

# From Sorrow to Joy

## How One of My Darkest Moments Continues to Shine

ANDRÉS CORREA

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At around 7:00 p.m. on Monday, April 13, 2015, exhausted by a hard workout, I saw five missed calls from my dad. My plan had been to head home, shower, and spend the rest of the night preparing for my first trial, scheduled to start the next day at 9:00 a.m. But then I called him back.

All I remember from that call is the crash of his voice on my ear—a free-falling wail of pain. I don't remember his words, only that something was wrong with my mom. I said I was on my way, but somehow I knew that she was dead.

For a decade, depression and acute anxiety contaminated my mom's body and mind, like slow-burning, complementary plagues, leeches on her spirit. She had highs and lows, and during the lows (and even many of the highs), she began abusing the Xanax that a psychiatrist prescribed after a five-minute consult. She self-medicated with Xanax and clonazepam and alcohol, all to numb her pain and escape the grip of anxiety.

I walked onto my dad's back porch that Monday night, and he confirmed it: She was dead. Her death certificate says "Suicide," but because we know she often tried to numb herself with a mixture of legal drugs, she likely overdid it that night, by accident.

As we gathered in shock at my dad's house, I worked on my trial from one to four in the morning. I was a mid-level associate, trying my first case with Trey Cox, a name partner. I called him; I don't remember what I said, only that I couldn't get a full sentence out without breaking down crying.

Early on the morning of Tuesday, April 14, Trey told me he had moved teams of people and a justice system to continue the trial. He called our client, our opposing counsel, and then the court. And without exception, for the benefit of a lowly mid-level associate, all agreed to continue the trial. The power of that gesture still resonates.

This is the story of how that darkest of moments shone rays of light in the future—how that pain became my teacher, touching me and others around me, and how the lessons ultimately led me back to the joy of my mom's life and even death.

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### My Mother's Life and Death

My mom, Patricia Inda, was remarkable.

She was the life of every party. She danced, she drank, she laughed—she *laughed*. I still see her, fluttering from guest to guest at our house parties, engaging with them for hours on their lives. She asked piercing questions on the most sensitive topics. "You're gay, aren't you?" I remember her asking someone once. "Do you know how to use condoms? Because girls will want to sleep with you," she told me as I prepared for high school. But she had a disarming approach that invited connection.

And as a mother? It's hard to imagine receiving anything more than what she gave. She cooked for us every day, describing it as a labor of love. She would wake up at 5 a.m. for a brisk

walk, make herself an orange juice, and prepare four children for school. After that, she would leave for her full-time job as a teacher, where (among other things) she helped organize the school's teachers' union. On top of that, she would go out late with girlfriends every few months but remained always present for my dad as a friend, lover, and counselor.

Today I recognize her frailties—low self-esteem, patience often not deserved by those around her, and blind devotion to others at the expense of her own well-being. She self-medicated against anxiety most of her life.

Her death was a confusing haze of people, events, feelings, thoughts. "It's all so absurd," I remember thinking as I set up the chairs for her funeral. I remember crying most at the thought of my future children never meeting her. I remember questioning what else each of us could have done to save her, and all of the hugs and kisses I should have given her instead of my silly attempts to "advise" her out of depression. "You should be grateful for what you have!" I would say, or "You just need to go for a walk or a hike or take up a new hobby!"

But that's not how depression works.

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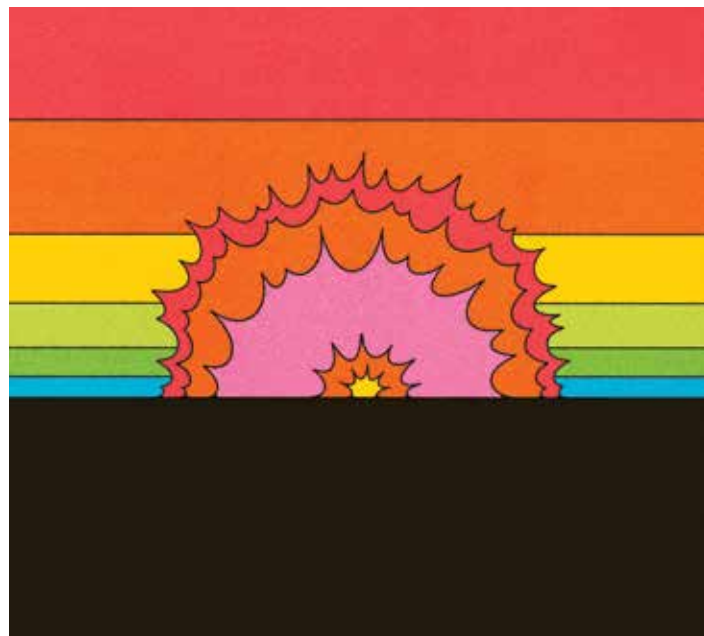
## Helping Others

I met Carlos just a few months before my mom died. He was a young lawyer, fresh off a federal clerkship where he shone after a couple of years working at a prestigious Los Angeles law firm. He had moved to Dallas for a local litigation firm; we met at one of the innumerable lawyer networking events around the city. He had a wonderful sense of humor and was the kind of lawyer who could spot issues no one else has spotted. By sheer capacity and hustle, Carlos had reached the highest levels of the profession at a young age.

There was an odd but immediate connection. I felt an almost comical urge to share information with him from the outset. I remember giving him relationship advice despite not having dated in a decade.

I learned the first signs of trouble for Carlos somewhat late in his associate career. By that time, I had made partner at my firm, and I was close with a couple of the partners at his firm. One of them mentioned to me that something seemed off with Carlos. As if he wasn't fully present or fully engaged in the work. As if his mind was elsewhere.

I shared my mom's story with Carlos. And he shared his own family stories, many of them painful. His story was, on the surface, a run-of-the-mill, middle-class story. The sort that no one highlights as evidence of an individual overcoming obstacles or odds. But he had battled to get to where he was, just as anyone else has. Out of respect for him, I will not share the details; suffice it to say that (as is true for so many of us) the soft traumas of early life still chased him, and they were becoming more debilitating.



Carlos was struggling. I learned that he wanted to end it all. I learned that depression and anxiety were his burden to bear as it had been my mother's.

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## Dreaming of My Mother

I have had four dreams involving my mom since her death. I call them "dreams" because, although they did not quite feel like other dreams do, I'm not sure what else to call them.

The first happened the day after she died as I lay in bed at my dad's house. In that twilight between wakefulness and sleep, I suddenly found myself looking down at the backyard, as if from the window of the second-story room where I lay. Suddenly, in the middle of the yard, my mom walked toward me and the house. She wore all white, and she was beautiful. By the time she died, her body has suffered the toll of a 10-year war with depression and anxiety. She had put on a lot of weight and showed visible signs of wear in her eyes, her skin, her hair. But not in this vision. As she walked toward me and the house, she looked pristine, perfect, beautifully bohemian. She had a rope tied to her waist, and the rope was anchored somewhere to the backyard. She simply walked toward me and the house. She was still there.

The second dream was a few weeks later. This time she and I were sitting on a porch that felt a little like, again, my dad's house. She now looked more like she did later in her life—older, overweight—but no wear and tear at all. Quite the opposite; she had the rounded cheeks of a baby, the shine of new skin, a glint in her eyes of promise and potential. Seated to my right, she points to an area just a few feet away, off to our right, where all I can see is a lush, dense green. She says, "I'm right there, not very far." And then: "But I can't say more or they will get mad at me!"

Illustration by Kate Dehler

The third was a year after that. I had been struggling for months with regrets over all of the love and affection I had failed to offer her in her final years. It was quietly tearing me apart. And one night on a work trip, I dreamed that I ran into her on a beach, somewhere in southern Chile, where we spent many family vacations traveling as children. She is looking at me and signaling to a sort of curved wall before her, concave, filled with pictures and images of our entire life as a family. She tells me, without words, “Don’t worry anymore! Look at all of the wonderful moments I have to look at, whenever I want to. There are so many! And I can review all of these moments, with them.” I ask her, “Who is ‘them?’” She doesn’t answer. So I ask her again, “Who is ‘them?’” She stares at me, frozen, as if running to the edge of a cliff ready to jump but stopping at the last second. And I wake up, bawling.

These three experiences, plus a handful of wonderful books, got me through my mom’s death, from numbed pain to latent sadness. Grief is odd. At any given moment, a wave of sadness would wash over me, as if arriving with the breeze to caress my heart.

The journey to joy began with the fourth, and final (so far), dream. This one happened in 2021, many years after the third dream.

I fell asleep on a Saturday night and dreamed I was back in my teenage bedroom. My mom and dad were both there, encouraging me to clean up some old things in my room, things that were gathering dust. I remember two things in particular: one of the original Barack Obama posters, the one with the word “HOPE” across the front, sitting in a pile of old posters; and a glass case collecting my medals and awards from sporting events and academic endeavors, also filled with dust. I thought nothing of the dream.

The next day, a Sunday, my wife, children, and I went to my dad’s house. We sat on the same porch where my dad told me six years earlier that my mom had died. “Oh, I have something for you,” he said. He walked off to the garage and came back with a box. “This is all stuff that belongs to you. I don’t know what you want me to do with it.” I looked in the box. I had worked on the Obama campaign in 2008, and my campaign cell phone and computer—with the “HOPE” sticker on top of it—were in the box. Also in the box were various awards from years past. All were enveloped in dust.

As I fell asleep that night, the memory of Saturday night’s dream jolted me awake. I spent the next two years trying to figure out what that all meant.

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## Struggling with Fatherhood

My friendship with Carlos reached a new level in the months following that fourth dream. The reason, unfortunately, was that we shared our distress with each other. I was suffering too.

By that time, my wife and I had two young children. The

sleepless stupor of two new babies had taken a toll on our marriage. And if I’m honest, more than sleeplessness, it was my own preconceived notions of parenthood, alongside an ego comfortable in my own success, that challenged our marriage.

Had you asked me how I was doing right before the fourth dream, I would have told you I was fine. My career was going great. I was generating business for the firm and was making more and more money. I was exercising and feeling very strong and fit. I was wearing nicer suits, taking on management responsibilities, and getting invited to serve on nonprofit boards. I was being encouraged to run for office. In short, my ego was being fed quite well—my image as a successful attorney kept patting itself on the back.

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# My ego was being fed quite well, but I had been sowing the seeds of my own demise for some time.

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But I had been sowing the seeds of my own demise for some time. I entered parenthood much like anything else I’ve done: to win. “I will achieve and be the best dad in the world,” I told myself. And I thought I was, because I was helping with feedings in the middle of the night and making breakfast every day and changing diapers and washing dishes. I was winning at being a dad. In my mind, I was such a great dad because I was doing more than what dads did in prior generations. In essence, I thought I deserved a medal just for doing what a dad should do.

At the same time, while I saw myself winning, I began to see my wife as losing. I saw how tired she was, how utterly exhausting motherhood could be, how she struggled with all of the physical changes she underwent—and I judged her for it. Not by outright attack or criticism, but worse. I seeped out judgment little by little, in small, derisive comments over an extended period of time. I judged her for not “winning” at being a mom, not happily conquering each day’s struggles and also being a great dentist and also a great wife and a great friend at the same time, all with ease and class.

She tried to warn me what was happening, but the image I had forged of myself could not allow inconsistent facts. I would

lash out defensively, turning everything into her problem, not mine. I was the great, winning dad.

I would not listen when she tried to communicate with me.

Claudia had told me she was not well, more than once. You would think that with my experience with depression, I would have been a partner perfectly suited to the task. That I would have asked thoughtful questions and that I would have listened to her. But I was too self-involved, too deluded in my own towering ego of success to truly listen to anyone else and to take an honest look at myself. I succumbed to a common pitfall of men: I kept telling her how to “fix” her feelings.

Over the years, this all led to a lack of connection with Claudia and to a lack of connection with myself. It’s not that I didn’t care; it’s that I was not aware of what was happening to me and to us. I fell into a habit of being done with daily duties—breakfast, work, exercise, dinner, bedtime—and then turning off. Sometimes I would turn off with television or my cell phone. Other times I used alcohol or cannabis. I told myself I deserved to turn off because I had accomplished so much that day and in my young professional life in general. I began escaping the moments of my life, through either constantly running—work, civic organizations, going out with friends, exercise—or constantly numbing—my cell phone, alcohol, weed. I could never be in the moment. I could never just be.

And Carlos got worse. More and more, he would share that he was done with it all. Our adversarial life as litigators, and the incessant competition we must engage in as business generators, was not helping. He had a family now, which raised the stakes even more.

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## Starting Therapy While Helping Others

Two things happened next that made all the difference.

First, I started therapy. Carlos was the only person to whom I felt close enough to ask for a recommendation. After all, going to therapy isn’t something you typically publicize. I feared what people would think of me. I even gave it a secret name on my calendar. I asked Carlos and he gave me a name. I spent the next 18 months in psychotherapy with a wonderful therapist.

Second, as Carlos’ situation deteriorated, I remembered what my mom went through in the final years of her career. Carlos told me he wanted to quit his job, and my mom also had quit as her depression took hold. It was, in many ways, the beginning of the end for her.

I decided I would be the colleague that my mom didn’t have, because no one noticed as she succumbed to depression. Or if anyone did, they had no idea what to do. I decided that my mom would work her magic one more time and save Carlos.

I asked him not to quit, at least not yet. While the law firm that employed him may or may not be the right job for him, let’s

come up with another option, I suggested, for now. I still kept in touch with my friends at his firm, and one of them had become part of the firm’s management committee. I knew her well enough to know she would always do the right thing because she had been through enough herself to have endless empathy for those who suffer.

I explained that Carlos needed some time to work on himself. It should be as long as he needs, and it should be paid, to give him peace of mind and a true opportunity to focus exclusively on his health. The only thing my friend asked was whether there was anything else they could do. Carlos would get his paid leave.

Carlos spent the next six months off work. He made plans with his therapist and psychiatrist on how to use this time. He traveled in state and out of state to group counseling sessions and in-patient therapies. He attended workshops and tried healing groups. He read, he hiked, he meditated. He questioned the pile of pills he was prescribed, and he undertook innovative new approaches to depression, including holistic methods. He spent time on his health and on his family, prioritizing what matters most.

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## Waking Up

By the time Carlos took leave, I had spent over a year in psychotherapy. I had learned that I had feelings and that I needed to actually feel them. I had learned that expressing feelings did not make me weak or feminine or less of a man, but that it actually brought me closer to my spouse, my colleagues, and my friends. I had learned that I continued to feel a deep sadness over my mom’s death and that I needed to just live in that sadness, let it wash over me, touch it, and tell it I hear it. I did not need to run from it.

I engaged in introspection in a way I never had before. For a long time, I had feared any question that might suggest an answer contrary to my notion of myself—an achiever, special, capable of anything, above average. Any other narrative terrified me, depriving me of meaning in my life. I even tried to “win” at therapy by proclaiming success after a few sessions. But my therapist skillfully cross-examined me into critical admissions of need.

So I kept at it and questioned everything.

After a year, I felt like I had so many new tools to live a healthier life. At its core, it was an awareness of myself—my past, my emotions, my defense mechanisms—that made most of the difference.

But something was missing. I had explored the subsurface of my being and uncovered some helpful clues to understand my present, but I still was not sure who I really was and, as a result, what my future looked like. If I wasn’t “the achiever” or the “winner,” then who or what was I?

It was at that moment that Carlos came back from his leave. He came bearing gifts.

Carlos had spent his leave time well. He explored the worlds of psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, theology, spirituality,



and mysticism. He came with messages from his journeys. He started handing me messages, a book here, a podcast there. It began with *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, and with *Here and Now*, a podcast of decades of lectures by Ram Dass. He introduced me to a community of people who regularly met to heal (one in particular stands out, led by Sherrie Ranson, whom I can only describe as a shaman).

For two decades, I had not given more than a passing thought to the meaning of our existence or of purpose larger than ourselves or of a universal spirit or God. I thought of myself as agnostic. And while my mother's death had prompted questions—and suggested some answers—about the existence of something beyond this life, it seemed like such questions were not very practical. What was the point of asking what comes next if we have to live this life no matter what? Might as well go back to work and family.

What I began discovering—or perhaps remembering—was a spark within ignited by the exploration of purpose and existence. A wave of books on philosophy, physics, and spirituality, and even humanity's most sacred texts—the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible—followed. They were no longer merely an intellectual curiosity; they offered a new way to live and understand my life. To find wisdom.

I slowly started putting away the cell phone, more and more. Instead of looking for, and even enjoying, the buzz of a drink or a smoke, I began to dislike how they muddied my mind. I began meditating. I started pausing during the day to just look around. To breathe, slowly, intentionally. To take in the breeze in my fingertips and hair, sense the warmth of the sunlight on my face. I embraced not just the simple pleasures but also the simple pains—tasting the water on my hands while washing dishes, communing with a pulled muscle as a curiosity instead of a disaster.

I stopped thinking about how I could control my future and bend everything and everyone to my will. Instead, I started listening more. I began treating my mind not as my ruler but as just another one of the wonderful tools of my body, like my hand or my emotions. I tried to create (mostly music), giving space to long-dormant sides of myself.

I began connecting with people in ways I always longed to do. I stopped judging them. I would look at those around me deeply, in full concentration and care, and just listen. I began sharing parts of myself without thought of embarrassment or reception, no longer as a carefully curated self-congratulatory narrative but as simply my truth.

I stopped running away from the moments of my life. Or to the moments of my life. Instead of living in moments past or obsessing over what the future may bring, I began riding an imperceptible flow, a sort of invisible river gently cradling us, from each moment to the next, with the curiosity of a child discovering the world anew.

Thanks to Carlos, I began waking up.

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## Who Is Helping Whom?

I knew that my mom had had an interest in Eastern and mystic spirituality in her youth. I vaguely remembered her sharing some of the concepts she had found intriguing or profound. She had practiced Buddhism, loved Gurdjieff and the moon's power over our lives, and felt she was more than what her human eyes perceived in the mirror.

One random day, I asked my dad, "Do you know if mom read Ram Dass?"

"I'm not sure. What did he write?"

"He started with a book called *Be Here Now*."

"El aquí y ahora!" he exclaimed. "We talked about it a lot!"

Like an explosion of white light, I realized that Carlos had led me back to my mom and connected us in a way we never had before. He opened a door that led to one of the most precious and joyous aspects of my mom's life—her search for meaning and soul. My mom, I remembered, would at times share some of her learnings, but she never pressed them on me, choosing instead to let me grow on my own in her garden of love. All the time I had thought I was helping Carlos, it turned out he was helping me.

She had brought me to him, and he brought me back to her.

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## A Legacy of Joy

A few weeks before dying, my mom told me on the phone that she had been thinking about her death. "I had a dream last night that I was at the bottom of a well," she began. "I was laying on my back, as if buried in mud. I could barely feel my body, as the mud covered everything except my face. It was nice because I felt no pain. I felt so relaxed as I stared upwards at the opening of the well."

I didn't think much of the dream at that moment. But then she said, "I think if I die, I will leave a legacy of joy."

I was angry. "How can you say that? How can you even think about death? We want you here. We need you here. Don't think those things. Don't say those things."

Weeks later, she was gone.

The last time I saw her body, she was wrapped in white sheets covering everything but her face. I knew at least she no longer felt pain.

I see now that she was right. Her legacy is one of joy. Joy through the healing power of community and loving connection. Joy in the exploration of the mystical and the mysteries, of all the things about our lives and existence we don't yet know and so improvise as best we can. Joy with roots in suffering—and all the more meaningful because of it. ■

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