

Note: This is the first chapter of *God Had a Hand on Me: A Memoir About Pain, Healing, and Victory* by Kim Dotson, revisions and developmental editing by Ken Walker. Released Nov. 21, 2023 by Redemption Press Express.

Chapter 1

Haunting Memories

More than fifty years later, my memories of the day my parents divorced still haunt me. Dad picked up my siblings and me that afternoon in front of St. Thomas School and told us he had “won us” in court. The scene unfolds in my mind as if I were another person watching this painful memory transpire. I can visualize the playground behind me as I stepped off the curb, though I was only in second grade then. I am still saddened by the tragedy I experienced.

I climbed into the back seat as my father shared the news that his marriage to Mom had ended. From that point on it would be me, my little brother, my big sister, and Dad making our way in the world. My brother and sister were my very first friends. My father instructed the three of us from an early age that we were to always stick up for each other, no matter what.

I have fond memories of us playing in and around the towering weeping willow in our backyard. Its roots peeked through the earth as they extended on all sides beneath that grand old tree, which is a metaphor for the person I am today. Reflecting on our neighborhood games of hide-and-seek on warm summer evenings, and sledding on moonlit nights down a closed street with my siblings, make me long for simpler times.

There are painful memories too. Like the heartbreaking scene that materialized the night of our parents’ divorce. We three little children sat on the living room floor in our pajamas. Despite the news from earlier in the day, we were doing what kids do: watching cartoons and our favorite game show, *The Price is Right*. Mom showed up at the front door, intoxicated, grieving her loss. Her tears and mourning made me feel awkward and uncomfortable. Her maroon-tinted hair was tucked back in a chignon above the midnight fur collar of her light-blue overcoat. Her Interlude perfume hung heavy in the air, transfused with the aroma of whiskey and cigarettes.

Between coarse sobs she asked my father to hold her, but he refused. With us youngsters sitting at their feet watching, the raw emotions our parents displayed were palpable. My mother’s guttural cry echoed on the chambers of my heart. I had no way of understanding everything that had transpired between them, and I will never know all the details, but I know there was a lot of pain. And shame. It was not mine to carry, but I carried it anyway.

Years later I learned that my mother never forgave herself for the pain she caused by leaving us for another man. She did the best she could at the time, but my heart remains deeply scarred because of her indiscretion. I am flawed with insecurities, fearful of rejection and abandonment, and poorly equipped to manage disappointment. From a young age, I felt burdened with an insatiable need to create my own validity in a world that often showed me just how disposable I am.

Despite the angst buried deep within my desolation, God’s Word tells me His power is made perfect in my weakness. My life is a testimony of this truth from the Lord: “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Yet at the time, I carried a burden of

shame for things over which I had no control, especially the fact that my parents were divorced (at a time when divorce was not so common), and then both remarried). I suffered immense sadness, loneliness, and yearning for the mother's touch that went unfelt because we were separated by two hundred miles.

I cringed when I had to explain to my friends why I called my stepmother by her first name instead of Mom. If I had known at the time that my mother left her three children to build a life with the man she later married, I would have been ashamed of that. Instead, I was simply ashamed of myself.

I was ashamed of being half Indian and half white. I grew up in the 1970s in a home where it seemed white people were not revered. Today I recognize there were some valid reasons for that sentiment, as both my father and stepmother have lifelong experiences with the profound ugliness of racism. I would say it was the norm of the day, but unfortunately, racism still exists in America. In fact, despite modern efforts to promote inclusivity, the separation and hatred resulting from racism seem to be alive in our midst now more than ever.

Most people of color can relate, regardless of where they live. I am no exception. I recently read a memoir by Michael Fuller called *Kill the Black One First*. In it, Britain's first-ever Black chief constable shares how he was accused of being overly sensitive when he voiced objections to fellow officers referring to Black people using unfriendly and despised terminology. I can identify, having been accused of being overly sensitive when speaking up after friends casually stated they "sat Indian style" or called a work meeting a "powwow." Throughout my life I have been called names like "injun," "squaw," and "redskin," and dealt with war whoops announcing my presence.

My siblings and I were the only half-Native American students attending our school in Missoula. We were raised to be proud of our heritage, but not everyone valued it like we did.

As I walked home from school one day, an older kid made fun of me for being Indian. At home, I collapsed in tears. My father volunteered to give a talk at my school to educate the students about Native Americans. My brother helped him set up a small teepee, and he brought several artifacts for the students to explore while he shared his talk. He titled it "Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask."

Despite the occasional indignities, we also celebrated our heritage. Summertime in our family often meant traveling to powwows around Montana and the Pacific Northwest, where we camped under the stars and participated in traditional Native dancing. We ate stew and frybread from the food stands and ran around in preadolescent kid packs with our cousins. I stood with my grandparents as stick game players sang late into the night.

When a well-known emcee announced the drum and beckoned dancers over the loudspeaker, "Intertribal—everybody dance!" my little brother likened this invitation to a gun going off at the start of a race. It was his signal to take off and complete the dance circle as many times as possible. He skipped as quickly as he could go (his juvenile but competitive form of dancing). To him it was a race to be won. He looked so cute in his regalia!

For many years my brother was the only boy among several cousins. When the girls gathered in the bathroom for makeup and girl talk, he stood in the hall alone, begging us to let him in and promising not to look. My great grandma, T'upia (we called her Toopie) endearingly called him Wheet Su'taah. We called him Charging Buzzard.

All my experiences played an integral part in forming the person I am today. They remain deeply embedded in my core, reminding me of the rich culture bonding my people to the earth. I embrace them, even those that hurt.

The Johari Window was developed in the mid-1950s by two psychologists as a way to improve understanding and communication between members of a group. It's based on the idea that trust can be acquired by revealing information about yourself to others and learning about yourself from their feedback.

The Johari Window contains four panes: two represent self and the other two represent the part unknown to self but known to others.

One of those panes is the "hidden area," those things we keep private about ourselves for various reasons. For me, sharing may open a door for someone who has a similar story, and it may offer that person hope for healing. If a loving God could heal and restore me, why not you too?