

Tiffany Duvernay-Smith

I was the victim, but I was blamed.'

Tiffany Duvernay-Smith is my name. I believe in breaking patterns, cycles and chains: footholds, strongholds and chokeholds. I am who I am, and I am becoming who I came here to be. I am happy to share my story of hope and healing.

I was born right here in Los Angeles. I had a fantasy childhood. I grew up traveling the world because my mother, Phyllis, worked for Trans World Airlines, TWA. By the age of 10, I had traveled the entire world with her. I also grew up dancing and performing in dance recitals. I grew up seeing my dad on the weekends and this felt normal to me. My dad, my stepmom and my sister were at one house and my mom and I were together at another house. My memories are of a happy childhood, visiting my dad on the weekends, getting good grades, playing with other children all the time in my small apartment complex. I can still picture myself skipping with my long ponytails.

Just before my 12th birthday my happy fantasy childhood came to an end when my phenomenal mother died unexpectedly while in Egypt on vacation. I lost my mommy. At the time, my dad was living in Texas for two years with my stepmother and my sister. He took me to Texas, from the only family and place I'd ever known, to a place I often felt unwelcomed and unloved by my stepmother and sister. I felt kidnapped and taken away from my mother's side of the family that I grew up with. I was even told not to talk to them...my own grandmother, my aunt, my uncle, my cousin. Our family was small, but I was told not to tell anybody where I was living. As an innocent, obedient 11-year-old, I listened to my father.

My relationship with my little sister was full of sibling rivalry initiated by my stepmother's favoritism and my dad's neutrality. What a six-year age difference: I was 12 and she was six. I was always spoken to about how I responded to my sister, but she was never corrected on how to treat me. Outsiders even made comments, noticing the favoritism. His remaining neutral when I was being mistreated made me feel like he was against me, too.

I never saw signs of him correcting my stepmother for the way she treated me. For example, when I told him about my stepmother slapping me across my face, like a real hard slap, he would not say she was wrong. I was 13 and had never experienced getting cussed at or hit, so it was a really big deal. The second time she slapped me, I slapped her back and I don't remember getting in trouble for that. So again, there's

this message of being neutral when it comes to physical violence. I was 15 years old, in the summer of 1989, (when) she slapped me outside in the driveway and I fought her.

'With my dad came verbal abuse and mind games.'

I know that violence comes in different forms. I remember when I was 12, my stepmother burned her hand. My father asked me to wash the dishes. I'm not sure if I got an attitude or if I didn't move fast enough, but my father began throwing dishes across the kitchen, sliding them on the floor and against the wall, saying, "You don't want to wash dishes. Okay, here you go. Wham, wham, wham, wham!"

I've since learned that that is domestic abuse, that it falls under physical violence, mental abuse, emotional abuse, etcetera. With my dad also came verbal abuse and mind games. The other violence I experienced was verbal abuse from my stepmother, where she always talked smart and rude. I'm not saying I didn't, but I was reacting to somebody who was abusive to me.

Around age 14, I made a decision to not be like them. I remembered my upbringing with my mother. I wasn't going to act like that. I wasn't going to be who they expected me to be nor how they treated me.

In my junior year and senior years, I stopped talking to her (stepmother). After the first day of silence, my dad said, "You can stop playing this game." I'm like, "What game?" He's like, "Not talking to your stepmother." I said, "It's not a game. If she doesn't know how to talk to me, she doesn't get to talk to me!" This was my first time expressing my sense of value and self-worth, letting them know how I wanted and deserved to be treated. I was 16.

'It made me feel isolated, mistreated and controlled.'

We moved back to Los Angeles when I was in 10th grade and lived in the Torrance, where I graduated high school. I was back home! Back in my city! Back near my mom's side of the family! I remember my phone calls were monitored and being told "you can only call once a week." I'd argue, "It's my grandmother" or "It's my godmother." I wasn't a bad student or wild or anything like that. It made me feel isolated, mistreated, and controlled.

I decided I wanted to move out. I was encouraged to stay there by my mom's side of the family because I was doing well in school, to graduate, then move on with my life. I even called the police, but they told me I had to stay until I was 18. These were the same messages that showed up later in my life. *Hang in there! Rise above! Pray! Stick it out! Then, at a certain point, you can move on.* There's nothing wrong with perseverance, however, this messaging backfires when the situation is toxic.

For all of my twenties, I had a stable life: my own car, my own apartment. I worked in corporate America for Fortune 500 and Fortune 100 companies. I was heavily into my Bible and extremely active in my church. They were my family. I felt great about my amazing relationship with God and encouraged by what I found in the Scriptures. I went through a forgiveness process when I was 21, which included forgiving my dad and my step-mom. I loved my life!

I felt kidnapped again.'

In 2006, at the age of 33, I started a relationship with a man who became my abuser. His charm slowly turned into manipulation, control, aggression, and verbal, intellectual, economic, spiritual and physical abuse. I felt kidnapped again, this time from my church family and my relationship with God.

The physical abuse was minor, but I remember a couple of incidents. I will say that I became abusive too, and I don't mind sharing an example of that. I remember he didn't like something that I said and grabbed me by my neck, had me leaning against the wall. We were not too far from the front door. After he let me go, he pushed me backwards and I fell on the floor against the wall. When I turned around, there was a hole in the wall from the back of my head. And what I did, since I'm going to be honest, is I called two people that he loved and let them know what he did.

Both knew that I knew their whereabouts. I let them both know that if he touched me again, I was going to find them and beat them up. I threatened them. At the time, I felt great about my decision because they knew I was serious, and I knew that he'd take me seriously. I walked back into my apartment and let him know exactly what I did. I will say that he didn't touch me again.

That's the way I chose to deal with it, and it worked. But it doesn't mean that I wasn't afraid of him. There were a couple of incidents I thought would get physical. I remember him being really angry and I thought he was going to do something to me physically, so I unplugged my laptop charger. He was coming closer to me and I said, "If you come any closer to me, I'm going to hit you with this extension cord." Now let me tell you, I'm about 5'6"; this person was a 6'2" 275-pound ex-linebacker, not professionally, but high

school and college. In his late 40's, he was still walking around looking and acting like an angry linebacker. So, yeah, I felt like I needed the protection of that extension cord.

Then that happened again where I thought he was going to do something to me physically. About a week later, he got angry again. As soon as he got upset, I instantly went back to the memory of the extension cord, (how I'd snatched it from the wall and laptop and had it in my hand. That made him angry. He came close, and I hit him with the extension cord. This is me being honest about how someone who is afraid, how someone who is a victim, can become an abuser or retaliate. It doesn't go so well. I know women who have killed the person abusing them and had to go to prison for it.

I was arrested during this relationship. I was the victim, but I was blamed, treated as the perpetrator, and sentenced to three years of probation, 52 weeks of anger management and over 400 hours of community service for things I didn't even do. Telling my story is my vindication.

'At my lowest point, I had nowhere to go.'

In 2010, after years of dysfunction and a \$100-a-month rent increase that I couldn't afford, I lost my apartment. At the age of 36, I was homeless! I bounced around for the next five years, which included staying in my car, with a friend or an extended stay hotel for a short time. At my lowest point, I stayed with my abuser in his parents' garage, without their knowledge or permission. That's where the extension cord incident happened. When I finally attempted to break up with him, we did a terrible back and forth dance for months. We were fully in the cycle of violence with power and control.

There's tension and then there's violence or emotional outbursts, then there's the honeymoon phase. This is what I experienced every time we broke up and got back together. It went on for five years. I realized I needed help. I was afraid that I'd end up dead or in jail, on accident or on purpose.

In April 2021, at the age of 38, I went to social services for help with cash and food stamps. I remember praying that I'd get a woman. Thank God I did. I showed her the scratches and bruises from a tug-of-war with keys that I'd had with my abuser. I told her I was afraid I'd end up dead or in prison, whether by accident or on purpose. She helped me fill out the paperwork and referred me to an organization that offers domestic violence services. With their help, I began going to support groups and receiving counseling. About 90 days later, I finally left that abusive man for good.

I have an aunt who could tell something wasn't right through our conversations. I'm pretty sure I wasn't giving her details at the time, because when you're in these, toxic, dysfunctional, unhealthy, abusive type of

relationships, you suffer in silence for various reasons. I must have been being a little open with her because she decided to tell me about experiences she had when she was younger with a boyfriend who she thought she killed on a couple of occasions. This was to tell me things can happen on accident, either to me or to him. Honestly, I feel like that is one of the things that helped me leave my abusive boyfriend.

The awareness, having a safe space to talk in the support groups, and then meeting with the counselors to talk through things, was extremely helpful. I was learning about healthy relationships. The first class I was in was called Domestic Violence 101. It helped me to figure out why I chose him, why I stayed so long, how to never choose him again in the next man, how to never choose someone like him, period, even a friendship. I participated in the support groups from 2012 to 2017.

In 2012, my primary care physician referred me to depression therapy. She referred me to a PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) therapist. I love the therapy I had with both women. It's obvious that I was in a toxic, unhealthy, dysfunctional situation. I was having flashbacks to being a teenager and all that toxicity from back then. I would have loved for one of the therapists to have simply showed me a power-and-control wheel and asked me, "Do you identify with any of the slices of pie on this power-and-control wheel?" I remained pretty clueless for another 5 years.

The domestic violence agency helped me apply for permanent housing. Two and a half years later, I got a call from a supportive housing complex. I had my own place again, paying my own rent, even if it was a small portion. I was glad to have a place I could call home. Two days before Valentine's Day in 2015, I received the key to my very own apartment. I was able to breathe. My mind was clearer and freer. Being able to move into that apartment made me feel like I was finally above rock bottom.

I've used my lived experience to help others.'

Instead of returning to corporate America, I use my lived experience to help others. I did some research on definitions and came up with a title for myself. I am a 'Systems Reform Advocate focused on Domestic Violence Survivorship, Mental Health Stigma Reduction, Housing for homeless people and Criminal Justice Reform.' I've told my story several times to law enforcement officers during their crisis intervention training. I've helped hundreds of elementary school children learn the game of the chess. I've assisted a nonprofit organization that helps formerly incarcerated people start their own businesses.

I'm on the board of directors for a re-entry organization. I've worked facilitating support groups, assisting with educational classes for people who have a diagnosis, facilitating classes on advocacy, reaching

out to legislators to bring about change. I currently work for a government agency assisting homeless people who are guests in hotels because of COVID-19 to move on to permanent supportive housing or interim housing. I'm on a couple of lived experience advisory boards. My advocacy has been in the city, county, state, across state lines and nationally.

I attribute my involvement to my spiritual connection with God and allowing Him to use me as a vessel. At the age of 43, after experiencing childhood trauma, an abusive relationship, homelessness, mental health challenges, law enforcement contact, healing and recovery, I finally had the healthy relationship I was holding out for. Thomas and I met in June 2017 at an event on Crenshaw. I was advocating for housing for formerly incarcerated people. We began advocating together, studying the Bible together and jumping waves in the ocean together. He was all of my answered prayers in one person. Seven months and 12 days later, we were married. We celebrated three years of marriage January 2018.

'Ask for help from safe people.'

I would advise others to be bold, courageous, and ask for help from safe people. Sharpen your people-picking skills. You have to put up barriers between friends who show signs of abuse, relatives who show signs of abuse, and create your space of how you want to be treated. I know that there can be children involved, I know there can be financial things, I know that our mental health gets affected, especially if someone's done what they call gaslighting, which is very invalidating. Our mental wellbeing is precious and important.

Know that leaving is the right decision once it gets dangerous. Children may be a reason that someone stays, and for different reasons, one of them being that people don't want their kids to be taken away. I've heard things like, "I haven't filed a restraining order because what if children and family services gets involved." If you're not willing to protect your children and walk away, they will take your children. The children are suffering. It doesn't matter how the person is treating them; it's them witnessing how they're treating you.

When I was receiving my mental health therapy, it was never connected to being in a domestic violence relationship. Can these two healing modalities talk to one another? This is what I would ask the policy makers. Allow a wedding ceremony between domestic violence and mental health.

Two policy recommendations, as it relates to domestic violence, is children and family services working more with the parents. There has to be a way to keep the children with the victim of abuse while

you help the victim transfer to being a survivor who is thriving, as opposed to adding trauma to that which has already been experienced. Check out all the domestic violence, healing, and therapy groups I participated in. My depression therapy, my PTSD therapy, I needed them all.

Another message for people as it relates to mental health is not to fear a diagnosis and not to fear medication. The real purpose of a therapist is to listen and help you work through ambivalence. Maybe you have to sort something through, but the final result is the same: the answer is within you and you may need help to discover what that is. Sometimes we can do that with friends, sometimes we can do it while reading a book, sometimes we can do it by listening to a song and sometimes there's something deeper going on that we need to talk about with a therapist.

Recorded at:
City of Los Angeles, CA
1/29/2021
4:58 pm

I would like to end with something that I've had to tell myself that's connected to hope and healing from a magnet on my aunt's refrigerator that I saw in 2011 while I was still in my toxic, dysfunctional relationship. It says: *Expect something wonderful!*

