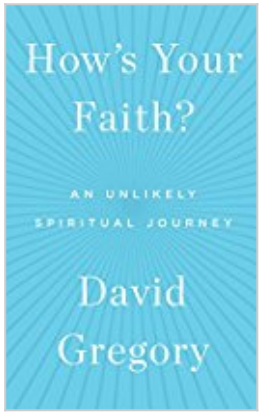

How's Your Faith?: An Unlikely Spiritual Journey

By David Gregory

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David's journey has taken him inside Christian mega-churches and into the heart of Orthodox Judaism. He's gone deep into Bible study and asked tough questions of America's most thoughtful religious leaders, including evangelical preacher Joel Osteen and Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic Archbishop of New York. It has brought him back to his childhood, where belief in God might have helped him through his mother's struggle with alcoholism, and through a difficult period of public scrutiny and his departure from NBC News, which saw his faith tested like never before.

David approaches his faith with the curiosity and dedication you would expect from a journalist accustomed to holding politicians and Presidents accountable. But he also comes as a seeker, one just discovering why spiritual journeys are always worthwhile.

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Editorial Review

Review
"David Gregory has taken on the most fundamental of questions in this thoughtful and engaging book about the deepening of one's faith in an invisible order amid the hurly-burly of the visible world. The result is an honest and bracing account of a good man's struggle to be an even better man--with God's help. I learned a lot from *How's Your Faith?* and you will, too." (*Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of American Gospel*)

“His experience in journalism made Gregory approach faith in an investigative manner, and his quest to answer questions that define his existence led him to meet with Christian faith leaders such as Lakewood Church Pastor Joel Osteen and President of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Commission, Russell Moore.” (*The Christian Post*)

"In eloquent but everyday language, David Gregory introduces us to his ever deepening faith. A spiritual journey that is honest, humble, and elevating." (*Rabbi David Wolpe, author of Why Faith Matters*)

"A thoughtful, introspective, and moving account. This is a book for seekers of faith." (*The Washington Post*)

“An unusual, probing book, part memoir, part cri de coeur, part exploration.” (*The Boston Globe*)

“Genuine and deeply felt.” (*The Wall Street Journal*)

“Gregory’s vulnerability in sharing the lessons he learned... distinguishes this book in the crowded lineup of spiritual-seeking memoirs." (*Bookpage*)

“Gregory’s book, dedicated to [his wife Beth] Wilkinson, depicts the role faith has played in various points in his life and looks for answers in how to live a life of meaning and purpose.” (*The Eagle*)

“Gregory’s book chronicles his serious study of Judaism and spirituality in recent years with Modern Orthodox scholar Erica Brown, and writes honestly about the continuing challenges he and Wilkinson face in raising their three children: son Max and twins Ava and Jed.” (*Jewish Journal*)

“It was very interesting to listen to Gregory talk about his search for his faith as he stood on the pulpit of a Protestant church…” (*Main Line Media News*)

About the Author
David Gregory is the former moderator of NBC’s *Meet the Press*. He previously served as Chief White House Correspondent for NBC News, where he was hailed by *Washingtonian* magazine as a “firebrand in the front row.” *How’s Your Faith?* is his first book.

How’s Your Faith?

CHAPTER 1

Pain

The Spiritual Search Begins with the Family Story

In these pages, I tell secrets about my parents, my children, myself because that is one way of keeping track and because I believe that it is not only more honest but also vastly more interesting than to pretend that I have no such secrets to tell. I not only have my secrets, I am my secrets. And you are your secrets. Our secrets are human secrets, and our trusting each other enough to share them with each other has much to do with the secret of what it is to be human.

—Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner

In a line, this is my spiritual autobiography: I grew up with a strong sense of Jewish identity, but I didn't have much belief.

And it makes sense, given who my parents are. My mom, Carolyn, grew up Catholic and left the faith when my sister and I were still little. She had a bad experience after a stillborn birth in a Catholic hospital, and it turned her against the Catholic Church for good. She was conflicted about whether to baptize us. In the end, my older sister, Stephanie (I called her Ci, pronounced Kigh, because I couldn't pronounce her name) was baptized and I was not; I was named in synagogue. For the most part, Mom was content to leave our religious upbringing to my dad, and Dad's Jewish identity has always been more ethnic than religious.

As a result, I did not think much about God or spirituality. The concepts felt too abstract. My mother encouraged me to pray, in spite of her negative experience with the Church; she told me once at bedtime that speaking to God was as easy as starting a conversation in my head. "Some people might even call Him Champ," she said, knowing that anything to do with the film Rocky was likely to inspire me.

I identified with my dad's brand of Jewishness, a cultural identity developed in New York and L.A. I was bar mitzvahed at the Synagogue for the Performing Arts, centered in Beverly Hills. The performing arts part was not a new denomination of our faith but a reflection of where we lived.

My dad, Don, chose the Synagogue for the Performing Arts to celebrate the High Holidays—the times when most Jews attend synagogue—because that was where his community was. It was a warm place with many great families and kids my age. It was also a place that could be easily caricatured, because so many of those who attended were associated with the entertainment industry, and Judaism was commingled with the signs and symbols of Hollywood success.

We held High Holiday services in the headquarters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills. Its plush lobby was adorned with photos of Oscar winners and show business figures; for years I thought that the Oscar was a Jewish icon. Inside the theater where services were held, the Greek tragedy and comedy masks adorned the bimah, the elevated platform for the ark containing the Torah.

What stands out in my memory are the older Hollywood figures who came for the High Holidays, the

women smelling of perfume and wearing expensive jewelry. There were actors, too. As a kid, I loved that I would sometimes recognize a guy from a commercial I'd seen on TV that week, or even from a well-known movie. People would greet my father, a producer and former agent, from across the room: "A happy and a healthy new year, that's what you should have!"

More than one would comment on how tall I'd gotten since the year before. Members of the congregation were called up to do readings, and this being a congregation of many actors, the readings were memorable. "I'd like to pray," went one. "But I haven't the time. Please, Lord, help us make the time." I remember the comedic actor Red Buttons—a client of my father's—ending a reading once with the line: "Thanks for the club date."

Now I can see how different my childhood faith experience was from that of people who grew up attending church or synagogue every week. Some people might think our synagogue was making a mockery of religion. But that wasn't so at all. It was a serious and warm place, and it gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of comfort and identity. The L.A. part of my Jewish identity, while somewhat funny, was, at its root, not so different from that of many Jews in America. That is to say, identity, Jewish history, and peoplehood were bigger in my upbringing than theology was.

Rabbi David Wolpe, a friend of mine from L.A., once said that Judaism is about two things: family and religion. Family is the shared sense of peoplehood that Jews have; religion is about the texts and the relationship with God. For me, the second part lagged behind. I knew I was Jewish. That's as far as it went. There was no spiritual side to it, no effort to engage with God.

Years later, when I began a spiritual search, I tried to understand what happened in my family when I was growing up and what happened to me. Maybe this is true for all of us. Letting go of what we carry around from childhood is made easier through humility and an emphasis on forgiveness and healing in faith.

I may not have recognized it, but as a kid as young as eleven, my spiritual longing began. I needed something to help me with the most difficult part of my life: my mother's drinking. I had nowhere to go with my feelings about it. I had no sense of community nor was I comfortable turning to those closest to me for help with solving my problems. I also didn't trust that God might carry me through this confusing period. Mom's alcoholism was part of the backdrop of our lives for years, but almost suddenly it took center stage when Mom was arrested for driving drunk in front of me. I was fifteen.

No one asks to be the child of an alcoholic. But you can learn from it, as from any hardship. My mother struggles with her story still, but she has allowed me to share it more widely than ever before here because, she says, owning it and letting others—anyone—learn from it is part of her recovery. Thankfully she did recover. Both of us did.

When I think about how I want my kids' lives to be different from mine, I come up with one simple and small thing: eating meals as a family. That's not something my family did when I was growing up, and I didn't know to miss it. But I'm glad that Beth and I have made an effort to sit us all down together most nights. My memory of meals is of eating Betty Crocker's Hamburger Helper as my mom cleaned up around the kitchen. After my parents split, Mom started working long hours and my sister and I tended to make meals for ourselves at dinnertime.

Even before they divorced, my dad was often not around at mealtimes, because he'd be working late. When he got home, he would play his own made-up hide-and-seek game with my sister and me, based on the old-timey detective radio show Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons. My sister and I would run and hide, pretending

Dad was Mike, Mr. Keen's assistant, making a loud call asking Mr. Keen to find two missing children. Though we'd hide under the bed or some other easily discovered place, we couldn't stand the suspense of the game. Dad would keep it going for five minutes or so, using false leads, looking inside closets, and we'd giggle loudly until he finally "found" us.

It's funny how the family meal stands out for me. My memory plays tricks on me. I did have family meals with my dad and stepmom on the weekends after my parents' divorce, and during those years my mom made an effort to have us sit at the table together at least once a week. But as an adult the family meal stands out to me as a symbol of family order. That's what I felt was missing, mostly in my adolescence.

It wasn't a consistently difficult childhood by any means. Still, I lived with a single mom who worked a string of unfulfilling jobs—a mom who gave us as much love as she could through the addiction that had her in its grip—and that experience made me who I am. The hard parts gave me a certain grit. And during those years, a fierce determination grew inside me, a desire to transcend my circumstances. I focused on trying to escape to a career in journalism that would take me far way. I cannot know the objective truth of what happened between my parents when they split up. What matters is that they simply weren't right together. There are indisputable facts: They divorced three and a half years after separating, for example. Dad lived on his own for a time in an apartment in Los Angeles. When Dad remarried, he and my stepmother, Kaye, bought a home off Mulholland Drive, a dividing line between the LA Basin and the San Fernando Valley.

The divorce loomed large over Mom's life for all of my childhood. Even though it was her decision—she had asked my dad to move out—the split marked her as a failure in her own mind. It overshadowed all the little successes in her life. The split was fairly amicable, and my dad says he paid generous child support, but my mom always struggled to make ends meet. She wasn't good with money, as she will admit. She saw herself as a struggling single mom who couldn't possibly match up to him, not only in our eyes but—more to the point—in hers. She saw my dad living a more financially successful life with more career advancement in show business and felt inferior.

From Mom's perspective, she had to remake herself, come up with a new identity, in the years after the divorce. She cycled through a series of different jobs, none of them especially fulfilling: She worked successfully as a Realtor for a while, before she got a job at American Savings Bank. Later, she started selling title insurance, which she liked because it was busy and it got her back out in the world charming people, one of the things she was best at. Her feelings of inadequacy drove her on a downward spiral with drinking. My mom loved having us for the majority of the week, but she struggled with the idea that all our "fun time" was reserved for weekends with Dad. This was the story she was telling herself: that the fun times we did enjoy with Dad somehow tipped the balance—that we would come to favor him over her. The truth is we enjoyed good times with both.

My mom's drinking frayed her around the edges, but she still functioned. She was a memorable person, and she knew it—ready with a big laugh and a sometimes outrageous sense of humor. She told me that the drinking, before it reached a problem stage, helped her turn on the charm and overcome nervousness or insecurity. Mom was just five-five, with the physical confidence of the dancer she once was. Her frosted blond hair was often teased up a little with hair spray. She dressed in a casual California style, favoring loose outfits in bold patterns with chunky jewelry. She had a smile that made people want to smile back. She might talk in an exaggerated New York accent to be silly, as though she were a Jewish mother from the Upper West Side rather than a Catholic girl from Burbank.

Mom was always dedicated to us, even during the worst of her drinking. She took Ci and me on trips to Catalina Island with her friends, and out to eat at an Italian place called Mike's for sausage pizza after my

Little League games. Ci and I often got two Thanksgivings: one with our dad and Kaye, then a second with our mom, who sometimes rented a condo in Palm Springs, where we'd watch the Cowboys play on TV.

When money got tight, Mom would buy things for us on layaway. She found a way to get me a Commodore computer when I was eleven, because I asked for it, though it was more than she could afford; she wanted to support me. There was no doubt that we were loved. However, her addiction made her unreliable and inconsistent. By the time I was in high school, the drinking had become a regular part of our lives. While she was in control for many years, the bad moments stand out and dominate my memories of my adolescence.

Such as a spring Saturday in 1986. Mom was forty-five, and she'd been a single mother of two for almost a decade. I was a sophomore at Birmingham High School, a public school in the San Fernando Valley, and I was already tall, in the lanky and awkward way of teenage boys. That morning she drove me to school for a tournament with the Speech and Debate Club. I'd joined earlier that year, and I got a lot of encouragement from the coach, Ann Collins, a strong-willed woman of high standards.

My mom had no idea how much I loved the Speech and Debate Club. It was so different from my home life. Everything Mrs. Collins did seemed understated, controlled: quite a contrast to my mom, whose outsize personality always took center stage. Mrs. Collins wore her white hair in a short, conservative cut; I remember her in fitted polyester slacks and a pair of glasses whose tint would darken when she stepped outside—and sometimes when she was inside.

I appreciated Mrs. Collins's strict rules about public speaking and thrived under her discipline. The only time she wasn't formal and guarded was when she was dispensing advice. "Stand up straight," she would tell me in a singsong voice. She had a lyrical way of speaking, and she'd adopt the correct posture to demonstrate. "Project to the back of the room," she'd say.

After I started winning debates, Mrs. Collins gave me a suggestion I never forgot: "You'll always need someone around to remind you that you aren't as good as you think you are." Little did she know I'd be lucky enough to be surrounded by many such people once I was in the public eye.

Mrs. Collins had urged me to participate in the Saturday tournament at my school. It was an all-day affair, with participants from schools all over the city. At the end of the day, I qualified for the state competition in two events. It was a great feeling. I'd never won at anything.

It was early evening by the time it was all finished, and I called my mom from the pay phone bank to ask her to come pick me up. As soon as I said, "It's me, Mom," she started crying. Clearly, she had been drinking—she was slurring her words and her voice was louder, the way she got after a few glasses of wine. "I didn't know where you were," she said, and I spoke slowly and clearly when I replied, "But you did know where I was. I'm at the tournament. I've been here all day."

When I told her that I'd won and was going to the state competition, she cried some more. I felt uncomfortable at the phone bank, even though there was no one around to overhear. I waited until she'd calmed down and then asked her to come pick me up, which she did. We lived within five minutes of my school. When I got in the car, she hugged me and said, "This is so great. We have to go celebrate." It never occurred to me that it would be dangerous getting in the car with her. I didn't think about risk like that. I was used to being with her like this.

We drove to Anna's in Sherman Oaks, my mom's favorite restaurant and bar. It was one of these dimly lit Italian places with red velvet booths in the restaurant area and a large bar in the back, which was where the

hard-core drinkers clustered. Anna's filled up with professionals during weekday lunch hours and evenings; many of them were heavy drinkers, like Mom. Since Anna's was in the building where my mom worked as an investment officer at American Savings Bank, I am confident that she spent a lot of time there.

Mom started early and continued through the evening. But even during the worst of her drinking, Mom rarely spent more than a couple of hours at Anna's each night. She'd always come home around dinnertime. Even though we weren't all sitting down for dinner together, and even if she was drunk, she felt it was important to be available to us in some way.

Mom knew all the bartenders at Anna's, and she was special buddies with a guy named Stan, who favored polyester pants and plenty of hair spray on his comb-over. He looked, as Ci once said, like a cruise ship bartender. In high school, Ci started working at Anna's as a cashier on the weekends, as a way of keeping an eye on Mom. She felt responsible for Mom in a way I didn't. Ci was the caretaker and enabler of the family—that's how she puts it now that she's worked through our childhood and is licensed as a therapist. I played a different role in our family dynamic. When things got bad with Mom, I got angry and retreated.

That night Mom and I sat at a booth at Anna's. I had chicken Parmesan and a Coke while Mom put away a few Big Reds, the drink that Stan had named for her: a goblet-sized glass of Chianti filled to the top. A doctor once made the mistake of telling my mom that red wine was the best thing to drink if she was going to. "So I took that as permission," she told me later. "I remember thinking: Great. The goblet's mine."

I felt uneasy that evening, with one eye on the wine Mom was putting away. The low-level stress of trying to manage her was a familiar feeling. Mom says she never kept track of how many glasses she drank, that alcoholics never do. But Ci and I kept count when we were with her, and Ci often told her she'd had enough.

I imagine Mom was fairly drunk by the time we left Anna's, since she'd gotten started before she came to get me. She was swerving all over Interstate 405 in her brown Mazda 626. "You're not staying straight, Mom," I said. And then, getting more concerned: "Hey—why don't I steer?" I knew I needed to take control of the situation, so I steered from the passenger seat.

I don't remember Mom arguing with me; I didn't think much about it at the time. I just did what I needed to do to get us home. Now I am amazed that Mom and I didn't talk about it afterward. I wish I'd had the wherewithal to say, "What was going on there, Mom?" and tell her she was out of control. But as a kid, you don't get to live everybody else's life. Your own normal is all you know.

• • •

Mom was born in Detroit. Her parents divorced when she was just four. That was unusual enough among Irish Catholics at the time, but perhaps more unusual was that my grandmother later remarried—and outside her community, to a Protestant. This was not an era of interfaith marriages in any community. Most Americans, especially immigrant Americans, lived in relatively homogeneous religious communities. But my grandmother was a fierce and formidable woman, to put it nicely. She was well equipped to deal with her community's disapproval.

However, she felt strongly the affinity to Catholicism. In an effort to compensate, she insisted that her daughter be brought up strictly Catholic. My mom attended parochial schools and went to church every Sunday, like everyone she knew.

My grandmother's second husband was a navy man. After they married, they moved to Burbank, California,

where they found a modest two-bedroom postwar house in a military-subsidized neighborhood. Their new community was not religious or ethnic. Their neighbors were fellow servicemen returned from World War II. My grandmother worked as a switchboard operator at the Burbank airport, and her husband worked as an appliance mechanic.

My biological grandfather had died of cirrhosis of the liver in Detroit when my mom was fourteen. His side of the family was a long line of alcoholics. In true Irish tradition, there are some great stories of booze, misery, and murder in the family lore. His sister, my mom's aunt, fell down the stairs after one big night of drinking. Her father put her to bed, and when she didn't come down for breakfast the next morning, they went up to find her dead. My mom's uncle was shot dead by his wife after he came home drunk and abused her one too many times. There are lots of cheery Irish tales like that from the immigrant community in Detroit.

My mother's passion, from a young age, was show business, as it was for so many girls growing up in Southern California. As a kid, she took dance lessons four times a week, and after she finished high school, she left home to start performing with lounge acts in Las Vegas and Tahoe: leg kicks in sequined leotards, that kind of thing. Mom didn't go to college; she says show business was her education.

Above all, what Mom wanted was to have children. So on her first ever visit to New York, when she fell for a smart and charming agent seven years older than she was, she decided she wanted to make a life with him. Don Gregory did not hide that he was Jewish, by any means, although he had changed his name from Ginsberg to Gregory, since an ethnically recognizable name was considered a disadvantage in the entertainment industry of the 1950s.

To my mom, Don Gregory was "just very New York," as she puts it, meaning that he seemed representative of a cultural identity she knew from movies and books. He was a big guy with a dynamic personality who was not afraid to be aggressive in his career. His showy connections and sharp wit could make my mom feel somewhat provincial.

But Dad also made my mother feel important. They were married when she was twenty-three, with the understanding that she would quit show business. In theory, my mom was fine with that decision, though it was hard for her. My father says that she couldn't stand feeling as though her identity had been subsumed into his, that she was now "just" Mrs. Don Gregory. She always identified with show business—she still does, even though she hasn't danced professionally in fifty years.

My mom also identified as a drinker, as only serious drinkers do. The story of her very first drink is engraved on her memory; she told it to Ci and me when we were little. She was fourteen, and her parents were having a big barbecue for their anniversary. Everyone was out on the back patio, and she sneaked into the kitchen, picked up a bottle of gin—she doesn't remember the brand, but it was a frosted bottle—and took a swig.

"I thought I was going to die," she told me. "My whole mouth went on fire. Then I had another one and got instantly drunk." She found a sofa somewhere and blacked out.

It's impossible to judge how much my mom's drinking contributed to her other difficulties in life: Did they stem from her alcoholism or vice versa? Before the divorce, my dad occasionally complained to Mom about the fact that "she couldn't hold her liquor," as he put it. He says she sometimes slurred her words or acted in a dramatic, embarrassing way when they were out with friends. This would lead to arguments, though neither of them considers Mom's drinking the biggest factor in the collapse of their marriage.

“When a marriage goes bad, there’s lots of ways you can describe it” is how my father put it recently, with the perspective of almost forty years between him and his divorce. “And there are lots of things you can blame it on. Drinking was just one of them.”

My mother’s most serious relationship after the divorce was with Ron, who lived with us for most of the five years they were together. He worked overnights in the film industry, doing color processing, so he was often home when Ci and I got back from school. In spite of his strange schedule, he made our little family seem more complete. He’d play ball with me out in the front yard, or tennis at a nearby park, and I’d sit with him as he watched afternoon reruns of Hawaii Five-0 before heading off to work.

In 1986 their relationship unraveled and he moved out. Ci and I were upset. His presence in our house had grounded Mom. Sure enough, she doubled down on the drinking after the breakup. That year, my sophomore year of high school, she began to seriously decline. There was always a box of red wine in the fridge, and she sometimes took a glass with her up to bed. She and some friends from our townhouse complex would spend hours soaking in the hot tub, drinking plastic cups of vodka and grapefruit juice. Taken together there was routine to her drinking that extended well beyond cocktail hour. We didn’t know it at the time, but she even started to drink vodka in the morning.

When I spent time with my sister recently, we realized that we had very different experiences of the extent of our mom’s drinking problem. The twenty-two months between us seemed like a lot in high school. During the worst years of our mom’s drinking, Ci was more independent than I was. She already had her driver’s license; she wasn’t reliant on Mom for rides. She had a serious boyfriend, so she was home less than I was. She didn’t witness as much as I did.

One of my memories that Ci didn’t share is seeing Mom hit an emotional low point one evening after work. She was crying about Ron when she got home one night, and her crying degenerated into a screaming fit. Not knowing what else to do, I physically restrained her on the floor next to her bed. As I held her down, I caught sight of myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. She was still dressed from the office in a black leather business suit. I remember thinking resentfully: This is not the experience a fifteen-year-old should be having. I didn’t like being dragged into my mother’s emotional life. I was an adolescent boy ill equipped for this reality show.

I never considered telling anyone other than Ci about that terrible moment with Mom. When you are the child of an alcoholic, you instinctively understand how ashamed you would be if the secret became public. No one had to tell me to hold the secret close; that went without saying. Ci and I were engaged in a total cover-up about the extent of our mother’s drinking. It was our unspoken pact. We were in it together.

Back when I was as young as five or six, Ci and I conspired to confront Mom about her drinking. I have just a vague memory of what happened, but we found Mom drinking wine while stitting at the kitchen table one afternoon. We stood in front of her, and Ci said with all the moral judgment an oldest child can muster: “You should stop talking on the phone and drinking wine when we get home from school.”

It’s easy to picture my mother as a drunk throughout my childhood. But it wasn’t like that. Mom was a drinker the way many were. She says now, “I took the drink, but eventually the drink took me.” Hers was a more jagged path. Drinking was always there, but only captured her fully when her life unraveled.

Once, my best friend in high school, Corey, took the jug of vodka down from the top of the fridge where Mom kept it, and he pretended to swig from the bottle. He acted drunk, stumbling around. I laughed with him while he goofed around, but after that, I was even less likely to confide in him about the real-life vodka

drama at home. Years later, I felt angry with Corey and my other high school friends for not probing more. I wished they'd known something was wrong, that they'd asked me what was going on. When I asked Corey about it in adulthood, he said he didn't know about my mom's alcoholism until everyone found out, and he and I didn't talk about it until we were both in college. By then I was talking about Mom a lot more; it wasn't the fraught topic that it was for me in high school. By college my mother was deeper into sobriety and I was getting over my anger enough to get closer to her once again. In high school, I didn't talk about it. No one knew, because I refused to let anyone in. I kept secrets from my friends and in some ways from myself. It was as though I thought that if I didn't talk or think about it, perhaps I could pretend it hadn't happened, hadn't affected me.

Ci and I never told Dad, either, because as bad as things got with Mom, neither of us wanted to live with him—especially not Ci, whose close relationship to our mom created some strain between her and our dad. That said, our relationship with Dad improved after the divorce, when we would have concentrated stints of time with him alone. In the first years after Dad met Kaye, she worked as a flight attendant, so she wasn't around much on the weekends. Ci and I had to establish a relationship with Dad, and while we were initially reluctant, we warmed up.

The three of us developed a Friday-night ritual at this little greasy restaurant called Ready GO on Sunset Boulevard, with booths and bad lighting, where I'd order grape soda. Later, we would all gather on a pullout couch in the den of Dad's apartment (where he lived before he and Kaye bought their house) and watch The Love Boat. These are great memories. Still, we never had the ease with Dad that we had with Mom. We'd always been afraid of his temper. He had a big voice and a full dark beard that added to the fearsome impression. Dad could be alternately charming and intimidating. We'd seen him have outbursts—not only at us but at people he worked with. As much as things improved, we always felt as though we had to present to him and Kaye as perfect children. We didn't feel free to be ourselves. If Ci and I were fighting, we'd stop when we heard him coming down the hall.

I remember asking for my sister's help to be sure I didn't forget to bring something to Dad's as I packed my hard black suitcase at Mom's house. We didn't keep a set of clothes and toys at his house, and if we forgot something—such as colored socks for me to wear when we went out to dinner, that was a big one—Dad would get mad.

But he was determined to give us a good time, and Kaye was loving and fun. I immediately developed a strong bond with her, and that made it easier. They would fill our weekends with activities. We'd go to Dodgers games practically every weekend they were in town. Kaye hung a large poster of Steve Garvey over my bed, which endeared her to me. (I was obsessed with Steve Garvey, as she well knew.) During my senior year of high school, in spite of my loyalty to my mom, I moved in with my dad and Kaye. By that point, I felt more comfortable with them and my relationship with my mother was strained.

There's a part of me that wishes I'd done so earlier. I wonder whether my fifteen-year-old self shouldn't have said to my mom: "Look, Mom, you're out of control. I'm going to live with Dad." But that was never going to happen. Ci and I were fiercely protective of Mom. Kaye remembers Ci grabbing my hand and digging her fingernails into my palm if I said something she thought was too revealing about Mom or our home life. We didn't want to give away Mom's secrets, not even to our father.

It was only with each other that Ci and I could be honest during the worst of Mom's drinking. When I could hear Mom talking loudly and drunkenly on the phone downstairs, I'd knock on Ci's door and go into her room through the connecting corridor. I remember sitting on Ci's bed, twisting the top off of a big brass bedpost that didn't fit quite right. I'd roll the top around in my hands as we discussed Mom's latest incident,

like the time she told us she got a bruise on her nose from tripping over the dog. Ci and I both knew she'd fallen while she was drunk, and getting confirmation from each other made us feel better. Nothing terrible ever happened—Mom was never grievously injured—but the potential was always there.

We were in denial about dealing with our anxiety, though. And the denial spilled over into other aspects of my life. For example, I refused to deal with the acne I suffered from as a teenager. When a dermatologist recommended I take Accutane to clear it up, I refused. My dad remembers me yelling at him angrily for daring to make the reasonable suggestion that I follow the dermatologist's advice. If Ci said something about the acne as we washed our faces in the bathroom, I would dismiss it with a joke. "It's just civil unrest," I'd say, as if dispassionately describing the anti-apartheid movement a world away in South Africa. She'd laugh, and that would be the end of it. Inside, I felt terrible about my skin. But I was shut down about it. My appearance was out of my control, like much of my life. I was incapable of mustering the will to deal with it.

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My sister and I each developed strategies to navigate Mom's addiction. There was a rhythm to her drinking, a regularity to its patterns when it was at its worst. The best time to talk to her was in the morning, when she was lucid and calm. I always asked for my lunch money before school—a dollar and a quarter—and that was my moment to convey anything else I needed to tell her. I could count on her then.

I knew to stay out of Mom's way when she was drunk and emotional, which was many evenings of the week, after she got home from work and Anna's. She'd stand in the kitchen, talking on the phone to her girlfriends, drinking red wine, and biting her nails. To this day, when I see people biting their nails, it makes me think of the nervousness Mom displayed while drinking.

At night, she was likely to be belligerent with me about the annoying teenage-boy things I did: losing my keys, refusing to pick up my room. We fought a lot. Sometimes she'd threaten to call my dad and would scribble notes to herself about what she wanted to tell him. Her chicken scrawl would have made her level of intoxication apparent to anyone who'd looked at it—not that I needed further confirmation.

From my mom's perspective, things were not too far from normal. As she put it many years later, "I might have functioned blurry, but I functioned. Bills were paid. Cars were running. Children were in school. But what happens when you reach your bottom is slowly but surely, you unravel. And I was unraveling." When I've talked about this period with her, she's told me that she was trying to numb herself. "I was scared. Scared of losing you guys to your father. Of losing my ability to find a mate. Of losing my ability to make money."

My sense of being disconnected from what I was feeling, and of having no control over my home life, made me retreat into my room and do my own thing. I'd spend hours sitting at the TV tray that I used as a desk, focusing on my homework and my debate efforts. I'd listen to baseball games on the radio while I worked, and that always made me happy.

And I'd turn on the nightly news. Come the end of my sophomore year, I'd set my sights on becoming a TV journalist. I realize now that the trials at home gave me a real gift. I could escape my secrets by imagining myself as an authoritative and curious journalist. I might have done something self-destructive with the emptiness I felt during those years, but I was never compelled in that direction, even though I knew guys who were taking drugs and driving fast cars. I channeled my unhappiness into my ambition. It was just where I naturally turned. My goals propelled and centered me. They became what I had to look forward to in the world.

It was then that I started having intense talks with my dad about my future. Once he saw I was determined to go into journalism, he encouraged me like no one else. He especially understood my interest in TV journalism: It was close enough to the entertainment industry that he felt he could offer some useful advice. There were topics I did not want to broach with him at all—such as Mom's drinking or girls I liked—but when it came to the biggest focus in my life, he was a pillar for me. His interest in my career ambitions made me feel loved and attended to.

My dad had always involved me in his career. For a while, I wanted nothing more than to go into show business, too. Dad likes to tell a story of finding me sitting at his desk when I was seven or eight, conducting a mock phone call in which I was pretending to negotiate a deal.

He used to bring Ci and me to New York to see his shows. To this day, when I smell the scent of hot pretzels on the street in Manhattan, I get a visceral memory of my dad striding quickly up Fifth Avenue in the winter with me rushing alongside him, trying to keep up. He and Kaye would bring freshly squeezed orange juice and powdered doughnuts to the midtown hotel where Ci and I would stay in a room adjoining theirs. We loved it. I remember going with Dad to lunches with directors and actors. He took Ci and me to the theater all the time. We would go out with him afterward, late, to Sardi's or Joe Allen, the big restaurants in the theater district.

Those trips enamored me of New York. I wanted the city to be the theme for my bar mitzvah party. I strutted into my party to the Frank Sinatra song "New York, New York"; my cake had the city skyline on it. In the picture taken that morning, I am posing at the foot of our townhouse stairs, wearing a white dinner jacket and a red bow tie, which I believed conveyed the image of the cosmopolitan guy I aspired to be.

The gift that my dad gave me was dreaming with me. He helped me nurture my dreams and formulate them into an actual, realistic path. We talked about my plans for my future almost every weekend that I spent with him during my high school years. I remember staying up on Saturday nights after we got home from dinner or the movies with my stepmother and sister. He would change out of his work clothes and put on his big blue bathrobe, and we'd sit together in the living room. It was a formal room, with high ceilings, elegant couches, a big painting, and a mirror. Dad usually made a point of asking what I'd been thinking about that week, so he could help me with it. He'd give me ideas on how to construct my college essay, and then we'd imagine how I could get ahead once I was working inside a media organization.

Looking back, I realize how many hours Dad and I spent discussing what I would become and how little time on who I was. It was as if Dad knew my life with Mom was a secret I needed to keep from him and everyone else; as if he knew that a career in TV journalism would permit me to create a David Gregory who had a perfect life, perfect hair, and perhaps even perfect skin.

I decided on journalism early in high school, as I watched the nightly news on the tiny TV in my bedroom. With the lights out and the house quiet around me, some reporters could make me feel as though I were in the middle of a war zone in the Middle East or tackling a tornado in the Midwest. I loved imagining myself grappling with the story, getting a handle on the history of it, and translating it for audiences back at home.

During high school, I studied the morning and evening news shows, trying to work out why different reporters and anchors did what they did. I memorized writing and narration patterns. I'd even mimic those I most admired, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings. I was moved by the coverage of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the Challenger disaster. The following year, I was riveted by the Iran-Contra hearings. I didn't understand all the issues at play, but I locked in to the testimony of Oliver North. I followed it like a daily sporting event, almost as obsessively as I checked Steve Garvey's box score each morning in the

newspaper.

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April 24, 1986. It's a date with great significance. It marks an all-time low for my mother but also a birth.

When the day began, its only significance was that I was competing in a statewide speaking tournament sponsored by Optimist International. I was to give a speech about the importance of optimism. The speech was supposed to address the importance of a positive attitude. Now this strikes me as somewhat ironic. It's hard to imagine myself brimming with optimism at that stage in my life.

The competition was in Agoura Hills, and I rode with Mrs. Collins, the debate coach, and a couple of other kids who were competing. Mom planned to come later to watch me. After she arrived, I caught sight of her from the podium. She was sitting next to Heidi, one of her drinking buddies from work. Mom was already crying, and I don't think I'd even started speaking yet. That was a sure sign she was drunk. Later, she told me she and Heidi had stopped by a party on the way to the competition, but she insisted that because she'd had a sandwich, she couldn't have been too inebriated.

To my surprise, I won in my category. I must have somehow delivered my remarks on optimism with conviction. Mom clapped loudly and rushed up to me. While I often recoiled from my mom's oversize emotions, I was used to them. I was proud of myself, too. I hugged her back and tried to tamp down her emotion and head out to the car. Now I understand that my small successes in high school probably made Mom feel better about herself. My winning a competition might have made it easier for her to justify her drinking: She could tell herself that her kids were clearly doing fine.

I no longer recall the logistics, but Mrs. Collins needed a ride home with us. We all climbed into Mom's Mazda—Mom driving, Heidi in the passenger seat, and Mrs. Collins in the backseat with me. I had become fairly accustomed to driving with Mom tipsy. But this evening it was more noticeable than usual. She was driving like she had the time after Anna's when I grabbed the steering wheel, weaving unreliably between lanes on the freeway. I was especially unnerved by it because I was sitting next to a respected mentor whose approval I sought. Mrs. Collins looked uneasy, and that only worsened my discomfort. She sat up straight and drew her breath in sharply as Mom swerved.

It wasn't long before a highway patrolman's lights began flashing behind us. When I saw the blue lights hit the car, my head began to pound. Mom is getting pulled over, I thought, and I panicked about what would happen next. She got out of the car and we heard her talking. Her voice sounded loud and argumentative to me. I remember Mrs. Collins saying pointedly—as if offering me a school lesson—"This is a time when you don't want to say much." Unfortunately, Mom couldn't hear her. Something tells me she wouldn't have been quite in the place to accept advice from my debate coach, anyway.

The officer asked Mom to do the "walk and turn" test alongside the car to check her sobriety. When she failed the test, she asked him not to handcuff her in front of the car and me. She walked back over to the car and leaned into the window toward me. There was no sense of reckoning in her face, no sorrow in her eyes—just the same old dodge. Everything would be okay, she told me; the officer was doing this only because he was inexperienced. He walked her away, handcuffed her, and put her in his patrol car.

I was worried for Mom, going off to some jail somewhere. But I have to admit that my bigger focus was more self-involved. I felt a deep sense of embarrassment. This was a new low. This night represented my utter failure to shield our life from outsiders. I tried to avoid Mrs. Collins's eye. But the secret was out.

Mrs. Collins volunteered to drive Heidi and me home in my mother's Mazda. It was a quiet car ride. I don't think I spoke at all. In fact, I remember little about that night after seeing Mom get in the back of the police car.

The house was dark when I got back. Ci was in bed. She'd been trying to sleep but had been wondering where we were. I walked into the dark of her room and announced: "Mom got arrested tonight." Ci told me later that my voice was angry. She asked lots of questions—where Mom was and how long she'd be in jail—but I went silent. These were questions I didn't know the answers to. We discussed whether we would call Dad and decided not to. That was it. I went to my room and went to bed.

Mom spent the night on a cot in a shared cell in the Calabasas jail, waiting for Ron to pick her up after he finished his shift that night. Although they'd split up, they were still close and she could rely on him to be caring, so he was the natural person for her to call. Mom used her pay phone access to call my sister collect all night long. I didn't hear the phone—my sister had her own line in her room—and I was shocked when Ci told me Mom had kept her up all night. Ci didn't mind. "Mom was just trying to get through it," she told me later. "And she was getting through it with me, which is who she got through things with at the time." In many ways, Ci was more like a girlfriend than a daughter to Mom.

Waking up the next morning in jail, Mom says she felt a small measure of relief, akin to the sensation a criminal might feel when she's tired of running and ready to make it end. Overpowering that emotion, though, were shame and fear.

"The first thing I thought was: My life is over," Mom told me later. "Meaning I could never get past this. I couldn't ever fix it."

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Mom's arrest was a terrible blow for Dad, too. Here was irrefutable evidence that he was in the dark about a major part of our lives.

Dad later told me that he and Kaye stayed up most of the night after they heard that Mom was in jail, talking about whether they should have us come and live with them. It had to be a real wake-up moment for my father. My own view is that he had never admitted to himself that Mom had a real problem with alcohol.

As an adult, I've wondered how my dad and others close to us didn't notice that something was off. But it was harder in those days to recognize someone as an alcoholic, let alone call him or her out. Alcoholism wasn't yet a national concern. Public awareness of substance abuse, and its impact on children, was much lower in the 1970s and '80s. It was also the pre-Oprah era, a more private time, at the tail end of the 1950s mentality that assumed outsiders were not to intrude on the nuclear family. "Danger has degrees," my dad said recently when I pressed him about whether it was unsafe for us to be living with Mom.

Still, I spent several years being angry at Dad for failing to remove us from the situation. I felt that he should have known better than to leave Ci and me with Mom when she was in such a bad way. Now I'm not so sure. Even after Mom was arrested, Dad says, he felt it would do more harm than good to try to get full custody. It would have meant going to court, putting us on the stand. He wasn't willing to expose us to that.

The morning after Mom's arrest is mostly a blank for me. She wasn't home when I went to school, and I don't remember seeing Ci, either. Once I got to school, I went to see Mrs. Collins and told her I was sorry. She looked at me solemnly from across her desk. "You know you don't need to apologize," she said. "You

do not need to say that. Your mom needs you right now." I thanked her and backed away to go to class.

I've wondered about that conversation in the years since. Why didn't Mrs. Collins ask me more about how I was doing that morning? Sure, my mom needed me, but I needed help, too. I imagine that Mrs. Collins was reluctant to intervene in my life, though.

My mom's arrest began a long thawing process. It took months, but gradually, I began to let go of my secrets. Little by little, I began to feel more comfortable with putting myself out there. The biggest change stemmed from Mom and the enormous transformation she was about to go through.

When I got home from school that day, Mom was standing in a corner of the little living room of our townhouse, not a place we would normally congregate. Everything felt strange and slightly out of place. Ron was looming behind her protectively on the stairs. Later, I found out he'd helped Mom get rid of all the alcohol in the house that day.

Mom looked like a wreck, as though she'd been crying for days. She held out a hand to me and said, "I am so sorry, Davey."

I didn't want to look at her. I just mumbled, "It's okay, it's fine."

She said, "No, it's not okay. It's absolutely not okay." And then she told me she was going to get help. She was going to a recovery program meeting that evening.

I don't remember feeling relief, or happiness, or pride, or any of the things I wish I'd been able to feel in that moment. I remember only a dull familiar anger. I had been worried about her over the last year or so, as she had taken a precipitous decline. Managing her had been stressful. I had become accustomed to numbing myself emotionally when she was drinking. Now that she had embarrassed herself to such an extreme, I just wanted to back away.

In Mary Karr's book Lit: A Memoir, about her own descent into alcoholism, she wrote that her young son was the reason she knew she had to survive. "You were the agent of my rescue," she wrote of him. "Not a good job for someone barely three feet tall."

There's no doubt that Mom went to the meeting that night not because she got a DUI but because her son had witnessed her being handcuffed and driven off to jail in a police car. I was never particularly comfortable being the catalyst for Mom to try to get sober. For many years, I considered her a huge burden. But she was my mother, and I loved her. At some point I realized how lucky I was that she wanted to change her life.

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