturity and irresponsibility, making them the agenda of the day that almost collapsed the entire economy.

Our planet is crying for help and responsible stewardship. Global warming, hurricanes and tsunamis, earthquakes and fires, polluted waters, and dying species have become daily dramas.

Yet, it is all so paradoxical. Out of chaos comes the greatest creative growth. Chaos brings order just as light eliminates the darkness.

We are collectively undergoing a tremendous shift in consciousness. Science and spirituality are meeting, and together they are conquering the new frontier: the mind.

We are starting to understand the power of our minds. Quantum physics, brain studies, new research on brain plasticity, breakthroughs in medical technology and imaging, as well as genetic engineering are producing a quantum shift and leap in consciousness. Spirituality, meditation, and affirmative visualization are transcending religion and blending with science. The new human for the twenty-first century is emerging.

I am fascinated by the speed of discoveries yet profoundly saddened by the pain we are experiencing. However, from my own life experience, I know that pain is my greatest teacher and the catalyst for my continuing transformation.

For some time, my intuition has been nudging me to write. The little voice within me kept on whispering, “Put down on paper your thirty years of clinical work in the field of addictions and family therapy.”

My ego had many rationales and answers for why I should not carry through with that idea. “You are not a writer. You have nothing to say. Great minds have done it and done it much better. You don’t have time. You’re too old. You cannot polarize your energies into writing. You need to take care of serious business. Writing is not productive.” Does any of this sound familiar?

Well, life usually gets our attention. Some recent movies and the latest research have validated my deep beliefs about forms of healing, transformation, and spirituality. This new validation gave my Authentic Self the necessary push, motivation, and passion to write about and further my lifetime work.

I have been on a spiritual quest all my life. My spiritual path has meant journeying down the road less traveled by doing my inner work for the past thirty-five years.

The pain of addictions led me to a healing process, but my soul’s yearning attracted to me the teachers and teachings necessary to transform my life and to shape my life’s mission.

I arrived on this planet on September 20, 1938 in Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia. Zagreb is one of the oldest cities in Europe and yet one of Europe’s youngest metropolises. Its long history began with its founding in 1094, and in 1242, Zagreb was proclaimed a free royal city.

Zagreb was founded where the last hills of the Alps merge into the Pannonian Valley. The city is cradled between the Medvednica Mountain, its highest peak being Sljeme, and the Sava River. The city is at the crossroads of various cultures, religions, and nations.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Zagreb was badly devastated by fire and the plague. The city was rebuilt during the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s occupation with its architecture being inspired by Vienna. One of Zagreb’s most recognizable landmarks is its neo-gothic cathedral. Begun in the late eleventh century, the cathedral was not fully completed until the nineteenth century. The cathedral’s treasury contains priceless treasures and relics dating from throughout its long history. Zagreb is also marked with beautiful avenues lined with chestnut trees and gardens filled with lilacs and jasmine.

According to my parents, my arrival was a happy event. I was the firstborn and would be their only surviving child—my younger brother died two days after his birth and my sister was a stillbirth. For a long time, I was the only grandchild in the

family. Then, when I was two years old, World War II erupted in Europe and the Germans soon occupied my country of origin.

Years later, a wise person told me that we choose the perfect environment for our spiritual growth; yes, the perfect environment to learn the lessons we need to learn so we can carry out our life's purpose. I have found that answer to be the logical explanation for why I grew up in the country I did and at that time in history.

My parents were sweet people, who had an important commonality point: their alcoholic fathers. Only when I started my own recovery did I truly understand the impact this simple truth had on their lives and on our family imprints.

You might wonder what are IMPRINTS: they are our emotional map, the deep-seated beliefs and values stored in our brain's limbic system. In spite of everything we know, our imprints govern our life at the subconscious level. Let me illustrate.

Have you ever been in a situation you found so painful and embarrassing that you told yourself, "I will never make this mistake again," only to see yourself a few days, weeks, or months later repeating the same mistake. The people and places may have been different, but the results were the same.

Did you ever, after ending a really bad relationship, swear you will never again get yourself into another such relationship, only to find that your next relationship is the same or worse than the previous one?

Have you said to yourself and perhaps to your friends that you will never be like your parents? You were sure you would never say the things they said, nor act the way they acted. Surprise! One day you hear yourself talking to your child and you sound, look, and act just like your parents—history has been repeated.

Your rational mind knows better; it knows what you do not want to be, to do, or to experience. So you wonder what is wrong with this picture. You ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?"

The answer is *imprint*. Our subconscious imprints are the deep-seated beliefs and messages we have received and internalized.

Once an imprint is internalized, it becomes a subconscious governing force in our lives. Our imprints form our emotional map, determining our ability to relate to self and to others. Imprints form our perceptions, values, and belief systems. Imprints determine the quality of our relationships with life, God, self, and others. Our values govern our choices as well as our behaviors. They determine whether we are reactive or pro-active.

The limbic system is the seat of our ability to connect with others and experience intimacy and love. It is also the seat of our imprints. Imprints form our emotional intelligence. Consequently, our imprints can enhance or sabotage our ability to connect, to form and sustain meaningful relationships with others.

Imprints can be broken down into two major categories: genetic and environmental. I will explore both in this book.

My purpose here is to take you on a journey of emotional, intellectual, social, cultural, and religious imprinting. In the first section of this book, I will illustrate for you the imprints I have developed during the past seventy-one years of my life; then I will provide you with the information and tools I have learned about imprints and share stories of others who have been successful in overcoming their own negative imprints. By doing so, I hope you will be able to transform your own life, shed the imprints that hold you back, and find your Authentic Self. We will talk more about what is the Authentic Self in these pages as well.

I am very grateful for everything that has ever happened in my life. It does not matter if I have internalized it as good or bad. All of it was necessary to transform me into who I am today. It was the necessary path to my true Identity and Authentic Self. My story is the story of suffering transformed into lessons, gifts, and victories. More than that, it is the story of human spirit rising above circumstances, thereby allowing me to rewrite my history. My passion, my creativity, and my compassion for humanity were all born on that path.

My hope is that this book will be the catalyst of your own transformation and awakening to your Authentic Self. My greatest hope is that children of wars and children of oppression and abuse can find hope, dignity, and a path of transformation. My intent is to take you on a journey of rewriting your history, shifting your perceptions, and discovering the truth of your origin. Thank you for joining me along this path.

Part I:

My Personal Imprint Journey

Chapter 1: Through the Eyes of a Child

In April 1941, I was two and a half years old. The Germans had just invaded my country and my hometown. Before World War II, Croatia was part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was technically a monarchy, ruled since 1934 by the young King Peter II, who would be forced to go into exile when the Axis powers invaded.

At that time, I was too young to understand what was happening, but I was aware of my parents' fear as they listened to the radio. An Independent State of Croatia had been formed—a clerical-fascist state. I didn't understand what any of that meant, but I felt my parents' fear and insecurity.

In the following months, my hometown no longer looked the same. Soldiers were everywhere. My parents did not take me to the park any longer. People whispered. Everything was strange. My mom still baked cookies, but she also cried a lot. I was still a child...now I was a scared little girl. *Why?*

The radio's volume was kept low. My dad was listening to the voice of America. My parents' faces had changed from smiles to worry. The laughter was gone. The blinds on the windows were always closed now; no longer was I allowed to play in the park. *Why?*

The answer was always the same, "Hush, baby; these are hard and dangerous times. You must be a good girl...don't make Mama cry."

I loved my mom; I didn't want to make her cry. I couldn't understand why nobody played or laughed anymore. Why was there no more music? Why couldn't we see the sky? Why were we in darkness? Why were the sirens screaming outside?

Early imprint: I internalized "Don't make Mama cry" to mean that other people's happiness is my responsibility. If they cry, it is my fault: I am not good enough.

My mother and father had a fashion salon in our home. Mom had a few ladies working for her and was always busy. My grandma, my mom's mom, was my primary babysitter.

Grandma was my storyteller. She told me tales about angels and spirits. While she gently brushed my blonde curly hair, Grandma told me how angels have beautiful blonde and silky hair. Listening to her sweet voice made me feel safe from the outside danger. Grandma said the angels were everywhere and would protect us

from harm. I believed her. She said I had a beautiful and wise guardian angel who was always leading me on my path.

These stories created one of the positive Spiritual Imprints I have felt at work throughout my life: the feeling of being guided.

My favorite story from Grandma was about when she was a little girl and went to the family well to get some water. The cord was stuck around the wheel. Because she was too small to reach the cord, she climbed up onto the well wall to pull the cord. The cord got untangled, but the wheel started rolling and pulling my grandma into the well. Soon, she was hanging in the darkness and crying for help. That is when her guardian angel held her in her arms so she would not fall farther down into the well. Her angel sent for help by making Grandma's big brother worry about her. He went looking for her, heard her cry, and got her out. Grandma said we must always listen to the little voice within us as our angels always tell us what we must do. Grandma also had some scary stories about the devil and how bad and powerful he was. She was so scared of the devil that she could not even say his name. She called the devil the dishonorable one.

The religious imprint of my childhood was based on this duality of Good and Evil. It was based on external Power.

One of the ladies who worked for my mom was Melanka. She was my favorite of Mom's workers. She always came in with a smile. She loved pretty dresses and would talk to me about beautiful ladies in evening gowns going to the opera. I liked being with her, and I dreamed about the beautiful dresses I would wear when I grew up. Melanka had a way of shutting down my *Why? Why? Why?* She made dresses for my doll. Outside, it was scary, but when I was with Melanka and my dolls, I was still a little girl.

At Christmas in 1941, I was a little over three years old. That year, there was no smell of cookies, no suckling roasted pig, and no bread. Christmas Eve dinner was very quiet. My mom had made soup and a little cake. There were no toys. My Christmas present was a sweater my mom had made. My parents said that Saint Nick could not come because of the war. My mom cried because there were no toys for me. My dad said the war was destroying us. When I asked, "What is 'war'?" my dad said it was when Germans or bad people invaded other people's countries and killed people. My grandma said we needed to pray; she said it was the devil making the war happen.

At night in my bed, I asked my guardian angel to make the Germans go home and to protect us.

A few times a week, I would go to church with Grandma. We would go very early in the morning. The church smelled good. We lighted candles for all the dead people in our family and one big one for my grandfather. Grandma wanted Grandpa to stop drinking. She said the devil made him drink and he was a drunk. I thought Grandpa was great fun to be with even if he did smell funny. He sang songs to me, and he talked to me about big ships he sailed on when he was a merchant

marine officer, and he told me about far away countries he had visited where there was peace. Grandma and I lighted a candle for peace. Grandma said God would make the Germans go home. I believed her.

One day, I asked my dad why his dad, my other grandpa, never came to visit. He said it was because my grandpa was a mean drunk and good for nothing. Dad told me not to ask any more questions about him.

Unconsciously, I internalized my parents' shame and embarrassment over their alcoholic fathers, and later down the line, this imprint would stay with me as my very own toxic shame.

One day after Christmas, Melanka came to work crying. When my mom asked her what was wrong, Melanka said that the Ustashi had taken her husband to a concentration camp. [In April 1941, separatist Croats from Ustasha, the fascist terrorist organization, set up in Zagreb an Independent Croat regime. The new state, organized on strictly fascist and authoritarian lines, collaborated in all atrocities with the Nazis. Ruthless cruelty and genocide were its trademarks.]

Through Melanka's sobbing, I heard her say, "He is innocent, but they will kill him." My mom tried to console and support her. I went to the corner to sit in my little chair and to cry. "Why are they going to kill us?" I wondered. Grandma said God would help us. I wished someone would tell me when. I knew then what fear was... it was when you couldn't breathe and you hoped no one would see you.

On Mardi Gras Day, my mom showed me the costume she used to wear to the Mardi Gras Ball. She was a princess. Mom said that when I grew up, I'd be able to wear her costumes and pearls to the ball and even her beautiful feathery masks. She had a mask that her father had brought her from Venice, Italy. I wondered whether she meant that by the time I was grown up, the Germans would be gone. I hoped soon there would be music and dancing again.

Zagreb in winter was a true winter wonderland. The trees were covered with snow and only the red cardinals stood out like little flowers. We lived in the suburb in a friendly neighborhood with big trees, beautiful gardens, and loving people. On Mardi Gras, the snow was gently falling and making our yard beautiful. My favorite cherry tree was heavily covered with snow; it looked peaceful. I was on the slope in our yard, on my sleigh and sliding down with my doll. I kept my doll warm in my sweater.

That morning, my dad had gone to the market hoping to get some meat and groceries because less and less food was available. As I was sliding down the hill, he came running back. Suddenly, I heard noise all around me. A lot of planes quickly filled the sky. My dad grabbed me and we ran inside. In the hurry of the moment, I lost my doll. She was lying out in the snow. I wanted to go outside to get her, but my dad said, "No. It is too dangerous."

Once we were inside, I heard my dad explaining that the convoy of Italian troops outside was delivering new ammunition to the local German headquarters, located in the high school at the end of our street. The entire football field, behind the

school, had been turned into the Germans' ammunition depot. The air attack was by the Allies to stop the Germans from building up their ammunition depot. Of course, I didn't fully understand all of this.

Suddenly, explosions were going off all around us. All the windows in our home were blown to pieces. My mom pushed me under an arch separating the dining room from the living room.

My mom was on top of me. Her hand was grabbing my throat and her nails were going deep into my skin. I could not breathe. My dad was trying to cover both of us. He finally noticed that Mom, in her panic, was choking me, so he pulled her hands away. Mom and I were sobbing.

I was so scared. Why did Grandma say the Germans were going to go home? The shattering of china and glass, the deafening sounds of explosions, the piercing sounds of sirens would stay with me for years. These were the sounds of death and terror. Yet the sounds were nothing compared to the visual images that followed, revealed by the sudden silence.

Like in a horror movie, our home had been turned into a war zone. Pieces of trucks, tires, metal, and glass were covering our furniture. Walls were cracked; windows were blown out. The floors were covered with glass, pieces of china, and bricks. In the backyard, hanging on the tree branches were pieces of human bodies.

My dad heard someone crying in front of our house. He walked over the debris to a man lying on the street, dying. The pressure from the bombing had crushed every bone in the man's body. My dad and a neighbor tried to lift him up without success. The man died while my father was holding him. In silence, my dad returned inside our house and took me into his arms. We all sobbed together. I did not ask my parents why people kill. Instead, I said, "I hate the Germans." My mom told me I must never say that; nobody could ever hear me say that. On that day, my feelings were silenced.

Our friends came screaming to our house. They asked for our help. In their bedroom were the heads and arms of the Italian soldiers. The Italian truck full of soldiers had been blown to pieces. The street was covered in blood.

They said that my girlfriend's mom had suffered a nervous breakdown. I didn't know what that meant, but I thought she was also going to die. The entire neighborhood smelled of death and smoke because the fires kept burning all night around us. It reminded me of the devil and the Hell my grandmother had told me about.

That night, my parents listened to the BBC. The radio reporter said that the British precision pilots had carried out their mission. From that day on, my parents listened to the BBC in secret—no one must know.

Lying in bed that night, I realized that life would never be the same. I knew that the world was not safe. I knew that I hated mean people who killed. I didn't understand why people killed, but I did not ask. I didn't know why God did not

send His angels. I decided something must be wrong with the stories my grandma had told me, but I did not know what.

After that first bombing, the city went dark every night, no lights, no power, so it could not be seen by planes above. At the end of our backyard was an unexploded bomb. No one came to remove it. No one dared to go near it.

I stopped sleeping in my own bed and went to sleep with my parents. I clung to my father. Fear was not just a feeling. Fear had become a permanent state of being that went hand in hand with a deep-seated sense that there was nothing any of us could do. That was my first experience with *powerlessness*. The innocence and safety of my infancy had been replaced with daily terror.

The imprint I internalized was: The world is unsafe. Do not trust. Others have power over my life. No one can save me—God did not show up. The power of violence wins. And the worst imprint: I am a victim.

Anyone who grew up during any war, anyone who grew up in an oppressive regime, anyone who grew up as an abused minority, anyone who grew up in a violent or abusive family, I know you are hearing me with your heart. You have been there with me. You know what sleepless nights are. You know what silenced feelings are. You know what fear does. You understand me. Children of war, children of oppression and abuse, my Soul hears your cries, and I know you understand my tears.

* * *

In the fall of 1942, I had just turned four. For my birthday, my mom gave me a new coat she had made from her old coat. She also made me a birthday card with a picture on it of a beautiful young lady wearing an evening gown. She told me that she loved me very much, and because she was a clothing designer, she said that when I grew up, she would make me beautiful dresses. I again wondered whether the war would be over and the Germans gone by the time I grew up.

One day that same fall, my dad and I were walking down the street on our way to the market. Across the street against the wall were twelve men and three German soldiers. The soldiers opened fire and the twelve men fell. The wall was covered in blood.

My dad picked me up, threw me over a fence, and jumped over himself. He held me on the ground until everything was silent and it was safe to move again. I thought about how when you die, there's a lot of blood running around.

In 1963 when I revisited Zagreb, I saw a commemorative engraving on that wall in memory of the twelve patriots who died while fighting to resist the German occupation.

The imprint I internalized was that Life and Death are violent.

During that same time period, the occupying forces imposed the following law: for every German or Ustashi soldier killed, three Croats would be killed or taken to

a concentration camp. For every German or Ustashi officer killed, twenty-five Croats would be killed or taken to a concentration camp.

That fall of 1942, my mother and I rarely went to town. It had become too dangerous to go out of the house. My father was the one running errands and waiting in line for food. He had to go early in the morning to get in line. Food was becoming harder and harder to get. There was no more meat—it was rationed only to the German and Ustashi troops.

One early morning while my dad was out, a German officer was killed. As a result, my dad and some other men who just happened to be on the street were imprisoned and were going to be taken to the concentration camp in Germany. Somehow, my dad managed to send a message to my mom. In a panic, my mom and I went to the train station to see him.

All the men were in a cattle wagon and tied to the floor, waiting to be taken to the concentration camp. A feeling of powerlessness and terror overcame my mother and me. We only saw my dad for a minute before the soldiers pushed us away from the train. As the train's doors were closed, the last thing I saw were the tears on my father's cheeks.

I remember that day as a big turning point. I went numb. It was like I was not there and I was not feeling.

The imprint of Lack and Scarcity turned into a profound belief in Not Enoughness: There was not enough safety, not enough food, not enough money, not enough joy. And with my dad gone, there was no more HOPE.

Hard days and sleepless nights followed. As my grandmother brushed my hair, she told me to pray that God would hear my prayers and bring my daddy back. I wanted so badly to believe her. My mom cried every day. Only sadness and fear filled our home.

The imprint I learned was: Life is a Struggle, full of Pain and Suffering.

Three days after my dad's departure, Mom took me to Zagreb's beautiful cathedral. We were going to light candles for my dad's safe return.

It was a cloudy day. In front of the cathedral was a large plaza. On this day, the plaza was filled with German and Ustashi troops, and the bishop of my hometown was blessing them.

My last sense of hope and trust had been broken. Now I knew that something was really wrong with us. We were born on the wrong side of the street. God was for the Germans and they were going to kill my dad.

On that October day when I was four years old, God became a problem, not a solution. I knew we were alone and abandoned.

My grandmother's God of love and goodness had abandoned us. He was for the Fascists and against us. The fear of Hell was transformed into a conviction that we were in Hell. The voices of my Grandma's angels had been silenced.

All of you who have experienced abandonment know the loneliness that follows...and you hear me. You understand me. Years later, I understood that I was

an old soul who chose to learn a lesson about forgiveness and compassion. But in 1942, my feelings were silenced. I must not make Mama cry. I must not say how I feel. I must be a good girl.

The Germans had a motto: “Deutschland über Alles”, meaning “Germany above others.” It meant that they were the superior race and we were inferior. The political party governing Croatia during the war endorsed that belief to justify genocides and ethnic cleansings...and the Church agreed.

People of the Balkans, Slavic people, were seen as a sub-culture to be dominated. They were seen as poor, uneducated, made for hard work, and people to be abused. Slavic women were seen as heavysset and made for hard labor.

Today, the rational mind of a seventy-two year old woman comprehends the falsehood of this statement. But as the scared little girl I was, I internalized these events differently.

For years, I have walked through life feeling inferior and ashamed of the primitiveness of the Balkans and my Slavic origins.

How my heart understands and resonates with the imprint of despair that slavery brings. How my heart embraces the lack of hope and dignity of those who were raised in apartheid. How strongly I hear the cries of those tortured, exploited, raped, and annihilated by dictatorial regimes. I understand your imprints and your powerlessness, as well as your fears that turn into hate. I also understand your confusion when all of this evil is done in the name of God.

How well and profoundly I know the falsehood of exclusive religions that pretend to possess the truth but kill in the name of God, that impose doctrines filled with hatred of others, but call themselves lovers of God. Religion of Fear to control the masses, I have experienced you firsthand.

Looking back, I now know when and where my deep-seated feelings and imprints of unworthiness, inferiority, and disempowerment started—in a cultural, social, and religious imprint, the kind that permeates every aspect of one’s life.

* * *

Life without my father was hard. It was the period of sleepless nights as well as nights filled with nightmares. My mom tried to reassure me the best she could, but I also felt responsible for her worries, helplessness, and despair.

Without us knowing and being aware of it, codependency had already become our way of relating to each other. We felt responsible for other people’s feelings and ignored or silenced our own.

A clear imprint came from that period: Security comes only through a man, my dad. Women must have a man to protect them...but he was not there, so we were abandoned; therefore, men are unavailable.

For months, we did not know where my dad was or whether he was alive. A client of my mom, who was her classmate in college, was married to an officer. Through her intervention, my mom managed to find out that my dad was in

Buchenwald Concentration camp. We could not communicate with him, but we were relieved that he was still alive.

I did not know whether my Guardian angel still existed, but that night, I asked her to protect my dad and to bring him back. There was no reassurance, no whisper or sign, yet I did sleep that night.

The winter of 1942-43 was harsh and the world around us was filled with hatred and fear, hunger and greed. Survival was the main focus. My mom's uncle was a baker. He looked after my mom and me the best he could. He would bring us wood and coal for heat when he could. Sometimes, he would bring some bread and some bones for soup. Each time he came he looked more tired, old, and frail. My mom would talk in a very low voice to him. Everything became a silent secret. Survival meant being silent.

Many nights, the American planes would drop "carpet bombs," which were a series of bombs attached together. When they were released, they would light up so that the city lit up like it was daylight. The carpet bombs were used to destroy military targets, but parts of the city would be destroyed too.

We lived in a duplex. We were in the lower apartment and the top apartment was rented to our friends—that was where my girlfriend and her brother lived. Every night when the sirens went off, our friends would come running down to our apartment because it was safer. My mom would then hide us children in a closet to keep us safe. It was so dark in there. We were so scared, and my girlfriend would always get sick, but after a while, we started playing a game and guessing where the bombs would fall.

When reality is too painful, detach and medicate. Turn the pain into a game.

Needless to say, for years after that, I had an aversion for small dark spaces. I also had the ability to be deluded about reality or to deny it. *If I don't see it...it is not there. Even the war can become the White Elephant in the living room that no one can see.*

Looking back, I admire the resilience and courage of my people who fought back and survived. I have realized the richness of my people: the beauty, warmth, and passion of the Slavic people. I remember the courage of our survival under the hardest circumstances. I remember our creativity and resourcefulness. I remember the goodness of our hearts. Most importantly, I realize that my earlier rejection of my people was also my rejection of myself.

The big imprint from that period of my history: I have no right to exist.

At the same time, by stopping my identification with a country or culture—not through rejection or denial but by realizing I don't have to be limited by that identification, my Authentic Self has come to life. By not identifying with a nation, country, or culture, I accept that my true origin is Divine. It is only when I have truly embraced and aligned myself with God, as I understand God, that I become One with all. I truly feel the blessing of multiple citizenships. I truly feel the privilege of speaking three languages. Three windows to different cultures:

Croatian, French, and English. What a blessing. It allows me to be One with all. My Spirit is truly free of borders, language, barriers, religious dogmas...and that allows me to be an observer. To come to this Realization, I did have to take the road less traveled.

Beyond knowing that my dad was alive, we had no news of him. Fear was our permanent state of being. Surviving another day was considered a success.

My grandma was still praying, still giving money to the Church and lighting candles for my dad's return, for peace, and for Grandpa to quit drinking. My mom was getting angrier with her mother and her obsession with the Church. My mom was also angry at her father because he embarrassed her with his drinking.

Mom's fear turned into anger and trying to control everything. She was angry at the war and its atrocities. She was angry at the family war caused by alcoholism and Grandma's religious addiction. She always seemed in those days to be screaming, crying, or just staying busy—perhaps so she did not have to think and worry.

No one had time for me. By the summer of 1943 when I was four and a half years old, I was already an old person in a child's body.

One day, Melanka read to us a letter received from her husband who was in a concentration camp run by Ustashi. He described the tortures he and the other prisoners there were enduring. His friend had just died after the Ustashi pulled out his hair and nails. Hearing this horror story, my mom got sick and could no longer listen.

As I listened to the details, unknowingly, I formed an important imprint: Power/Authorities are mean and violent. Do not trust Authorities.

Melanka's husband asked for our prayers, but in my mind I knew prayer would not work. God was for the Germans—I knew because I had seen the bishop blessing them.

War, religion, abuse, and death were becoming synonymous in my imprints. To this day, I do not watch violent movies about torture and killings. They go against every fiber in me. They violate my humanity as well as all humanity.

The year of 1943 was the period of hopelessness, helplessness, and loneliness. We all felt stuck without a light at the end of the tunnel.

I am so grateful that my spiritual beliefs have healed and transformed my life. Radical forgiveness has transformed fear and hatred into love, compassion, and understanding.

In the summer of 1943, the Germans were having serious problems on the Russian front. They were using prisoners from concentration camps as human shields to protect the German army.

Unknown to my family, my dad was among those prisoners. However, before the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, my dad managed to escape with another prisoner. They fled into the woods, and at night, they tied themselves under a train going to Ukraine and Romania. During the daytime, they hid in the woods, and sometimes,

a Russian peasant hid them and gave them some food. It took them from July until the beginning of November to reach Zagreb.

When my dad reached home, he was physically ill. The malnutrition, hard labor, beatings, humidity, and cold of the concentration camp and the Russian front had taken their toll. He was physically burnt out, but he was alive. What a relief I felt to see him! He was emotionally broken also, but I did not understand that then. I only knew he was alive and I hoped that meant things would be more normal again.

I did not understand then that in the concentration camp, my dad had been forced to witness death on a daily basis. When he returned home, he did not know how to deal with such loss, grief, and death, so he stayed silent about it. His very presence in our home also required silence. We kept it a secret from most people and he rarely went outside.

The Germans were experiencing more and more difficulties as the Allies continued to advance from all sides. In frustration and fear, the Ustashi in Croatia and the Chetniks in Serbia and Montenegro were multiplying the killings and atrocities they committed.

However, Tito and the Partisans—the Yugoslav Resistance—were gaining in the mountains of Bosnia. Tito was a Communist leader and the Resistance was turning Communist too.

By the spring of 1945, the German army and its puppet governments were in full retreat before the Yugoslav Partisans. On May 14 and 15, 1945 the Battle of Poljana was fought between Ustashi and Partisan troops. Although the Germans had surrendered on May 7th, in Yugoslavia the war ended with that battle.

Zagreb experienced its last battle in the form of street fights. For two days, we were barricaded in our home as the fighting continued all around our house. As the Ustashi retreated, they dynamited sections of the town to prevent the Partisans from advancing.

During this time, we were very hopeful that the American troops would liberate Croatia. But that did not happen. Although the British were involved in Poljana, Croatia was “liberated” by the arrival of Partisans, followed by the Russian troops.

The Partisans took over the city. Soon the streets were lined with sick, wounded, battered, and hungry soldiers, some of whom were hardly more than sixteen years old and some were old men. They brought with them their sick horses. The smell in the streets was horrific.

While we were all happy and relieved that the Germans and Ustashi were gone, we were also afraid; no one knew what these Communist troops would do. What was the future going to be like?