

PROLOGUE

During a rare talk with Dad in his latter years, I realized he was not just a sweet clarinetist, but also a *phenomenal* musician, earning first chair at the University of Alabama's Million Dollar Marching Band. Music was his passion. Yet, he was overcome by pragmatism and obligation. Thus, he shelved his dreams of pursuing a musical education at Julliard and taking a stab at a career in New York City in order to fulfill his commitment to join the family business.

As a shy, reserved boy, I tended to hide behind my written words. My childhood friend and I spent one summer vacation publishing a neighborhood newsletter, *The Belle Meade News*, at the age of eleven. After writing and co-editing for my high school newspaper, *The Sword & Shield*, I dreamt of being a writer or journalist—to share my thoughts and observations through my pen.

However, practicality proved to get the better of me, and I bent to the same pressure my dad endured those many decades earlier. Hence, I pursued a business profession to support my own family. Throughout my career, I often avoided arguments by deliberating my positions through notes and letters. I relied upon journaling through my darkest moments to try to sort out the competing forces in my head.

Though content and proud of the family he led in his 80s, my dad lamented not chasing his vision. With this indelible memory, my dad stirred me to bring my thoughts, fears, and passions forward through reflections and stories.

During my mom's last days, she beseeched me to finish my stories and to share them with the world. This inspiration helped carry me through my years of writing and re-writing. Along the

way, I've met many amazing people that have enhanced my life's journey, which began in such an auspicious way.

However, today, I tremble at the stress and strains I endured through a turbulent childhood and decades of corporate work life. I reflect on my destructive choices to cope with my earliest of insecurities and frequent temptations. Throughout the years, I struggled with many opportunities to exhibit courage and confidence. My personal journey was taxing both on me and my loved ones. Through these thoughts and sagas, I hope others may garner the bravery to overcome their own demons and challenges.

My story starts as a young boy in the suburbs of Birmingham, Alabama...

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Thanks for reading *In Search of Courage: An Introvert's Struggle with Addictive Behaviors*. I hope you will be captivated by my experiences and inspired by my journey.

You will find photos from each chapter on my website:

www.BeyondIntroversion.com/In-Search-of-Courage/Photos.

CHAPTER 1: THE CLOSETS

My favorite time was alone time.

My mom seemed to worry about my solitude a lot more than I did. “Why don’t we set up a play date with a friend?”

“I’m fine. No one I really want to hang out with, Mom.”

“What about at kindergarten? Maybe get to know them better?”

“I don’t know, Mommy.”

“You should try, Stephen. It’d be good for you.”

“Fine,” I sighed, anxious to move on from the subject.

My efforts to make friends were generally gawky and unsuccessful. I always felt a bit odd, unable to talk to the other kids at school. Or maybe it was because I was the only kid in kindergarten routinely donning a suit and tie... at age six! My parents didn’t force that upon me. I just felt compelled to dress up, perhaps to mimic my dad who always looked dapper when he went to work. In order to appease Mom, one day at school I clung next to Isaac Furman. He was a popular guy amongst the dozen kids my age at our Jewish kindergarten.

I gulped down the pit in my throat, bit my lower lip, and blurted: “Hey. What’s up?”

Isaac took a long look at me in my suit.

“Hey, come here. Let me show you something,” Isaac whispered as he pointed into a closet. As I peeked in, he suddenly shoved me into the closet and wedged a chair against its

doorknob, trapping me inside. Through the crack I could hear him gathering the others. I tried to push my way out without any luck. I sensed he was pointing at me, caught behind the door. He received adulation and laughter while I fought back my anger and tears. I pushed harder. But I chose not to beat on the door or yell for help. I didn't want to give Isaac that satisfaction or make things worse for me. I was humiliated enough. Finally, I could hear the teacher enter the room and the others shuffled away from the closet.

The teacher pried the chair away and let me out. "Are you okay?"

I slinked out of the closet. Not wanting to attract any further attention, I mumbled, "I'm fine. I don't want to talk about it."

I escaped to the bathroom and hung my head. *Why did they do that to me? Why me? What's wrong with me?*

The day dragged on. Later when I got home from school, I headed straight for my clothes closet. It was the best part of my room, and of the whole house as far as I was concerned. When I opened my closet door I faced a two-foot high wall, designed to accommodate the staircase below, followed by the metal pole holding up all my hanging clothes. But when I peeled back my jeans, corduroys, and fancy clothes to the deeper right side, another higher tier was revealed. As I climbed onto the second level, I turned to face the door and used the plywood plank that lay above the clothes pole as my desktop. I loved it because it was unique, but also because it was the solitude I craved growing up. It was a little nirvana for me, often holed away in the top of my two-story bedroom closet for hours doing homework and hobbies. On this day I crawled inside to escape.

However, outside my closet, I never had a lot of friends. I was a shy kid at heart. That was me, who I was. Nevertheless, my mom continued to encourage me to make friends and have play

dates like my older sister Renee. Renee and I played around the house as we grew up. She certainly had a calling to socialize with countless friends while I occasionally played with my only friend, Steven Schwartz, who lived up the block. We did what kids do at that age—games, TV, bikes. That's excitement to two seven-year-olds in the '70s. At eight, Steven moved to New York City. My lone pal was gone.

I then turned to my backyard neighbor, Roger. We formed a close bond playing with matchbox cars in his backyard dirt, often for hours on end. We built roads and bridges, waterways and parking lots, and drove our cars throughout our land of make-believe. I came home with my arms and hands dark brown from hours in the dirt, which was also caked in every crease of my jeans. Other days Roger and I jumped our bikes off homemade ramps and proudly pedaled around the neighborhood, convinced we were the fastest and coolest riders around. Sometimes we'd go inside to concoct strange mixtures of household cleaners. I'm not sure why we did that. Perhaps we were waiting to see if something was flammable. Though that never occurred inside, we did unintentionally ignite a brush fire at the dead end down the block. We seemed to be on the same wavelength. Both content with our symbiotic relationship. We played together and enjoyed the camaraderie that our nerdy selves didn't particularly attract at our separate elementary schools.

Otherwise, I often grabbed my basketball and withdrew outside. I never asked anyone else to play. Not even Roger. Eventually, I charted my own college basketball playoff brackets. I was all the players on both teams. I leaped to grab a rebound from my last missed shot. I dribbled around an outstretched defender. I passed the ball to myself for the final shot into our hoop bolted to the side of our house just outside Renee's room. My hours of bouncing that ball and announcing the games annoyed her to no end. But despite my short, scrawny non-athletic physique, I was a star forward and point guard in my fantasy world.

My fun alone times were somewhat blemished, given my mom's incessant prodding to find friends and my sisters' ribbing at my hours of basketball games and closet hideaways. After all, these were people I loved unconditionally. I might be able to brush off the needling of my classmates, but these concerns from my family confirmed these were not typical activities for a young boy. I got the message; something wasn't quite right.