

My Story

As mentioned on my home page I grew up in Germany, more precisely in the North West, close to the North Sea. I spent the first half of my life there before coming to North America on a work visa. I grew up with an older brother and a younger sister in the outskirts of a small town of about 12,000. My older brother had taken the spot of rebel so I chose to be the responsible child, come home with good grades, do my chores, be as independent as I could be, and make my parents proud.

My parents were both born at the end of the 2nd World War and lived through the difficult post war depression. My paternal grandfather was a prisoner of war in Russia for several years after the war had ended. I perceived him to be a harsh and controlling person, not much fun to be around. I remember when he got sick in his later years, he did not want my grandmother to handle the finances or pay the bills – that was his job despite the fact that he was bedridden. My maternal grandmother was pregnant with her first child before getting married, which caused a lot of shame in the late 1930's. She was emotionally withdrawn. My grandfather passed away when I was about six years old. She never remarried, thus lived a large part of her life in solitude. I think it is fair to say that both sides of my parent's parents carried trauma. Neither my grandparents nor my parents ever had access to counselling or other forms of therapy as it may be available and more acceptable today. They made the best out of what was available to them at the time.

I am not getting into this history out of blame, but out of the realization that I am a product of my parents and they are a product of their parents and so on. As children we take in our environment and learn from it. We are dependent on our parents for a long time and they are most often our primary caregivers. They feed us, they cloth us, they set boundaries, they love us, they teach us, they are our role models. In childhood we form messages and beliefs based on the experience we have with the people we trust and depend on most (primary caregivers). We absorb some of their emotional energy and their behaviour. As grownups we may find ourselves perplexed at times how much we resemble our parents, whether we like it or not.

My father, like his dad, could be quite harsh and controlling. He resorted to physical punishment to discipline us, especially when he was enraged. He could also be a lot of fun when he was in a good mood. I do not remember the reason, but I never forget my father chasing my brother and I out the front door trying to kick us literally in the bud. We were running for our lives and did not dare to come home until hours later, hoping he had cooled down enough. One day we were all gathered around the dining table in the kitchen for dinner when his chair decided to break and he ended up sitting on the floor. You would have heard a needle drop – not one of us knew whether he would go into a rage or burst out laughing. In this instance he did the latter and we all had a good laugh together. When starting 4th grade I and some of my school friends had to switch schools. We got a German teacher that dictated at a speed we could not follow. We were simply not used to her way of teaching and she had no interest in accommodating us. I came home crying, failing the class miserably. The very next day my father picked us up for each of her classes and took us back to school afterwards until the school principal replaced that teacher. This is also the way my father could be, very stubborn and determined, in this case protecting me and my school friends. After I had moved to North America, I frequently called him. It was always me initiating the calls and yet I could hardly get a word in. I felt like a little boy for many of these calls. He mostly talked about himself and his business adventures, I listened. Very seldom was I able to share my stories with him. To this day it makes me sad that he never made the choice to come and visit me in my new life, find out who I have become, wanting a deeper, more meaningful connection with me.

While my father could show some emotions, mainly anger and joy, my mother chose to push down most of her emotions. She was a very quiet person and only on occasion stood up to protect us children from our father when he was in one of his rages. Mom was responsible and dependable, a worker bee. She managed the household with a large flower and vegetable garden and once all of us children were in school, she started working part time on top of it. She was a great cook and her cooking and her kitchen were her pride. She was always frugal with money. When my parents split, she managed to support us children through a challenging time. This period was very hard on her and she ended up with a nervous breakdown landing her in a clinic for 3 weeks where she could take care of herself and recover, gain some strength. Mom remarried and she tried to make a better choice for

herself the 2nd time around. I believe she never forgave herself for yet another marriage that did not create the deep connection and partnership she yearned for. She suffered, but she tried to hide it, not wanting to burden the people she loved. My mom was the only person in my family that regularly phoned me and asked how I was doing. The phone conversations were not deep and we did not share our feelings, but she was missing me as much as I missed her. I am very grateful I was able to support and be with her when she lost her fight with cancer.

Coming out of my teen years I left my home in stages. When my mom moved in with her new husband and got married, I was still apprenticing and slept some nights in my sister's apartment and some nights at my mom's – I was floating for a few months, did not really have a home anymore. Afterwards during my compulsory civil service, I lived at the home for disadvantaged youth where I did the service. I moved a bit further away while in University and two of those semesters I was living in The Netherlands. It was after getting my Engineering degree that I was given the opportunity to move to North America for work.

I remember carrying a lot of anger during my civil service. It was often directed at women and I was controlling and demanding rather than loving. It felt like I was incapable of having healthy romantic relationships. While in University I fell deeply in love and I was devastated and grieved for many months when that relationship fell apart. In a way it was a wake-up call for me and I stopped using women to try and feel good about myself. I did not have another romantic relationship until I met my wife years later.

Describing my behaviour at that time, I could be harsh, controlling, stubborn, determined, responsible, dependable, driven, angry bordering on the verge of rage, a perfectionist, frugal with money to the point where I would spend very little on myself for pleasure and enjoyment, more deeply connected with what I do than with who I am or who I am with. And here I thought I was doing very well, especially at work, contributing to the success of the companies I was working for. Yet, I was getting feedback how tough I was and that I was sometimes harsh and out of line. I observed myself being angry a lot when things would not go my way at work and at home. I started to dislike myself and the way I showed up.

Instead I focused on work and it became my sole purpose in life. Work carried so much of my identity that later it had a negative impact on my marriage and others

close to me. I remember many times I would be torn apart between getting some more work done or going on a date with her. Sometimes I am just astonished my wife stuck with me through these times, challenged me and my behaviours, fought verbal battles with me, slept in separate bedrooms, let me run away and come back. And running away I wanted to do so often. One of the pivotal moments for me was her saying *"I am your ally and not your enemy"*. That changed something in me. She was not trying to punish me, but support and help. She was seeing something in me that I myself could not grasp.

I was living in toxic shame. I believed about myself I was not good enough, not lovable, not wanted, not worthy, not belonging. These are the stories I told and the beliefs I had about myself from childhood. I was trying to be a good boy for getting recognition, for my parents to see me, yet it never seemed enough. I wanted them to tell me how proud I made them. I wanted them to love me, which in the story I created they did not. I tell myself to this date if I had been a girl, my parents never would have had a 3rd child. In other words, they would have been much happier if I had been a girl.

In 2012 a friend of mine invited me to this men's weekend. I had no idea what it was really about. I just knew I wanted to do something for myself and I was longing for connection with other men, something that has not always been easy for me. The weekend was organized by Mankind Project Canada (MKP) and it was called the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTA). An opportunity to start taking a look at myself in a deeper way and to unearth these negative beliefs I had about myself. On this weekend on a magic carpet my father was temporarily brought back from death and I was able to tell him how much I missed and loved him. He in turn told me how much he loved me and how proud he was of me. I was able to deeply connect with a part of me I was hiding from myself. I came home with a new mission, a way of moving forward in my life, and the knowledge that I am good enough and lovable just the way I am.

I have had other deep connections with other parts of my past since then, for example the father that physically punished me for having done something not to his liking. Learning how to feel and express my emotions in a safe way is a big part of the personal development work I do now. I do this by connecting with others in a weekly sharing circle. I learned if I stay silent, keep my emotions secret, and put

myself down through self-judgement, my negative beliefs and my shame will grow and fester. When I create awareness, know who I become and how I behave when shame surfaces, speak about it, share my story, and practice self-compassion, my shame will ultimately die.

You may wonder why I am doing this. Why would anyone go into his/her painful past and relive that part that has been perfectly buried for so long. For one I am being told I have mellowed a lot. I am happier. I am more alive than I have ever been. I pay attention. I have more presence and awareness. My relationships are more meaningful. I am able to connect more deeply. Today I can challenge myself and choose to be off work for a period of time, which in the past would have been unthinkable. I trust myself enough to be vulnerable and support others on their journey. I want to make the most out of this life I have right here and right now. I cannot do this when unconscious beliefs are dictating the way I live my life. So, rather than having unconscious patterns and beliefs determine how I show up in the world, I get to choose. It is not always easy, but I find it very rewarding.

For me this starts with taking responsibility for my actions rather than blaming others and finding fault in what they did to me. When I do the latter, I react and protect myself by projecting my issues and negative reactive emotions onto others. By owning my behaviour and my actions, I stop being a victim. It puts me in charge. This is easier said than done. To be honest with myself and to take responsibility for my behaviour can be very tough and challenging, especially when in a reactive emotional pattern. It will require changing relationship with self, it will require a ton of courage, and it may require you to start respecting and loving yourself.

I have made MKP part of my journey attending men's circles and staffing NWTAs weekends. It keeps me working on my shame, negative beliefs, and the patterns that no longer serve me. Just because I have been doing personal development work now for a number of years does not mean I am done with it. To me this has become and will remain part of my life. Recently, I was staffing an NWTAs and I wrongly believed I could disconnect my alarm from automatic updates including the time change from Saturday to Sunday. I ended up getting up an hour later than intended and I missed a morning circle where I had a speaking part. Even though I was assured it was no big deal, my shame and belief that I need to be perfect in order to feel worthy and be loved and accepted showed up. The old me would have

gone into hiding and I got up to do just that, to sulk and reaffirm how bad and unlovable I am. But I caught myself in time and stayed in the room where I started to express my feelings. I started sobbing and one of the other men on staff kept me company, held the space for me, and listened as I shared my story. Instead of reaffirming my old shame pattern I was able to release that shame and connect with myself and the world around me. I felt empowered and alive.

Having this awareness allows me to show up different in my relationships, whether it is with friends, family, my grandchildren, or my wife. I most often can be aware when a reactive emotional pattern gets triggered up and rather than projecting it on that person, I own it. This eliminates unnecessary struggles and fights and it allows me to be more present with the people around me. In turn, my relationships notice this change in me and respond differently. This does not mean that I take on all responsibility for anything that happens in the relationship. Self-love requires me to also take care of my feelings and to set my boundaries. While navigating this can be challenging, sharing and communicating feelings and triggers while still owning them, can be a very effective tool to help loved ones understand. With this in mind, overall relationships deepen and become more loving.

As I pointed out previously, work (and also money) have been a big part of my life and my identity. When doing a good job and making good money, I feel proud of myself and my accomplishments. It makes me happy when I complete a task, I do a good job, and I get paid well. As a recovering perfectionist I have very high standards when it comes to the quality of my work. If you can identify with this pattern, you may understand that me choosing not to work for a period of time, not to earn money, creates a lot of stress. I am learning to sit in this discomfort and be alert, watch my reactions and coping mechanisms. With the support of my wife I get to imprint new beliefs such as “it is okay”, “I have enough”, “I am enough”, “I am lovable despite the lack of income”.

Work is about doing, mainly living from the neck up. When in my head, not in touch with the rest of my body, I feel disconnected from myself and my surroundings. Connecting with my body, with spirit, with nature, is about being. I feel the most open and connected when I am doing, spring into action, from a place of being. In that space I am in touch with self, I am present, I can relate to others openly and with love and compassion.

Changing my career from a technical consultant for electronic hardware and FPGA design, to becoming a (technical) mentor and coach, requires me to connect with and believe in myself. It takes courage to move out of my comfort zone and into something that is new and unknown. There will be many fears and triggers on the way, but I do not let them dictate and diminish my life's mission.