

[00:00:00] **John Moe:** It's usually pretty easy to record your voice and play it back later over speakers or headphones. It's a bit trickier to capture and then listen to your true, wise inner voice. That voice can be elusive. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

[00:00:19] **Transition:** Playful acoustic guitar.

[00:00:27] **John Moe:** My guest this week is Cheryl Strayed. She's the author most famously of the memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. *Wild* is about the 1100-mile hike that Cheryl took in 1995. It came about following her mother's death, Cheryl's deep depression and heroin use, and a sense that her life felt out of control. The book was turned into a 2014 movie, starring Reece Witherspoon as Cheryl. Cheryl Strayed is also the author of *Tiny Beautiful Things*. It's a book that's a series of essays taken from her advice column, "Dear Sugar".

Tiny Beautiful Things has been adapted into a scripted television series of the same name, now on Hulu. It stars Sarah Pidgeon as a younger version of Cheryl, called Claire in the series, and Kathryn Hahn as contemporary Claire when she's about to turn 50. Younger Claire has a life. A lot like what Cheryl's life was when she was younger. The present-day Claire's life is what Cheryl's life might have been, had she made some pretty different choices. I talked to Cheryl Strayed about the show, about choices and about which inner voices to listen to.

[00:01:39] **Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:01:49] **John Moe:** Cheryl Strayed, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

[00:01:51] **Cheryl Strayed:** It's wonderful to be here, John. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:54] **John Moe:** I binged *Tiny Beautiful Things*, and I genuinely laughed and cried. People say that; it sounds like a cliché, but I did both things. So, thank you for the emotional journey that we went on.

[00:02:06] **Cheryl Strayed:** Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. You know, that's my favorite thing. I always say my favorite thing is to make people cry, but that's not really true. My favorite thing is to make people laugh and cry. Not that I can claim, you know, responsibility for all your laughter and tears of the show, but I was a big part of the show, and I'm thrilled that you had that experience.

[00:02:25] **John Moe:** Why did you want to make a TV series about an alternate version of yourself?

[00:02:31] **Cheryl Strayed:** Well, you know, it wasn't—it's funny, I didn't begin from there. What I really began with is just knowing that in that book, *Tiny Beautiful Things*, there is so much story. There is so much life. There is so much humanity. As a writer, the thing I've always been interested in doing is making us feel less alone, reminding us all that we're connected even in our darkest hours, we are connected to people who have suffered throughout all time. And in our highest moments too, we're connected to people who know

what it feels like to triumph or love or win. You know, so I just felt this sense that this book had so much story in it. When I first said, “Hey, how about making this a TV show?” I didn't have a fully formed idea. I didn't know that idea would be an alternate version of me. Really, all of those things came through the creative process as other people got involved and really, you know, contributed their vision as well.

[00:03:31] **John Moe:** Well, how did that evolve then from what the book was to this idea of this kind of layered traveling through time kind of story that you tell in the show?

[00:03:42] **Cheryl Strayed:** Well, it really began with Liz Tigelaar, who is our creator and showrunner. And she and I, at the very beginning, before she even began to write the pilot, had these conversations about, you know, who would this character be? Really beginning from that place of “Who is Sugar?” First of all, is Sugar me? Is our character me or not?

And pretty instinctually right away I said to Liz, “I felt like it wouldn't be interesting to just sort of retell the “how I became ‘Dear Sugar’ story” in a way that was really straight from my life. It felt too complicated. It felt less interesting. It also felt, you know, strange for me to say like, “Okay, now I'm gonna cast my own marriage onto the screen, or my own kids onto the screen.” I didn't wanna do that. And yet, because anyone who's read *Tiny Beautiful Things*, the book, knows that I very often tell stories from my life in the “Dear Sugar” column. I still do that. I have a monthly “Dear Sugar” Substack newsletter, and very often I'll tell stories from my life. So, I said to Liz, “Okay, how about this? How about the present-day character of Claire, AKA Sugar—who is played by the amazing and brilliant Kathryn Hahn—how about she and I share a past, but at a certain point our lives diverged?”

It felt important to me that she have the same foundational experiences as I did, because I draw on them in my advice so much. She had to have grown up in a rural environment like I did. She had to have grown up poor and working class. She had to have lost her mom young to cancer, be estranged from an abusive father, and have gotten married and divorced in her 20s. Those are kind of the things that—all the things that happened to be before the age of 25.

And from there we diverged. So, when you see in the show—as you know, the beautiful and amazing Sarah Pidgeon plays the young Claire, the young Sugar, who is very much like me. And then, Kathryn Hahn plays the adult Claire, the adult Sugar, who—what we have in common is we both write a column, but otherwise, we are very different.

[00:05:50] **John Moe:** What have you gained by thinking of yourself having gone down a different path when you—when it's the still vestigially you, but become someone else? What is—what did that end up teaching you about yourself?

[00:06:05] **Cheryl Strayed:** Mm! That's such a great question. There's a “Dear Sugar” column called “The Ghost Ship that Didn't Carry Us”, and there's even—there's also an episode called “The Ghost Ship” that explores the same premise. And in that letter, a man writes to me and says, “You know, I'm 40—” I think he's 41. He is like, “I don't know if I should be a father or not. I feel I could live this life or that life.”

And I wrote—in my answer to him, I wrote about this idea of, you know, we make choices. And in the case of deciding to become a parent, we make a big choice. And it profoundly and

forever changes your life, and you have a different life because of that choice. And so, in working on this show—being a writer and executive producer on the show, where we do have Kathryn Hahn, you know, on a different shift than the one I took. It has been pretty interesting, and it does—you know, it really brings me back to a point that I make over and over again in my advice as Sugar, that if you don't listen to that deep, inner voice of truth within you, there is a price to pay. And so, what I see, Kathryn as Claire doing in the show is paying the price for not having listened to that voice within her that said, “I need to be a writer.”

You know? I think that that so much of the ways that we see her grappling throughout the series are ultimately rooted in that—you know?—that she didn't keep faith with her work, for good reasons. Right? She was an aspiring writer. She had some early success. And then, she got pregnant unexpectedly, and she had a baby and became a mother, and then she had to raise—you know, pay the bills and get health insurance and all that stuff that people do. But there is a price to pay for that, you know, when you turn away from that wise inner voice. And so, for me it was really cool to see—like this idea for me, I was like, “Well, what would've happened to me if I hadn't kept faith with my writing?” And it's probably something like, you know, I'd probably find myself in the situation that Claire is in, but what I love is, you know, in the show too, it's never too late. You know? She—you can always turn back and say, “Oh, wait a minute. Inner voice, there you are. I'm gonna listen to you now.”

[00:08:19] **John Moe:** The idea of the wise inner voice is a big part of a lot of your work kind of, it occurs to me. And you seem to really trust listening to that inner voice, that wisdom that comes from that inner voice. I think a lot of people want to listen to it, but they get worried that it's the right voice or that it's not, you know, anxiety talking or trauma talking or something like that. How do you go about finding the true wise inner voice and not listen to a bunch of charlatans?

[00:08:52] **Cheryl Strayed:** Mm. It's—I mean, that's—I wish there were just a super easy answer to that question, and I think I would've—you know.

[00:08:59] **John Moe:** We'd wrap up early, you know?

(They laugh.)

[00:09:01] **Cheryl Strayed:** I mean, I think I—20 years ago, I would've naively said, “Just, you know, it's there. It's there.” You know. But you know, what I will say is that that inner voice, I do think it's within all of us. And it's not our fault that for a lot of us it's really hard to trust that sense of clarity we have, because so much around us tells us not to. Right? So much in our families, in our communities, in our culture—whether it be our religions or—you know, fill in the blank. All of the voices outside of us that say it's not okay to be who you are and to feel what you feel and want what you want.

Any anyone in the LGBTQ community can tell you—who grew up, you know, in generations where they were told you're wrong for being this; you don't get to want this. You don't get to be—to feel this way—can attest to that truth, right? There's a journey a lot of those people had to go on to say, “No, this is me, and it's going to be me whether you like it or not.”

And I think that the inner voice in other ways works that way too. I mean, that's just one example of one of the ways that we sometimes have to work through a lot of stuff to say, "This is what's true." And one of the things I know for myself, that inner voice of truth within me feels good. Okay? So, the anxiety voice might be saying—in fact, I even have like a name for that. I call it your—my ITS. It's my Inner Terrible Someone, who says, "You're stupid. You're bad. You said the wrong thing. You'll never be able to do this, that, or the other thing. You always mess up." You know, that is a voice inside of me every day, and it makes me feel terrible.

So, I know, okay, that voice is there, but it's not the voice I should trust or listen to. The other voice in opposition to my ITS is that wise inner sage, that wise, knowing voice that says, "You're gonna be okay even if you make mistakes, even if you didn't always do the right thing or say the right thing." And so, what I try to really listen to—and this, again, is advice I give as Sugar—is trust the body. When the body feels like things are bad or wrong or scary, that's the wonderful way to say like, "Okay, maybe don't listen to that voice." The voice of the truth makes you feel strong and courageous, even when you're afraid.

[00:11:25] **John Moe:** Do you mean listen to the body? Like, really check for those physical sensations? Do you mean that in a literal sense?

[00:11:32] **Cheryl Strayed:** I do, you know. And I know, of course, as I say that—you know, I'm not somebody who has panic attacks or has had many of the symptoms that a lot of people with anxiety disorders have. And so, you know, I certainly think too you can like be actually having, you know, symptoms that don't feel good. And so, it's like, ah, you know, like that's what my body's telling me. And maybe, you know, I don't think that those are necessarily reliable things, but for what I can tell you is in myself I feel a sense of calm rootedness when I'm doing the right thing. And I wanna say that that that is true, even when I also feel afraid at the same time.

So, just for an example to talk about writing, you know, when I was talking about our character, Claire, not listening to that voice inside of her that said, "You're called to be a writer, you need to answer that call." In my own life, all through my 20s and 30s, I felt that was the case. And I kept faith with my writing, while I waited tables and worked all kinds of jobs to pay the bills. And very often as I was trusting that I was also—my ITS, my Inner Terrible Someone—was saying, "You're wasting your time. You know, get a real job, get a job with benefits. Give this dream up. What—how likely is this dream to come true? Not very likely." And that's true. It's statistically not very likely that that dream will come true, that I'll publish my book, or that anyone will read my book. And yet when I could just be calm, even in spite of those things that scared me, even in spite of those things that made me feel like maybe I was on the wrong path, I could stay—I could stay calm. I could stay the course.

And so, you know, it's confusing because those things can sit right alongside each other. The space I've made of it for—John, it's like—the way I think of it is this. It's kind of like in *Wild*. You know, I wrote that—you know, here I was hiking through the wilderness. Your listeners who aren't familiar with this story—I hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, 1100 miles up the Pacific Coast Trail when I was 26, the summer of 1995. And I did it alone. And of course, the first question that people always have for that is like, "Weren't you scared?! Weren't you scared?!" And of course, I was scared. I was alone in the wilderness. A woman alone in the wilderness, walking for 94 days. I was scared sometimes. But before I went, I said, "Okay, I have to

come up with a mantra to make me brave.” And so, when I was scared, the thing I would say to myself is, “I am not afraid. I am not afraid. I am not afraid.” And so, the way that I made myself trust that inner voice, which was “you can do this”, is to actually prepare for the fear, know that the fear would be part of the journey and simply decide to, you know, not make it my ruler, not make it the thing that defined me.

[00:14:24] **John Moe:** Were you afraid?

[00:14:26] **Cheryl Strayed:** I only said “I am not afraid” when I was afraid.

(John affirms with a chuckle.)

You know? I mean, it's so complicated that these things can sit by—you know, so when I say, “Oh, trust your inner wise voice,” that doesn't always come to you like some bright, beaming, you know, like lovely thing. It's like they're alongside that voice that says, “No, no, no. You can't. You can't.” You know? Or “You are afraid, even though you think, you know, you're brave.” And what I'm saying is listen harder. You know? Listen harder to the voice that makes you feel good. Listen harder to the voice that's not panicking. Listen harder to the voice that says, “I love you, and you are worthy, and you are good.”

[00:15:08] **Transition:** Gentle, plucked guitar.

[00:15:11] **John Moe:** More with Cheryl Stray after a quick break.

[00:15:21] **Promo:**

Music: Cheerful, harmonizing vocalizations.

Tre'vell Anderson: Trans representation in media is at an all-time high with trans entertainers gracing the screens large and small.

Shar Jossell: But trans voices, especially Black trans voices, are rarely centered in our own stories.

Tre'vell Anderson: That's why we bring you a new, limited series called *We See Each Other the Podcast*, co-hosted by me—journalist and better half of the Max Fun podcast *FANTI*—Tre'vell Anderson.

Shar: And me, award-winning journalist and media personality, Shar Jossell.

Tre'vell: All of it is based on my book, *We See Each Other: A Black Trans Journey Through TV and Film*.

Shar: Now, listen folks. We're having a very different kind of conversation. It's giving kitchen table talk.

Tre'vell: Mm-hm. We get into the discourse, honey. Tune into *We See Each Other the Podcast* at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get slay-worthy audio.

Music: *We see, we see*
We see each other

(Music ends.)

[00:16:05] **Transition:** Slightly melancholy guitar.

[00:16:10] **John Moe:** Back with Cheryl Strayed, author of *Wild* and *Tiny Beautiful Things*.

(Music ends.)

It's out of therapy in many ways. A lot of therapists will say, "Okay, you're feeling this feeling, you're feeling this apprehension or this anxiety, whatever it is. Where is it located in your body?" And it makes me think of *The Body Keeps the Score*, the Bessel van der Kolk book, where trauma is stored in your body, and you have a muscle memory that that relates to that. I know that you've had trauma in your life. You lost your mother. You've experienced abuse. You've—you know, you've lived a life. Do you find that the trauma is stored in the body as well, still?

[00:16:56] **Cheryl Strayed:** I don't know. You know, I think of myself as somebody who has healed, when I'm thinking—when I'm thinking about the traumas of my childhood. I was sexually abused at a very young age, and all through the earliest years of my life, I witnessed my father physically abusing my mother—sometimes physically abusing me and my siblings, and certainly emotionally abusing us all. We lived, you know, in terror and trauma. And even though as a child, once my mom left him—then I had a happy period of my childhood—all through my childhood and teenage years, I knew that a terrible thing had happened to me, but my—but I wasn't living in a family or a culture or a time or a community where anyone was like, "Let's get this kid into therapy! You know, talk about it and you can make it okay. You can heal."

It wasn't until I left home, and I was in my 20s—and I wanted to say, I don't even blame anyone for that. Like, I'm 54. I grew up in a generation and also a socioeconomic class that like literally nobody I knew—nobody I knew went to therapy. I mean, that was just not like anything at all in my world.

[00:18:11] **John Moe:** It wasn't done. Yeah.

[00:18:14] **Cheryl Strayed:** And in my twenties, I did really—you know—think about this question you're asking, like what are the consequences of the traumas I've lived through? And then, of course in my 20s, the great trauma of my life is my mother died young of cancer at 45. And so, you know, I think in so many ways I don't—you know, I did lots and lots and lots of things in my 20s and 30s and 40s and into my 50s to heal myself, to come back to wholeness, to make—to repair. And right now, I feel like I don't—I don't have that trauma in

my body, you know? I don't think—I think I have come through the other side of some kind of healing.

But of course, the minute I say that I think we never know what will come up again later in our lives. And so, I say it with humility. To me, the definition of healing is to turn the ugly thing that happened to you into beauty. And I think I've definitely done that with those things I just talked about, and I've done it through my writing. You know? Which is kind of interesting, because I've been telling you like, “How did I have to listen deeply to myself? It was to trust that I was called to be a writer.” And it was through that writing that I made the ugly things into beautiful things, into words that were consoling and helpful and illuminating to others.

[00:19:38] **John Moe:** Do you think that you would be happy having listened to that—and happy is a such a loaded term, and I apologize—but do you think you would've been satisfied being where you are now having listened to that voice saying, “Be a writer, this is your calling,” if *Wild* hadn't sold, if *Tiny Beautiful Things* hadn't sold, if there was no Reese Witherspoon movie involved in all this, and you were just plodding along like so many other people who hear that voice.

[00:20:11] **Cheryl Strayed:** Yes. Yes. I think in the most significant way, yes. I do think it's also true that, wow, you know, to feel like that I actually have reached people with my sentences and stories, you know, is also a kind of—is a kind of healing, I guess. And like, you know, because I do have that sense of—there's something just tremendously satisfying about feeling like your words do like help others feel less alone. Because of course, when somebody says to me, “I feel less alone because of you,” what happens is I feel less alone too. Right? And so, it's actually this interesting kind of connection that's made.

And yet, what I also know is for one thing, you know, I was a successful writer before *Wild* was published. Now, what happened with *Wild* was just insane, right? Like this big explosion, this kind of volcanic success that I never could have imagined. But you know, before that—so, *Wild* was published when I was, when I was 41. And before that, I had been a writer all those years since my early 20s—late teens, early 20s. I've been publishing work, writing work. You know, my work was read, but in a—just a much smaller community and circle of people. My first novel, *Torch*, I always say, you know, there are like 50,000 people out there who were like my little literary orbit before the thing happened with *Wild*.

And so, I think that that the reality for most writers is that, you know, we do connect. I mean, to me, even if 10 people said, “Wow, you know, I feel changed by something you wrote, or I feel recognized by something you wrote, or consoled,” like that, to me, is the connection that I need to feel like I did that thing that I was hoping to do, making the ugly thing into something beautiful. Now, if your next question is like, “Well, what if nobody had ever read it, and you were sitting alone in a room writing work that never made it anywhere in the world,” um, yeah, I still think that there would be something about my essential need to turn experience that was painful into stories that are—you know, if not uplifting, at least true. I do think in just that, that act to me is cathartic.

[00:22:30] **John Moe:** From my experiences writing and even making podcasts, which I'm sure—I know you're familiar with both those things, obviously—there is something magical

about sitting in the small room. I always get back to this idea of the small room, and then you make these words and these sentences and these paragraphs, and you send them out into the world. And then, I always think it's something of a miracle when the echo comes back to you. You know, somebody says, "Hey, I read that, or I listened to that, and it had this effect on me." It still feels like magic to me. It still feels like alchemy of a kind.

[00:23:05] **Cheryl Strayed:** Absolutely. That's what it is. I mean, it feels—and it feels like a gift—you know?—that, you know, you do this work alone, and then this—and this gift is given to you. And I wanna say like it is absolutely far and away my highest achievement. You know, a lot of good stuff happened. Oprah, Reese Witherspoon, like all of those—all of those things, right? The movie, the show. Yeah. On and on. What matters the most to me? You know, the thing that feels like the greatest, most exciting gift I've ever received in response to my writing is that thing you're talking about—is somebody saying, "Thank you," essentially. "Thank you for writing that, because I saw myself in you."

And it's interesting, as we're talking about this, I just remembered—so, lately I've been doing—I've been transcribing my journals. I don't keep a journal much anymore, but I—all through my—from the age of 19 until actually the day I finished writing the very first full draft of *Wild*, so in 2010—I kept a journal. And I decided to transcribe all of these journals. It's just been this months' long project where I just sit down, and I type into a Word document whatever I wrote in the journal. Which, you know, it's a little bit sometimes embarrassing, (*chuckles*) because it's like, "Oh, what was I thinking?!" You know. I'm saying all these things in my 20s that, oh my goodness, I'm glad I'm not in my 20s anymore.

But the last entry, which is fascinating for me now to look back on—the very last entry of the last journal I kept is me writing about having finished *Wild*, the first full draft of *Wild*. So, I'm writing this journal entry. Nobody in the world has read *Wild* yet, except me. Right? (*Chuckles.*) So—and I'm saying to myself on the page, "I'll never be the same again. I'm changed because of the things I wrote." And that's what I'm talking about, like the ways that—you know, I felt whole in a way by the time I came to the end of that book.

And then, yes. Does it help that then it did get read and it did get published and people did say like, "Ooh, it helped me too." Yes. But I think it did begin with that essential—I mean, I actually have a document that says, "I feel transformed by this experience," which is I think kind of interesting.

[00:25:28] **John Moe:** Yeah, that's, uh—that's good reporting that you were able to do right there on the spot. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:25:31] **Cheryl Strayed:** I know! And I had forgotten I'd written that, but it was fun when I came across it. I was like, "Wow. Yeah. That's the power of writing in my life."

[00:25:37] **John Moe:** Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) Good one, Cheryl. Yeah. You've talked a little bit about trauma, and I know we've touched on anxiety. Have you ever been diagnosed with an actual mental disorder, something that has an acronym or a name attached to it?

[00:25:53] **Cheryl Strayed:** I haven't. I haven't. And I've had experience with it in that I've been close to people who have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders and depression, and so

I've learned a lot about it. But myself, I never have. And I've sometimes, you know, reflected on—it took me years to even understand what anxiety was. And I do think that this thing that I've like called my ITS or whatever, like you know, clearly that's an anxiety voice in me. But I've never been—I don't feel like, you know—I don't feel like I have an anxiety disorder. So, no, I haven't been.

[00:26:31] **John Moe:** Yeah, so it's never—you haven't been able to chalk up the anxiety to an interference in the managing and functioning of your life?

[00:26:42] **Cheryl Strayed:** I haven't. I will say that there was a time, really, right before I decided to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, when I was—there was this year that was a couple years after my mom died. It was this year that I had split up with my husband—my husband, who I'd married very young—and I had started using heroin with a boyfriend who I met, or a guy I met who sort of became my boyfriend at the same time that he was like, “Hey, do you wanna try heroin?” And I really do think—and that's right before I started—you know, decided to go hike the Pacific Crest Trail.

So, those months, that year that proceeded my hike on the PCT were very much the bottom points in my life. And I've really reflected on that a lot. Like, was I in a—was I in a depression then? Because I—certainly, it's the only time in my life that I really did understand in a very deep way, like in my body, this idea of like, “Why should I go on living?” You know? I didn't really have an answer to that. It didn't feel like I needed to. And you know, I do in reflection think, “Okay. I was in probably what would've been a diagnosable depression at that time.” I didn't have the money or the resources to have a therapist, but you know, it was very much—I think of it as the bottom point of my life.

I mean, I say that even in *Wild*, like it was from that place that I realized, you know, I cannot go on living this way, because I cannot go on living if I stay this way. And so, I've—the way I figured out how to get out of that was hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, and I've never been back in that place again.

[00:28:32] **John Moe:** Yeah. What makes you say yes to heroin? You must have known what heroin was. You must have known the effect it had. What was that decision making process about?

[00:28:45] **Cheryl Strayed:** (*Laughs.*) I love—I love that we're giving it the big word “decision making process”.

[00:28:50] **John Moe:** (*Laughing.*) What were your series of deliberations on that?

[00:28:52] **Cheryl Strayed:** It's funny, 'cause you know, the grownup me—and like, when I was writing about this experience, in *Wild*—you know, the grownup me could see so clearly what I couldn't see then. And it was a perfect storm of a number of things. First of all, you know, it was the '90s. It was Portland, Oregon. The whole grunge scene was—you know, it was a very—it was very cool. I mean, I don't know any other way to say it. It was very cool to do heroin. I was in my 20s, and therefore just sort of in my wild days, if you will. And I was an orphan. My mother had died. I didn't have a father. I didn't have anyone. I didn't really have anyone who was genuinely keeping track of me. Of course, I had friends who loved me,

but you know, they were all their other 20-somethings. And I really had this strong compulsion in me to be reckless.

In some ways, what I can see now is I was in some ways saying, “Okay. Okay, universe, you know, you tried to wreck me. Now, I'm gonna actually wreck myself. I'm gonna ruin my life to—by way of showing you how much my mother mattered.” You know, my mother who had died at 45, was such an extraordinary person. But you know, on paper she was just the most ordinary woman of all, and it was so unbearable. I had that feeling that a lot of people have when they lose somebody essential that, you know, how can the world go on when in fact my world has ended? And so, it was in that time that I was trying to figure out like who am I without my mother? How do I become a woman? How do I live without my mom in the world?

And so, I thought, “You know, I'm gonna honor her by just—by not living, by wrecking myself.” And so, heroin was a really great way to do it, really effective. And yet, what's also true when I was at that bottom point, I had this kind of—you know, there was also, here we go: the inner voice! That deep, deep, deep, deep voice within me, who knew exactly who I was, rose up inside of me and said, “You can't do this. You're wrong. You cannot ruin your life. And ruining your life is not honoring your mother. It is not loving your mother. It is not showing the world that this woman was extraordinary. The way to do that is to thrive.” And it was then that I—you know, I really did reverse course. I had found out I was pregnant by my heroin addict boyfriend.

I knew I was not—you know, I just was in on the wrong path. And I do think that in the end, what I—you know, that deep inner voice within me, what that was really connected to is the ways that my mother had loved me. She'd loved me too well, really, for me to let me ruin myself. And so, I said, “No. Okay. I have to—I have to take a different course.” And that's really when I decided to go hike the Pacific Crest Trail. And it wasn't to like turn into somebody else. It was actually just to walk me back to myself, which I really think that is true for all of us. You know, I think that we were all born whole. We are all born courageous and beautiful and good. And healing is a way back to that. Not—you know, I mean, obviously there's transformation involved. We do change and evolve as we grow. But you know, I always begin from that place that we—that, you know, we were good to begin with. You know?

I don't have to become somebody else to be good. I simply have to become me again.

[00:32:45] **Transition:** Staccato acoustic guitar.

[00:32:47] **John Moe:** More with Cheryl Strayed in a moment.

(Music ends.)

[00:33:02] **Promo:**

Music: Suspenseful, orchestral music.

Maddy Myers: *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom.*

Kirk Hamilton: *Diablo 4.*

Jason Schreier: *Final Fantasy XVI.*

Maddy: *Street Fighter 6.*

Kirk: *Baldur's Gate 3.*

Jason: *Starfield.*

Kirk: *Spider-Man 2!*

Jason: *Master Detective: Archive's Raincoat* for Nintendo Switch!? No? Is that just me?

(They laugh.)

Maddy: It's a huge time for video games.

Kirk: You need somebody to tell you what's good, what's not so good, and what's amazing.

Jason: I'm Jason Schreier.

Maddy: I'm Maddy Myers.

Kirk: And I'm Kirk Hamilton. We're the hosts of *Triple Click*, a videogame podcast for anyone who likes games.

Maddy: Find us at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts. Bye!

(Music fades out.)

[00:33:43] **Transition:** Relaxed guitar.

[00:33:45] **John Moe:** Back with the author Cheryl Strayed.

(Music ends.)

What role then, if—'cause I think people are gonna be listening to this and thinking, "Well, I want to listen to that inner voice. I wanna listen to that wise voice, the one who does make me feel good. But how do I manage all the shame that has brought me to where I am now,

that's brought me to a place that I don't want to be? That shame that gets down on me for being who I am.”

Because it seems like that, and the wise inner voice are almost opposites of each other and kind of pulling in opposite directions. So, how do you—how do you cut loose that shame?

[00:34:35] **Cheryl Strayed:** Well, (*laughing*) you are asking such hard questions, John! I'm gonna lose my license as Dear Sugar.

[00:34:41] **John Moe:** Welcome to *Depresh Mode*, Cheryl Strayed!

[00:34:44] **Cheryl Strayed:** I love that like thousands of years of people trying to—you know—get rid of shame, and I'm supposed to answer this question on your podcast. So, um—

[00:34:53] **John Moe:** Hey, man. You know, no one forced you to be an advice columnist.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:34:58] **Cheryl Strayed:** So, let me just say—here's what I think. You're right, and I think shame is just an absolutely—there's nothing good that comes from shame, and the only—the only way I know how to eradicate it or at least diminish it is to tell the truth as often as possible in as many venues as possible. And maybe it does begin in a private venue, like in your journal. I remember there was a point in my 20s that I decided that my rule for my journal would be that I would tell the truth there, you know? No matter what. I would write what I actually thought and felt, what I actually had said and done. I would write that in my journal. And even that—just, you know, allowing some sort of oxygen in. And then what happens is then you feel like maybe I'm safe telling somebody about this, these thoughts, these actions, whatever it is. Right?

And then maybe that expands. Maybe you write an essay about it that gets published! I mean, you know, I think when I think about like those early things I wrote—there's an essay I wrote called “The Love of My Life” that's—actually one of the episodes of the show is actually based on that essay—and I remember when it was published just feeling like this immense shame. Like, who would write about her sexual promiscuity and her profound, weird grief. And then, another essay I wrote, called “Heroin”, where I write about like my drug use. Like, who would tell these terrible stories about herself? And what I found is, you know, taking that risk, telling the truth about the things that I was ashamed of—the act of writing it, you know, alleviated something in me.

But then the act of connecting, you know, telling other people about it—what they all said back to me is not “shame on you”. They said, “Me too, me too.” And then, the shame evaporates, because it's pretty easy to look at other people and say, “Oh, honey—you know, you're not a terrible person. You're not a bad person. You're just a person.” And when you start to be able to do that, give that generosity and love to other people, you maybe start to give a little bit of that back to yourself. And so, you know, I think that just finding a way, you know, like finding a way to bring light into those dark corners of yourself, those—where you tuck the shame away—that's how we begin to lose it.

I don't know! What do you think? What's worked for you?

[00:37:35] **John Moe:** Well, I think that—like you say—exposing the shame to the sunlight is a huge step, because it wants to hide in the shadows, and it wants to not be spoken about. And so much of—so much shame can be so—can be so common. Like you say, when you start comparing it to what other people have been through and the kindness that that is much easier to extend to other people than to yourself—about, “Oh, I'm ashamed of this. I'm ashamed of this mistake that I made or this series of mistakes that I made.”

You know, a friend or someone who loves you can forgive you and can say, “Yeah, that's a thing that happened, and now we move forward.” I think the big challenge is seeing the logic of, “Oh, why can't you just be that kind back to yourself?” And then, making that leap to actually doing it. That seems to me where the real hurdle is. And it can almost be more frustrating, 'cause you can say, “Well, of course I should just extend this kindness that I extend others—I should extend that onto myself as well.” But actually doing it, that seems to be the tricky bit to me.

[00:38:56] **Cheryl Strayed:** For sure. And it's—as you know, it's not something that you do in a day. So, you know, first you tell the truth, if you can—even alone to your journal, even if you write it down on the computer screen and then press delete. That's something. But I think the next thing is actively rewriting that story that you've told yourself, because of course, shame is about a story that you've internalized that has sometimes been told directly to you, you know, by the culture, your parents, your religion. “You're bad. You did a wrong thing. You shouldn't want this or think that.” Right?

[00:39:32] **John Moe:** Yeah. “You are the kind of person who does bad things. You are—” Yeah.

[00:39:35] **Cheryl Strayed:** Exactly. And you need to actually take that story and say, you know—I mean that's an ITS. That's an ITS story, right? And say, “No, no, no, actually I'm done listening to you. I'm done being—you know, receiving that false story about myself. And I'm gonna rewrite this story about myself.” So much of our journey to wellness—which sounds like so foo-foo! I'm sorry. A journey to wellness! But you know, I just—I wanna say, you know, “Dear Sugar”, it's like—obviously, it's a grittier kind of self-help that—I mean, I never imagined I would have anything to do with self-help. I'm not—I didn't—when I was writing the “Dear Sugar” column, I didn't know that that's what it was. When the book came out, it was like in the self-help section. I was like, “What?”

[00:40:17] **John Moe:** That term's pretty loaded, these days.

[00:40:21] **Cheryl Strayed:** But you know, the journey to wellness—which I say with a straight face—is about taking control of the narrative and letting your story evolve and moving yourself to the center of your own story, being the agent of your life and saying, “Okay, I've been told that I am weak or stupid or wrong. And I am going to say now that's not true. I'm brave. I'm strong. I'm right. I'm competent. I can guide my own life.” And you know, that takes a lot of time. But that is totally possible, and I have done it myself, and everyone I know who has saved themselves has done it too. I'm gonna guess including you.

[00:41:08] **John Moe:** I think so. It's a—you know, it's a process like everything. You're transcribing these journals. Are you going to publish the journals?

[00:41:18] **Cheryl Strayed:** I don't think so. I mean, you know, I really—I haven't even thought that far. Honestly, I thought it would be an interesting thing to do, both creatively and personally, and so I don't know what the outcome will be. I can tell you that I'm doing it right now, and I think that the reason I'm doing it—that it's important that I'm doing it right now—is I really am at this big becoming in my life, in the same way that in my 20s—if hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was this way of becoming or moving from one place in my life to the next.

I feel like I'm kind of going through now a different kind of becoming. My kids are a junior and senior in high school. It's been a very hard few years, the past few years. Uh, you know, the two times in my life that have been emotionally the most devastating and difficult were the years in my 20s, early 20s when my mom died, and then these past few years. And I feel like I have to look back and figure out like where I've been and where I'm going. My kids will be leaving the nest over the next couple of years, and I am moving into what I call my crone age. My, you know, my—that next chapter of my life where I'm just in the world in a slightly different way.

And so, it's pretty cool. Like, for me at this point, the transcription project feels really more like that at this point. Like, it really is not so much about something I'm gonna publish, but something I just want to see within my myself that—who knows—might lead to something that I write about.

[00:42:59] **John Moe:** Are you finding things that younger you was saying that are explaining things about modern you that you didn't realize?

[00:43:08] **Cheryl Strayed:** Well, the thing that's just striking is how absolutely, clearly I needed to be a writer. And how absolutely, clearly I have always been riddled with anxiety and doubt and fear about writing. So, the things that I was writing—I mean, literally I have a journal entry at like 19 saying, “Am I a writer? Can I be a writer? Do I have anything to say? Can I do this? It's scary.” You know, I say that over and over, all along the way. And what's funny is I still think all that stuff.

(They laugh.)

I know that people don't believe that. People don't believe that, because here I am now. You know, I've written a lot, and yet—and there's something kind of sweet about that, actually. Like, I kind of love that inside my relationship with my writing has never changed. I do think of it as like the great, unbroken thread of my life. And so, that's been interesting, and I think the most painful thing about the transcriptions for me is this thing I'm talking about. Like, you know, how hard it was for me sometimes to simply trust myself, just to trust what I knew was the right thing for me to do, to be brave enough to follow through on what I knew was the right thing to do, and how I agonized about certain things, and—because I was afraid to act and afraid to cause pain or experience pain. And then, what happened is I only caused more pain, because I was afraid to trust myself.

[00:44:50] **John Moe:** Hm. Is—and I'm really interested in this whole transcription project that you're doing. Are you kinder to yourself now, having read through these things and worked—you know, reworked those words and retyped those words and kind of relived those experiences?

[00:45:07] **Cheryl Strayed:** Absolutely. I think that—I think that most of us become, with age, kinder to ourselves. I think that that's—you know, you hear a lot of people—a lot of people, once you've reached the age of—I don't know—45 or over, people start saying, “What's the advice you'd give your younger self?”

And of course, there's—the title column of *Tiny Beautiful Things* is just that question: what would you give your 20-something self? And what I say and what I hear echoes in a lot of other people is it boils down to, “I would say to myself it's gonna be okay. And you know, you're doing just great. And be kinder to yourself. Be more generous with yourself. Be gentler.” And I certainly feel that reading the words I wrote so long ago, wanting—you know, wishing I could go back in time and just put my arms around my younger self and say, “You know, this is hard now, and it will be hard again.” I mean, that's the thing I just told you. The last few years have been the second hardest few years of my life. You know, it will be hard again.

But I think that the difference—the biggest difference in my life is—even in these last few years, where it's been so hard, even as I, you know, fall on my knees and cry some days, really actually—what I know is that it's gonna be okay, that I can go on, that this is hard right now, and it won't be hard forever. And you just have to keep moving forward. In my younger years, I described that feeling of depression I had for you, you know, earlier. Like, that before I hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, asking myself, “Well, what is the meaning? Why am I here? Why am I here if this is so hard and I'm suffering so much?” Now I have that wider perspective that is more gentle, that says, “Suffering is part of life, and you're strong enough to endure it, and there are brighter days ahead.”

[00:46:59] **John Moe:** Holding the microphone up to the wise inner voice, it's Cheryl Strayed. The TV series is *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Cheryl Strayed, thank you so much.

[00:47:08] **Cheryl Strayed:** Oh, it was wonderful to talk to you, John. Thank you for the very, very, very hard questions.

[00:47:13] **John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) They call me Moperah Winfrey.

(*Cheryl laughs.*)

Nobody calls me that.

[00:47:19] **Cheryl Strayed:** I love it though! It's good.

[00:47:22] **Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

[00:47:29] **John Moe:** The entire season of *Tiny Beautiful Things* is available now on Hulu. Next time on *Depresh Mode*, figuring out how to deal with a narcissist can be tricky, even for the narcissist.

[00:47:42] **Speaker:** One of the hallmarks of narcissism is lack of awareness. So, it's not like they wake up in the morning and say, "Oh, you know what? I feel really bad about myself, so I'm gonna go out and be really arrogant and expect everybody to pay a lot of attention to me, 'cause I think that'll make me feel better today." They have no insight, no self-awareness. This is how their personality has grown up over time, probably since childhood.

[00:48:09] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* exists because people donate to it so that it can go out in the world and help other people. It's a team effort. If you have donated already to the show, we thank you very much, and you are a big help to what we're doing. If you haven't donated yet, it's easy to do so. Just go to MaximumFun.org/join. Find a level that works for you, and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. Be sure to hit subscribe. Give us five stars, write rave reviews. All of that helps get the show out into the world where, again, it can help folks.

The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7 for free in the United States by calling 988. Just those three numbers. 988. The Crisis Text Line, also free and always available. Text the word "home" to 741741.

Our Instagram and Twitter are both [@DepreshPod](https://www.instagram.com/DepreshPod). If you're on Facebook, look up our mental health discussion group, Preshies. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack. Search that up. I'm on Twitter [@JohnMoe](https://twitter.com/JohnMoe). Instagram [@JohnMoe](https://www.instagram.com/JohnMoe). Also, please use our electric mail address, depresshmode@maximumfun.org if you want to get in touch with us.

Hi, credits listeners, who would you choose your wise inner voice to sound like? I think I might go with the actor, Richard Kind. Or Emmylou Harris, or possibly Floyd, the guitar player from *The Muppets*. Yeah, probably Floyd.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. The show is produced by Gabe Mara. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson, and we get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, "Building Wings".

[00:49:50] **Music:** "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

[00:50:26] **Hannah:** Hi. This is Hannah, from Melbourne, just wanting to say: if you are going through hell, keep on going. There's good stuff on the other side.

[00:50:37] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

(Music fades out.)

[00:50:47] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[00:50:48] **Speaker 1:** MaximumFun.org.

[00:50:50] **Speaker 2:** Comedy and culture.

[00:50:51] **Speaker 3:** Artist owned.

[00:50:52] **Speaker 4:** Audience supported.