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VOICES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

*Bold, Brave, and Brilliant Women  
Who Make a Difference*

GAIL WATSON





## FINDING COURAGE IN YOUR STORY

*Terry Sidford*

It was 1970 and I was living in Encinitas, California. I was eight years old. My sister and I were in our bedroom when suddenly she blurted out, “Terry, grab whatever you can—we have to leave tonight.”

“*What?* Tonight? Why?”

“Mom and Jerry have never been this drunk, and something might happen to us.”

Frightened and confused, I grabbed a pillowcase and put whatever clothes were on the floor inside. “Debi, I can’t leave my goldfish. Can we take them with us?”

“No, Terry, we have to walk to Dad’s house *now*.”

We ran out of our apartment in the dark toward my father’s apartment. My sister had called him and told him we were coming, and he ran out to find us. As we walked across the railroad tracks, I remember feeling like a homeless person escaping something dangerous. My father found us and took us to his bachelor pad. We never lived with our mother again.

My father was a counselor at the community college. He was loving and kind, but he was a free spirit, to say the least. He did his best to cook us healthy meals—mainly tuna casseroles and lentil soups.

I was the youngest of three children. My sister left home right after high school, and my brother (who had also eventually moved in with our dad) graduated early. I was the only one left at home when my father’s girlfriend moved in.

When I was in high school, my father’s girlfriend and I didn’t get along. I was unhappy and insecure. Not only did I have an alcoholic mother, but now I was unhappy at home living what seemed to be an unstable life with my father. I left high school my junior year to live with my sister in Arizona.

My self-esteem was so low that I couldn't bring myself to enroll in another high school there. I decided to get a job and work instead.

Years later I obtained a GED, which is equivalent to a high school diploma. I should have been proud, but I still felt ashamed for not finishing high school.

Having an alcoholic mother who couldn't care for me and being a high school dropout only added to all my other insecurities. To compensate, my outward appearance became more polished so no one could see the pain on the inside.

In my twenties, I worked in the medical field, becoming an angiographer and surgical assistant. During this time, I met my first husband. He was kind, stable, and reliable. We had two beautiful children, Alex and Connor. Eventually, though, I became restless. I felt I was living an inauthentic life that kept me from expressing my true feelings and emotions. My husband liked that I worked full-time because of the income, but he also wanted me to be a full-time mother. I tried to tell him it was impossible to be a perfect mother and still work full-time, but he wouldn't listen.

Finally, through much soul-searching, I faced my fears and doubts about making it on my own. I believed in something inside of me that said: "You will be all right; trust this voice." After that, I bravely gave myself permission to pursue my dream of becoming a pharmaceutical representative, even though I did not have a college degree. I wanted this job so badly that I applied for it with nothing more than faith in myself. And you know what? I got it!

This gave me the confidence and courage I needed to make the tough decision to initiate a divorce. It was hard because I knew I would get tremendous disapproval from everyone around me. But I found strength I never knew I had. It took courage and heart to know that my two sweet sons would be better off with a mother who was whole rather than one who was broken. It was as if a force deep inside me knew I had no other choice but to live my truth, and that truth would sustain me.

This was my first step in finding my courage. At that moment I changed my life story from one of being insecure and ashamed to one of infinite possibilities.

As the years went on, I remarried and started a career in life coaching that led me to work with women. I found it curious that many women were incredibly brave, but they never saw it in themselves. I wanted to find out

why. I created a survey on courage and found one hundred women willing to take it. I compiled my findings into stories, each illustrating a different aspect of a woman's courage. When I finished, the stories became my book *100 Hearts: Inspiring Stories from the Women Who Lived Them*.

One evening I gave a presentation at a women's book club, and one of the ladies asked for examples of my own courage. I was completely taken aback. *My own courage? What do I say?* I answered weakly, "I find courage in my day-to-day life." I went home and thought about it. I knew it had taken courage for me to get a divorce; it took courage to pursue a new career. Yet I still felt ashamed of what had happened in my life. But when I thought about how I had survived the dark times in my life, I realized that my ability to survive pain, abandonment, humiliation, and self-doubt from my past took tremendous courage. Overcoming shame and embarrassment took a huge amount of courage too. That night I reaffirmed my choice to make the shift from "I am ashamed and embarrassed" to "I find my strength and courage in my stories."

You deserve to be seen, heard, loved, and valued regardless of your life story. Acknowledging the courage that results from your life stories allows you to be seen and heard for who you are today. And being honest and open about yourself paves the way for others around you to do the same.



*Terry Sidford is a motivational TEDx speaker, author, professional coach, and television host who transforms audiences through sharing her life experiences of embarrassment, past failures, and triumphs. Terry inspires audiences to write new, courageous chapters of their own life stories. She and her family live in beautiful Park City, Utah.*

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