

It Didn't Start With You

HOW INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA
SHAPES WHO WE ARE AND
HOW TO END THE CYCLE

Mark Wolynn

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

I'm living my Aunt's life, my mother's, father's, grandmother and grandfather's lives, my great grandfathers and mother's lives, cousins and uncle's and most likely more that I don't even know. Stories they created and survived, messages generated via their own experiences as well as those received from their forefathers and mothers are now part of me. Simple statements, phrases, beliefs influence how I view myself and my life—in the background that is, though some are obvious and known to me either through family conversations or years of therapy and training. Revealing the past in all its truth is eye opening and when the unconscious content materializes, well it can be as shocking as it is surprising.

For instance: I didn't know my mother grew up hearing her mother say to friends, family, and acquaintances, "Donis can do it." And here I am living the same reality. I'm the one to make things happen. I'm the one to do whatever it is that needs doing, and yes quite honestly, often at my expense (time, energy, spirit, peace, serenity, joy).

It Didn't Start with You

Mark Wolynn starts his book with his own story of going blind for no apparent physical reason. Turns out, despite his journey to India to learn and deepen his meditation practice and to work with/learn from respected gurus, healing his relationship with his parents was the answer. Two gurus clearly told him, "go home."

There is much energy in this book about parental connections, including a succinctly and quite beautifully written chapter about the bond between mothers and their children and what happens when that bond is disrupted for whatever reason. Much of what he wrote in this chapter resonated for me considering my first two weeks of life were spent in the hospital nursery (my siblings had chicken pox so we couldn't go home) and that my mom's mother was emotionally unavailable, abusive, etc. thus leaving my mom without what she calls "the words" to express her emotions, nor from my perspective the capacity to feel into herself, feel into me, attune with me, help me create the self that Shore and others discuss when talking early child development (brain and being).

What Words Reveal

This is clearly a self-help book written for laypersons. The writing is user-friendly (short sentences, terms defined, when names are dropped context for understanding is provided). There are comprehensive diagnostic inventories to discover and uncover fears and anxieties reflected in our everyday language, simple words and phrases that reveal storylines, narratives that may in truth belong elsewhere—other family members from generations ago—as well as behaviors and physical symptoms.

Discovering core complaints, descriptors, sentences and the core trauma are part of Mark's 'Core Language' approach, the focus in this book:

Core Complaint—our main issue, whether internalized or projected outward

Core descriptors—adjectives and short descriptive phrases that reveal unconscious feelings we hold toward our parents

Core language—the idiosyncratic words and sentences of our deepest fears that provide clues leading to the source of unresolved trauma. Core language can also be expressed in physical sensations, behaviors, emotions, impulses, and symptoms of an illness or condition

Core Sentence—a short sentence that expresses the emotionally charged language of our deepest fear. It carries

the residue of an unresolved trauma from our early childhood or family history.

Core trauma—the unresolved trauma in our early or family history that can unconsciously affect our behaviors, choices, health, and well-being. (Page 219)

Putting this process together, Mark shared the story of a young man, James, who awoke one night freezing cold with an impending sense of doom that he would die if he went back to sleep. He came to Mark with the complaints of depression and insomnia. He'd dropped out of college, an aspiring 19-year-old stopped in his prime. Turns out, listening to his core descriptors and sentences and doing some family genealogy work [Mark shares techniques for doing family genograms (an extended family tree) to create a map of experiences going back through generations] that an uncle had in fact died in a snowstorm of hypothermia. James had no knowledge of this before seeing Mark yet he lived his uncle's story. Once the details were discovered, James was able to use visualizations, active imagination and direct dialogue techniques to create pathways to reconnection, integration and reclamation of his life and his health.

According to Mark, the impact of our traumatic legacies plays a far greater role in our emotional and physical lives than has ever before been understood. His book offers a slow paced, comprehensive guide to understanding trauma's impact in the moment and as carried forward from the past, and techniques to uncover what's causing symptomology now, distress now, and ways to reconnect with those whose lives are impacting you. Appendices offer questions to mine for data and list your family history and early traumas (yours and your family's). There are questions throughout the book guiding your explorations into your past.

Doing some of the exercises myself, I noted many clichés that automatically came to mind because I was raised on them and am consciously aware of their presence in my life, such as: 'the early bird catches the worm', 'when in Rome do as the Romans do', 'where there's a will there's a way', and of course 'thin rats outlive fat rats' (weight gain and loss were always a central focus in my family and thus my life). Songs from my past also offer clear statements about my reality (lived then and perpetuated today) like, "alone again, naturally."

But it was difficult to ascertain which of my family trauma's might play the bigger role: my German relatives moved with the promise of

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quality farming land and pledged their allegiance twice, once to the king of Denmark and then to Catherine the Great (which meant a long haul to Russia, to a small village on the Volga River) only to have their hopes dashed by lies and their true reality. They survived the Great Famine, the Bolshevik revolution. Relatives were sent to work camps where they died or survived atrocities that followed them to eventual release and resettlement. My grandparents were separate for 17 years; he, a theologian, escaped to Berlin; she, the first kindergarten teacher in her village, stuck in Russia, before earning her way out. They came to America, directly to Colorado bypassing Ellis Island and all that trauma, a minister and his wife. My parents survived the Great Depression and so on. On my mom's side there's adoptions and abuse and, and, and. I felt like, what do I do with all of this background? It was a muddle of known stories without an underlying theme.

But when my core phrase appeared in my mind it was like pieces fell into place: I work tirelessly for little compensation while they, the 'golden ones', reap abundance while doing next to nothing.

Suddenly I felt my past as my present. Yes, my relatives worked for nothing, promises were broken and dreams destroyed by sod houses and marshlands, by famines and wars. Meanwhile, others rose in stature and wealth at their expense. With a wider view, I saw this pattern recreated perpetuated today.

What was missing for me, however, was what to do about it. Mark's intervention techniques rely heavily on visualizations and dialogue work (two chairs and so forth). He shares many case vignettes that highlight the exploration process and then the healing process, but he's there guiding and offering the words, the experience, the healing pathway. The amount of information one can uncover can potentially be overwhelming when you're faced with startling discoveries, especially if you are not a trained psychotherapist. And, in fact, even with professional training and a doctorate in clinical psychology, well the inner parts are still that, inner children, adolescents, young adults with pains and hurts, scars and unhealed wounds that resonate despite skills to titrate and "cope".

The most important sentence, then, for me in this book was what Mark called the 'healing sentence', which, he says, "is a sentence of reconciliation or resolution that brings about new images and feelings of well-being" (pg. 220).

Uncertain of my 'healing sentence', I revisited my family tree and instead of seeing desperation and despair, I saw frontiersmen, explorers, teachers, mentors, philosophers. One of my Eichhorn relatives even has a pinnacle named after him and is renown for his climbing feats!

The impact of our traumatic legacies plays a far greater role in our emotional and physical lives than has ever before been understood.

Instead of acting out, act in. When you're triggered, locate where you feel uncomfortable in your body. Place your hand there. Bring your breath there. Tell that young, fragmented part of you: "I've got you. I won't leave you. I'll breathe with you until you're at peace."

—Mark Wolynn
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I needed to appreciate their endeavors and their perseverance, their faith and tenacity. And then appreciate those same strengths in me. So it didn't work out in Denmark, okay let's try Russia. Not happening here? Then, off to America.

It seemed as if the old, "if one door closes, another one opens" cliché rang true for my relatives. Perhaps what lay beyond that portal wasn't exactly what they envisioned or expected but they maintained their drive to better their lives for themselves and their families. I realized it was now up to me to accept that I had been a worker bee with little honey in the hive to show for my efforts and that it was time to find a way to become one of the 'golden ones' who reaps the benefits with much less labor. I'm not sure what exactly this will look like, how it will play out or even come about but the prospects are thrilling none the less.

Coming Back Around

Mark is considered a "pioneer" in the field of inherited family trauma. He has worked with individuals and groups for more than 20 years. *It Didn't Start With You* is considered a "pragmatic and prescriptive guide for readers to use his core language approach to discover the roots of their trauma, conscious and unconscious."

Reading this book and sharing my experiences with friends while hiking has started many interesting conversations and a healing process for me as well as them. The process is fascinating and relatively simple in terms of gathering data. And though he offers case

examples of how he determined the core sentences and so forth, how he worked with the core trauma to help his clients' heal, I do think this sort of work, if done in isolation, isn't as useful as if working with someone skilled like Mark in person. I see this as an excellent tool for clients to use in relationship with their trusted therapist/counselor or perhaps a group of trusted and valued friends with some psychology background willing to support each other's explorations and create healing situations to let go and move forward.

You can listen to Mark talk about his work on [UTube just click here](#)

Mark Wolynn, director of The Family Constellation Institute in San Francisco, is a leading expert in the field of inherited family trauma. A sought-after lecturer, he has taught at the University of Pittsburgh, the Western Psychiatric Institute, Kripalu, The Omega Institute, The New York Open Center, and The California Institute of Integral Studies. His articles have appeared in *Elephant Journal* and *Psych Central*, and his poetry has been published in *The New Yorker*.

For more information please visit <http://www.markwolynn.com>, and follow the author on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

You can read an excerpt from Mark's book starting on page 70 with a link to the complete PDF on page 71.

Insight is gained when we are willing to tolerate discomfort in the quest to understand ourselves.

—Mark Wolynn
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