Candice Schutter: Welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and the 'cult'ure series.

Before we get into today's content, a quick heads up for regular listeners of the pod. This week I'm dropping another ebook over on Patreon, and this one's on the hot topic of vulnerability. It's just a few clicks away, along with over a dozen bonus episodes in the Deconstructing Dogma series, where friends, former colleagues and I are healing out loud, getting into the nitty gritty of everyday cult dynamics.

In the coming weeks, I'm going to be inviting lots of new voices over on to Patreon to add to these bonus conversations, and I can't wait to share them with you.

So if you wanna learn more about how you can support this work and gain immediate access to bonus content, you can head over to patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Okay. Onward.

Before we get into today's conversation, a content warning. This episode includes reference to child abuse, coercion, and suicide. It may be triggering to trauma survivors or anyone who has experience with religious abuse or emotionally coercive relationships. Please listen with care. As always, the stories and opinions shared here are based on personal experience and are not intended to malign any group, individual, or organization.

Last week, I featured a conversation with Lindsay Spyker. She shared her story, and she and I spoke about the dangers inherent in the so-called troubled teen industry. Today we're gonna keep our focus on how children are uniquely impacted by an unhealthy culture.

Delinquent. Troubled teen. Problem child.

When we use labels such as these to describe our children, we ourselves are under the influence. We are reinforcing a worldview that dehumanizes and separates.

And I say this with compassion because oftentimes we use labels like this after having exhausted ourselves trying to fix what appears to be broken. We try to help the child. We use tools and resources that are available to us, and when again and again, they don't work, we are desperate to offload our helplessness. So we point at the child wondering what on earth is wrong with him, her, them. Rather than understanding that their behaviors are a symptom of the unwell cultures they occupy.

Now, having said that, I wanna be crystal fucking clear here. I have no interest in shaming parents, most of which are doing the best they can with the resources and ideologies that they have inherited.

This isn't about pointing fingers at children or parents. I'm here to advocate for entire families and communities, for all of us who've been steeped in a hyper individualistic, colonizing culture that teaches us to suck it up, power through and turn our backs on those who do not conform.

Children are in need of guidance, direction, and clear expressions of boundary. And they also need love, age-appropriate empathy, and adequate time and space to make mistakes, to grow and to develop according to their own unique timeline.

Every child is unique and therefore every parent will be challenged. Any child is harmed when they're born into a culty family, group, or system of influence where discipline is synonymous with control. And when a child who requires special considerations is born into a concretized belief system a full-blown cult, the resulting trauma can be devastating. Children who are nonconforming or neuro divergent, from the perspective of cult leadership, they pose the greatest threat to the system as a whole. He, she, they must be broken, in every sense of the word. Their innate wildness must be systematically stripped from them, and the traumas that they experience as a result are lasting.

In December of last year, I sat down with Trina Studebaker to talk about her experiences as a leader, wife, and mother in a Christian fundamentalist cult. In episode 42, Trina spoke bravely about how she regrets that due to cultic indoctrination, she was unable to protect her children from a culture that was highly toxic and physically and emotionally abusive. During our conversations, she spoke openly about the harm and terror that her children experienced, and she shared a fair bit about her eldest son Christian, a neuro divergent child whose very birth challenged the family order to such a degree that he became a constant scapegoat for his father's pain and anger. She spoke about how the religious dogma of the group was used to justify extreme physical and emotional abuse, and she offered the details of her story not as trauma porn, but as a cautionary tale for any parent who places ideology above the needs of their children. It was a brave and powerful episode, and I do recommend you circle back if you haven't heard it.

Trina and I kept in close contact after it aired and about a week after the episode dropped, she reached out to me wondering if I would be open to hearing from her now grown son Christian.

Of course I said yes, and he and I connected soon after. We talked for over an hour, and it became immediately apparent that this follow up episode had to happen.

First and foremost because Christian has every right to speak for himself. And I just wanna take a second to celebrate here that his mama gets that. She understands that his life is his own. And so he joins us today with Trina's brave and wholehearted blessing.

And secondly, what an honor and an opportunity for us all to see the cult through a young child's perspective. Christian was born into the group. As was his father before him. Which is part of what makes this story so damn powerful, because both of these men are no longer who they once were.

Which is really why Christian wanted to be here today, to do as children are meant to do, to carry forward the legacy and evolve the narrative from one of resiliency to one of recovery.

Now, this is an honest, and at times painful story to hear. And that's why it's important for us to listen and to hang on till the end, because it is also a story of reconciliation and repair.

Christian is here because he wants us all to know that not only is it possible to survive the cultiest bullshit imaginable, it is also possible to heal, to reimagine, and to thrive on the other side of it all.

Thanks for tuning in. Here's my conversation with Christian Studebaker.

So how are you feeling going into this conversation?

Christian Studebaker: For the most part, pretty good.

You know, definitely had a little bit of a, a wave of anxiety like 30 minutes ago. But I think that's normal even with how many times I've talked about stuff. You always get that initial rush, I guess you could say.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: But yeah, I've done this before, so, uh, never been recorded, but yeah.

Candice Schutter: Well, I'm so honored that you are allowing me to push the record button with you and that you're trusting me with your story. And I'd love to just start with how we connected to one another and as I mentioned, your mom, Trina, was on the podcast in late December. Episode number 42. And she told her story about, um, really about resiliency and surviving Christian Fundamentalist cult that your whole family was a part of.

And she shared about what it was like to be a mother, and in turn spoke a little bit about your family and spoke specifically about you and some of the experiences you had. And, I think that it makes perfect sense that you would want an opportunity to speak for yourself.

And I'm curious though, what was that experience like having your mother tell that story publicly?

Christian Studebaker: I mean, I'm pretty familiar with it. She's been pretty outspoken through her own channels, you know, in different forms of social media. And through friends and things like that. So we've had that, we've had to have that kind of conversation before of like, what is okay to share with other people.

Because originally, you know, when we initiated this whole recovery journey, I guess you could call it, she was very, similar to me having suppressed everything and then all of a sudden being comfortable or being willing to share these things, you kind of go a little bit overboard. And anyway, initially there was oversharing being done. Not just for our own stories, but about each other and other members of the family. And we had to have that kind of conversation of what is okay. But that's all part of the journey. You know, it's a process and establishing boundaries and we're really good about that now.

But it's, yeah, it is a familiar thing for at least she and I in the family to share these stories. So it was really cool to kind of hear some minor things that I'd forgotten about and a few things that were new. But it is always really interesting to hear somebody else's perspective of your own life to a certain extent, a slice of it.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And so you obviously listened to the episode and, and as I understand it, you actually shared it. You felt comfortable sharing it with folks. And then you reached out to her to maybe make a connection with me. Tell me a little bit about why you wanted to do that.

Christian Studebaker: I think in the grand, I mean, I understood the idea, you know, behind the whole podcast series, you know, sharing the message of all of these different people's stories and everything. And I thought it might be an interesting thing to have, you know, an individual's perspective as a parent, and then also to get the, the child's perspective of things.

And you know, and you and I have, in our previous conversation, we talked about how you haven't had anybody on the podcast yet of somebody who was born into the cults. You know, a lot of people were, uh, found it. I think we had talked about, usually around the twenties and thirties years of age.

And so it's a little bit different, I think, of an experience when you're born into it, and that's all you know.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Christian Studebaker: And that's what you're, you know, your whole life is, you know, that's what you're introduced to.

Candice Schutter: Well, you were spot on. I was of course, thrilled to connect with you, just theoretically to connect with you because of that different perspective that you have. And then when we actually connected to actually hear your story, and really the way that I framed it toward the end of our conversation that that feels important for the listeners is really that bridge from resiliency to recovery.

I feel like your life is such a testament to that. And I was so touched hearing your story, and so I hope you don't mind repeating yourself and sharing with our listeners, what that journey's been like and starting from the beginning since they were already dropped into your story when you were a small child in the cult.

Like, tell us a little bit about you as a child and the life that you lived.

Christian Studebaker: Oh man. Yeah. It's, uh, an odd thing to be so vastly separated from that experience, not just in years, but in just status of life. And, uh, everything that's happened since my childhood and everything that I've grown into. Things I've experienced. It. It's, it's almost like telling somebody else's story, you know, until you get to some of those, you know, heavy, sweet spots. And the emotions kind of come back to a certain extent.

But it is very similar to my relationship with my dad, where he is a different person now than he was. Um, as people heard on my mom's podcast and that I'll go into detail, I very much tell people that the person that he is today is a different person than the the dad that I knew back in my childhood.

And the same goes for me. I'm a completely different person than I was. And so it is very odd to kind of look back and think about and remember these things that have happened and just be so completely separated from that, that none of that being my reality now. Um, um, is, yeah, it's really interesting.

I guess where, you know, you said, start at the beginning.

My mom told me later on that as early as around six months of age, she could tell that I was different. I was not like the other babies. She didn't know what it was that was off, um, but something wasn't right. It wasn't normal, I guess you could say.

And later found out, I think around the age of eight when I was officially diagnosed, diagnosed just like every other nineties kid with ADHD, anxiety and depression, which I was, you know, medicated for. And it was, in my situation was not an overdiagnosis. It wasn't just a blanket, you know, like, this kid has anger issues or this kid can't sit still, therefore ADHD. It's like, no, I was, I was very much the textbook definition of ADHD. And so in addition to ADHD, anxiety and depression, I was also diagnosed with Tourettes, OCD, ODD, which is oppositional defiance disorder, CD, which is conflict disorder.

I was never diagnosed with schizophrenia because, uh, that's kind of the interesting thing about being crazy is you don't know you're crazy. And I didn't know that the voices that I was hearing were not normal. So I was never, I never told anybody about that until I was in my twenties.

And so as a kid who was diagnosed with all of these different problems and had all these behavioral problems, you know, I don't know what the correct course of action is to raise a child like that. I hope that I never have a kid like me. I was, I was more than one handful. You know, I had all of these different problems and stuff and would get into trouble.

And so my, my early life was, I guess what I was really aware of was that I was born into a family and not everybody loved me. I, I could sense that. I could sense. And I, you know, and I was so young, I didn't realize what it was, but my mom loved me, but my dad didn't. He didn't want me.

And then being in the cult where that kind of foundation is set. I, I explained it to people that they believed and they taught, the adults and the parents that if your child was acting out, it's because the child had demons inside and they needed to be expelled. And the best way to do that would be to beat your child. And a sign that you were doing it right is if there was blood. If there's blood, that's physical proof that the demons are leaving your body.

And so that was my reality as this confused, angry, lost child who had no control over, you know, myself. I would do things with my body, especially with the Tourettes that I had no

control over. And, I kind of explained Tourettes as being similar to a seizure, rather than, you know, one or two episodes a day, that last x amount of time, it's more of like a hundred thousand seizures that last a second, each one.

And so my early life was just full of so much confusion and anger and desperation to be accepted. And then when I would not get the acceptance from my dad or from teachers or from my classmates or anybody, that would just fuel the anger even more. And I would lash out and I would break things. I would fight, cause problems for people. And then I would be disciplined again. And I, you know, disciplined in quotation marks. I, I talk about how, when I say that I was disciplined as a child, you know, a lot of people are like, yeah, I was spanked too. And I'm like, yeah, were, were any tools used on you? Was a belt? Um, I remember my dad at the time, he was never physically abusive to the point that it would break things. None of my bones were ever broken. But he did the psychological, the mental kind of torture where he would put me in timeout right by the garage door and he'd tell me to stand there and listen. And he'd go out in the garage and he'd say, I'm gonna go out there and I'm gonna make something to beat you with.

And I would have to stand there by the garage door anticipating when he would come back in. And he would spend however long it was in the garage, making all this noise, building something, um, that he was gonna use on me. And so there was a lot of that kind of fear instilled in me at such a young age.

And, uh, in a conversation I had with my grandpa, my mom's dad, who I'm extremely close to. Um and has very much been my hero throughout my life. He had told me that he remembered as early as I think two and a half when we were at their house and I had gotten ahold of a marker or something and snuck behind their recliner in the living room and like drew on the back of the recliner as a, as a two-year-old. And my dad was outraged that I had destroyed something of somebody else's and of value. And to my grandparents it wasn't a big deal. You know, it's the back of the recliner. It's two-year-old.

Candice Schutter: That's what two year olds do. Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. And, and my dad then picked me up and took me to the back room and beat me, as a two year old. And I think that's around, from what I remember, talking to my mom. Around that time between the ages of one and two is when the physical abuse started happening. Um, you know, and it wasn't spankings, you know, and also why would you spank a one or two year old? Like, they're so young, they're not gonna understand.

But the way that my dad had learned was that that's how you discipline a child who's acting out. And I wonder how much of what I did was actually acting out, and how much of it was just a normal one or two year old, you know?

Candice Schutter: Exactly. Right.

Christian Studebaker: So my early years were, the emotional kind of feelings and thoughts were, why don't you love me? What is so inherently wrong with me that I'm unlovable by you? You know, thinking of my dad and that desperation for love, safety, compassion, things like that.

And that trend just kind of, it just continued. It compounded over time and got worse and worse. My behavioral issues got worse and worse. I was a problem at school, uh, very violent. A lot of the kids were the same size as me. You know, we're all right around the same size when you're five or six years old. And I remember in, I was suspended in first grade because some kid in gym class took my favorite jump rope, but he wouldn't give it to me. And so I grabbed another jump rope and came up behind him and wrapped it around his neck and pulled him down to the ground and started strangling him. That was my understanding of how to deal with emotions.

Candice Schutter: Mm.

Christian Studebaker: And that continued on. I was very much a problem child. And I was a danger to other children. Third grade, I remember there was a kid who we were sitting across from each other at these desks and, and he had made a, a joke about me. I was the butt of the joke basically. And I jumped across the table and held a pair of scissors to his throat and threatened to kill him if he ever made a joke about me. Again, completely normal behavior for an eight-year-old to go , you know, to do. Um, no problems there whatsoever. Uh, no red, no red flags.

God knows how many conversations my parents had, or my mom specifically, had to have with the teachers and the school administration about me. Um, but it's, it's funny, I, I wonder if any of the teachers or anybody had any kind of sense to ask what's going on at home.

Candice Schutter: Yes. That's exactly what I keep thinking, right?

Christian Studebaker: You know, and they may have. But as my mom shared in her story, how they were taught or told to parent, they were told that nobody's going to understand why we're doing this. We're being of service to God, and this is the way God wants it. And that whole load of garbage and, um.

Candice Schutter: You can curse on here.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, I'm just looking for more creative words.

Candice Schutter: Okay.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, that load of shit. Um,

Candice Schutter: Well, and the, the nature of the larger culture and how we enable cult dynamics through this whole idea of religious freedom, right? Oh, well, it's part of their religion, so we, we can't interfere. We can't ask questions. We can't pursue it any further because this is a function of their religious belief and it's their right to essentially abuse their children because religious freedom, right?

Christian Studebaker: Right. Well, and then at the same time, I think it was around the ages of six or seven that, you know, my parents were like, we can't handle this kid. We're

overwhelmed. And they sought out help through other means. Um, I started going to therapy, different types of counselors and things like that.

And looking back, I'm just like, how could you all be such, so, like, such idiots to, you know, not question why, why is he acting out this way? And then, and then be like, oh, the appropriate response is then to have him go to therapy and again, be like, we don't know what's wrong with him. It's like, well, maybe if you loved him and weren't beating him and putting him through these different things, maybe then the child would act somewhat normally. The neurological things were present still and were a very big thing. Um, but I, I wonder again, the extent that they were, is probably amplified by what was going on at home.

Candice Schutter: A hundred percent, had to be.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. And it, it just kept getting worse and worse. I was medicated at eight, I think was when I started being medicated after the diagnoses. And that was when it was like being a subject, an experiment is what it felt like. You know, my parents tried to explain to me why I did these things, why I acted this way. And they said that the wires in your head are just mixed up. They're not connecting where they're supposed to be. You know, which is a fairly adequate explanation coming from where they were, being uneducated on the matter. Um, and, my mom never said that it's because God hates you. But that's something that my dad would say. You are this way because you're bad. You're evil or whatever. That's why I don't love you. You know, there are many different reasons why he didn't love me.

So then you take this eight year old and you start giving them pills, and it was just such an experiment. It was like we'd go to these weekly or biweekly meetings with the therapists and the counselors trying to figure out the right balance. Oh, this new drug came out and we should try this one.

And, and really it stunted my physical growth, because, a common side effect of a lot of these different medications, you know, they serve as appetite suppressants to a certain degree. And so as this kid who's growing and getting closer and closer to becoming a teenager and going through that big growth spurt, my weight was severely stunted. I would've been classified as anorexic at certain points, that the doctors then had to prescribe PediaSure and different types of weight gain supplements and things like that to try to.

You know, so it was just this whole situation where there's this kid who's not loved, who's getting beaten. Giving these medications and then going to counseling and therapy and then giving specialized food and all this stuff. And it was, I felt very special and unique and different from everybody else. And that was really like where those feelings, the, I'm alone in this, nobody understands. And, and that feeling of wanting to be loved, you know, gets translated over time to fuck everybody else. You know, I, I hate you because you don't accept me.

And things would get worse at school. I started to become a scrawny kid who was smaller than everybody else, even a lot of the girls, and would get bullied. And then I would act out, uh, you know, what I felt like was appropriately. And then I'd get in trouble and suspended

and then I'd go home. And I'd get in trouble and disciplined for being suspended. And then I would act out even more.

Candice Schutter: Just a cycle. Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, it was just this endless cycle and at some point I think I just accepted that this was my reality. This was the way that my life was going to be forever, and there was nothing I could do about it. And, and my dad definitely helped, you know, he assisted in that process.

Um, my brother is incredibly intelligent. And my dad would tell me, I would, you know, I would pick on my brother. I never did things to him that my dad did to me. You know, to the same extent. I would do the typical, you know, punching and fighting like kids do. And I probably, you know, definitely went to a higher level with him than a normal kid would. But it wasn't the same as what my dad put me through. You know, I wasn't using tools on my brother or locking him in rooms and closets and things like that.

Um, but my dad would tell me that I needed to be nice to my brother because when I was older, he was gonna be the one to bail me outta jail cuz God knows I'm not. As soon as you're 18, I'm fucking done with you. You're on your own kid. And you know, and he would say things like that at 9, 10 years old. So I'm, I'm in this situation where I'm not loved by one of my parents, this person also abuses me and tortures me to a certain extent, and I'm having all these different problems and I'm just so scared and lost and confused and just, I mean, insurmountably angry. And angry isn't even the right word. Uh, rageful just, I mean, to such a high extent, I've never seen anybody else demonstrate the level. I would almost pop the blood vessels in my eyes from just screaming and being so angry as a child.

And it just kept getting worse and worse. And the, cult was, that was the reality was, you know, it, it was confusing cuz I actually early on liked going to this place cuz all of my family was there. My cousins in particular, on my dad's side, his oldest sister's daughter, four daughters were there and my aunt and uncle, and basically, my whole dad's side of the family was there. And they were family, and we were close. Because we were, you know, participating in these different activities four or five days a week.

So I liked it. I didn't make the connections between the abuse and this cult.

And to me it wasn't a cult. You know, you're normal, sane people don't enter into those kind of atmospheres and they don't have those kind of thoughts of like, yeah, this is right, or this is wrong. Like I said before, crazy people don't know they're crazy. Broken people don't know they're broken.

Candice Schutter: And people don't join cults They join a good thing.

Christian Studebaker: Right. And you know, I remember a lot of the different teachings and things that we were taught through the cult. A major one to me was that God has an ultimate plan and everything that happens to you is, there's a reason for it. And so my dad would then take that and the abuse and all the different things like that, it was because God was

punishing me. And my relationship with God from that point on was that, you know, of course there are no other gods. This is the only one, right true God, Jesus was white. God is a old white man in the sky with a white beard and a staph. And the bad things were happening to me because God hates me or because God is punishing me. And I will never be good enough to get into heaven, but I have to spend the rest of my life serving God. That was the, the kind of idea that they had instilled in me.

Candice Schutter: So what sort of future, if any, could you see for yourself with this framework?

Christian Studebaker: I didn't think of the future. I mean, I accepted that I was going to end up in jail. That I would, as my dad said, I would be homeless or in jail or dead. And that was my reality. And school was never for me. I was always getting into trouble. And nobody in my family had ever done anything, you know, I think my mom said she went for like one semester to a community college, and same with my dad. But that was the most that any of anybody in my family had ever done. And school was for my brother. He was the gifted intellectual in the family who would get straight A's. And he was the star student for all of his classes. And I was so jealous of the praise he would receive from our parents and from the teachers.

I hated it. Because I, I was uncontrollable. I had no idea what was going on with me, and I would act out in these different ways. And he was the perfect child. He had friends and I had none. I would oftentimes try to, the older brother would tag along with the younger brother to hang out with his friends. Because I was a problem child and all the neighborhood families knew that. They were all scared of me. And they didn't want their kids around me.

So I, my interaction with other people my age were, they would bully me at school and then I would go and hang out with the younger kids that were my brother's friends. If their families would allow me. So I had really accepted this whole reality that Austin, my brother was gonna be successful and he was gonna have to take care of me as an adult.

And that was all the thought I gave it. There were no dreams or, any kind of sparkly future for me.

[00:32:40] transition

Christian Studebaker: Well, when I was 10, I picked on a kid in class and I got into a lot of trouble for it. I had already been suspended, who knows how many times that year my parents couldn't take any time off of work, any more time off of work cause my mom was working at the time and so was my dad. And so they came up with a deal with the school district where one of my parents would drive me to school and the vice principal and a teacher would come out to the car and physically escort me into the building.

And they had cleared out this storage room in the gym that was about a six by eight room. You know, it was just storage for different things, like desks and stuff. And they cleared it out and they would put me in there and then lock it and I would be in there all day by myself. Um, I remember there was one poster, a Michael Jordan poster, um, he's holding up a TV character's, Urkel. He was picking up Urkel by his head. And, and that was all that I had in

the room. I had a desk and then that, and then homework. And at lunchtime a teacher would come out and escort me to the cafeteria where I was by myself on a table with a teacher. And I would sit there, and it was very much like prison. And then afterwards escorted back to the room and locked in there. And then repeat the process for the last two weeks of my fifth grade year. And it was solitary confinement as a 10 year old. And I, and I was in trouble. So once I got home, I was locked in my room. You know, and, would be disciplined and things like that.

So that's just what reality was. I accepted it. That what my future was going to be.

And eventually that year when I was 10 was when we left the cult. And my parents kind of explained, they didn't explain it very well, um, but they explained it to my brother and I that we were leaving and there was gonna be this big change. And we didn't know what all was going to happen, but we were leaving.

And again, I didn't connect the dots between the cults and the abuse. Um, but I was scared, because my entire family was there. You know, everybody that I knew. And, and it was kind of these weird realizations of like talking to other kids and they would be like, oh, this weekend we're going doing this or that with our families. And I'm just confused like, what do you mean you don't have practice? Like worship practice? You don't have bible study? You don't have this or that going on that was dedicating your life to God.

Like, so everybody else was wrong. We were right. And, and that was that.

Candice Schutter: Did that add to the sense of isolation, I would imagine, with your peers?

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, I mean, already we were told that we were special and better than everybody else because we were serving the right God and other people, the heathens, they were not serving the right God or any God. And we were the only ones who were gonna be in heaven.

Candice Schutter: So when you left then, the foundation of your belief system is the only thing you'd ever known. So we're gonna leave this group that is the way, the path, the only people serving the right God. And now we're gonna transition into something else. Like did you have anxiety around that or was that not really consciously on your radar at the time?

Christian Studebaker: I don't think it was really on my radar. I was, I was a child and things happened to me. My dad would do what he did and this and that. I was always along for the ride. And so it was like, okay, this is a change, it's happening. I didn't give it any thought, but I'm sure I had anxiety around it.

Um, my brother was always the more aware, you know, in questioning, at least internally, those sorts of things. I think he came to the conclusion or his own conclusion that there was no God. Um, at a far younger age than I did. Where he started having those, those questions of like, that doesn't make sense. If you know these children, these starving children in Africa that are dying by the millions, why does God hate them if they don't even know he exists?

Like, like, you know, he would, the logic wasn't there and he would piece those things together before I did. I was too focused on my own reality.

I was just in adapt mode, doing best I could with what I had been given, um, what very little I had been given and what little control I had. But then we kind of jumped around to a few different churches and different establishments after we left the cult. None of it was for very long. My parents had some pretty eye-opening experiences around politics around this time when we, they had found a church that the leader of the church was a Democrat. What do you mean? What do you mean you believe in God and you're serving the right God and you're a Democrat?

That's not right. Um, no pun intended.

Candice Schutter: No pun intended.

Christian Studebaker: And so it, so they had their own experiences. I was not aware of politics. I'm 10, 11, 12 years old, you know, just not aware of any of that kind of stuff. I was just, you know, head down and try to survive.

There was this like, internal void that started with not being loved by my dad. And then that grew, you know, every time something happens, or throughout all the years, that the void would grow and it, and it would get larger and larger until it's this gaping chasm of emptiness on the inside. And I was so desperate to fill it with something. I mean, with compassion, with love. And my mom did the absolute best that she could with what she had been given and what she had learned. And it wasn't enough. She can't make up for another parent essentially not being there. While being there and being abusive.

And my relationship with my dad was, I think, at the worst it had ever been. We would all go to bed around eight or nine or the kids would go to bed around eight, and parents would go to bed around nine or 10 and around 11 at night, my dad would go into the kitchen and he'd get a glass of water. And I had, I hated him so much cuz he was just pure evil in my eyes, in my opinion. He was the reason for everything that was wrong in the world and especially everything that was wrong in my world.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Christian Studebaker: And I had planned out how I was gonna kill him. I was gonna hide in the kitchen and have a knife and come up behind him and kill him. Um, what sane, normal child has those kinds of thoughts? You know, and I knew that I would probably end up in juvenile detention and I would get in trouble for that. And I didn't do it because I was afraid of getting in trouble with the law. I never did it because I was afraid that I would fail and that he would then kill me.

Eventually when I was a teenager I had a friend. My first real friend who accepted me, how I acted. He was also a problem child. He had run-ins with the law and stuff. And those were the people I identified with was other problem kids. And it's funny cuz my parents didn't want

me around them in fear that they would rub off on me and make me act out more. But really I just wanted to be accepted and have some companionship.

Candice Schutter: That's where you got a sense of belonging.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. And this one friend, I think I was 16. We had been friends for a few years. My oldest friend at that time, I had never had a real true friend that I could be myself with. And that would engage in the inappropriate behaviors that I participated in, like throwing rocks, uh, not little rocks, throwing, you know, big rocks at cars, breaking windows, breaking into houses, doing things, violent, aggressive and angry things cuz that how angry I was at the world.

And this, this person I trusted actually. And he introduced me to marijuana and he was like, Hey, here's this thing. And I was very much a DARE kid. I was all about DARE and drugs are bad and all that stuff.

Candice Schutter: All the more reason to do them because you're bad. Like that's your worldview. Like, I'm bad.

So the bad thing must be for me.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. And, and I, I liked those, visualizations of what were bad things. Motorcycles, leather jackets, tattoos, smoking, all that kind of stuff that, you know, the antagonist in the different films and TV shows. Like I, I loved that. I remember as a kid, my parents wouldn't even let us watch Lion King, and we were Disney only household. Cuz that was the only thing that was somewhat okay. But I couldn't watch Lion King because I would imitate Scar. I didn't wanna be Mufasa the leader, whatever I wanted to be the bad one. I wanted to be angry and lash out.

But this friend had also experienced his own form of abuse. And we, we never talked about it, but I realize now, you know, why those kinds of people find each other, how we find each other. And, and I trusted him. And so when he said, pot is not going to kill you. I tried it out. And the very first time I did it, that gaping chasm inside was filled immediately. Everything that was wrong in my world, in my life, in that reality was righted. I felt normal. I felt like I could have friends. I felt like I could fit in with the world.

And I, and as a teenager, I mean, most importantly, I could talk to girls finally. I mean, you know, a 16 year old boy, you know, drug fueled. Yeah. It was amazing. And I remember my first thought after the effects hit me was, I want to feel this way and do this every day for the rest of my life. And that was kind of what I accepted. That was what was going to happen. I was, I was gonna pursue that with the desperation of a drowning man, because everything that was wrong with my life and I had no idea how to fix it, all of a sudden I had a fix. Had the fix.

And, and it progressed from there. Um, pot turned into this, which turned into that. And six months after I first smoked pot, I was doing heroin in this guy's car outside of an outpatient rehab center that I was in. Because my mom was disabled at the time and had tons of

Oxycontin. She had tons of pain pills and she was so high and doped up on this stuff to deal with her chronic pain that she, there was no way she was as good and organized as she is, there was no way she was keeping track of all the pills. And so I started taking them and at the beginning I would take them and I would sell them to buy more pot. But pot stopped working. It stopped getting me as high. And so my friend would be like, Hey, take some of these pills. You'll feel better. So we started. And then I started taking more pills and more and more until my mom would refill the prescription and then the next day the bottle would be empty.

And they naturally asked me what was going on. And I lied of course, as I did about everything. And eventually the truth came out after them pressing me quite hard.

Um, and I should also mention that the abuse with my dad, the physical abuse stopped when I was 14. And I've had conversations with him. He doesn't know why that was when he stopped. I don't know why either. Um, but the interesting thing is that my brother can't remember his childhood. It was so traumatic having to be there and watch my dad do what he did to, to me, and to be present in this environment of anxiety and of conflict. He told me one day, he said, you know, I can't remember anything before the age of 11.

And I'm thinking, I'm like, I'm trying to figure out why is that? He's three years younger than me. So when he was 11, I was 14. And that was when the abuse stopped. At that moment his life began, essentially. Um, from what he can remember.

And, and for me, that was when it all stopped. I never got the chance to, uh, fight my dad. I know a lot of kids that their, their dad would hit them or things like that. And I asked them, when did it stop? They said, when I knocked him on his ass.

Candice Schutter: That was my first thought when you said that. It stopped at 14. I was like, oh you must have fought back, and that ended at all. But no, that's not what happened.

Christian Studebaker: No, the worst thing possible, which was that it just stopped. Just, and I never got that chance. I never got the chance to become a man, you know, quotation marks and fight back.

Candice Schutter: Were you hypervigilant during those late teen years waiting for it to start up again? Or what was your thinking around that?

Christian Studebaker: I think it tapered off to a certain degree. So I think I, in the back of my mind, yeah, was kind of like waiting for it. But I wasn't ready to fight back because he had instilled in me so much fear of death that, you know, I, I was just happy that it ended.

Looking back now, you know, I kind of wish the circumstances had been different. But I never got the chance to fight back or gain some level of confidence, I guess you could say, uh, or, or take back my life, essentially. That kind of rite of passage, I guess you could call it, for what a lot of these people that experience this go through. Um, it's not really that important now.

Yeah, I, I was doing drugs in, in an outpatient rehab center. This is my senior year of high school when I was 17. And one thing led to another. I kept failing UAs. I would have my brother pee in a cup for me cuz I knew that I had a drug testing after school. Cause I, my reality was I'd go to school you know, Monday through Friday. And on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays after school, I would take the bus and I would go to this outpatient rehab. And then afterwards I'd go home and I'd have to be just at home.

Brother peed in a cup. I would keep it on me all day throughout the school day knowing, you know, I was smarter than everybody. I could outsmart the system.

I remember when I was a little kid, I would be obsessive about ice cream, and would eat all of the ice cream. So they would go, you know, they'd put the ice cream in the freezer and I'd sneak in at night out into the kitchen and eat all the ice cream and then put the empty container in the freezer. Cause I didn't want them to find out because, you know, they wouldn't find out, they wouldn't find out about an empty container or anything.

Candice Schutter: Brilliant plan.

Christian Studebaker: Brilliant. Well executed.

They started hiding it in like vegetable, like frozen pea bags and stuff. And I would always find it. Eventually they bought a, a second freezer they put out in the garage and my dad put a padlock on it. He like retrofitted it with this lock. And when they did that and I knew that they had ice cream, they were, my dad was kind of like, you wanna be all defiant and play games? Well, you know, beat that essentially.

And me being like, oh, okay, you want to fight? Let's fight then. So I wait till they go leave the house or go to sleep or whatever. And I took the freezer apart. I left the part that was locked. I took the entire freezer apart. Got the ice cream out. Ate it all. Put it back in the freezer in an empty container. And then put the freezer back together.

And

Candice Schutter: Oh my gosh. How old were you when you did that?

Christian Studebaker: probably 12 or 13, maybe younger than that.

Candice Schutter: You, my friend, are untameable, which is a beautiful thing and in the situation that you were in was a dangerous thing to be. Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: So, I kept failing the UAs. My grandfather, who is a member of AA as well. He got sober in in 1970. You know, he now has almost 53 years sober. He such a big influence on me in my life, and especially my recovery from drug addictions.

And the outpatient rehab told my parents if he fails another UA, he's gonna be sent to rehab. My parents brought that up to my grandfather who said, give him the choice to go. And I had

this, sort of a white light experience when I was being forced to attend these AA meetings, where I saw a future version of me that was homeless and using drugs and alone. And then I saw a future of me that was healthy, had friends and family, and looked happy. And I, that scared me. So I texted my mom, I needed help. And a week later I was in Minnesota for a month and, and I thought, you know, uh, one month away from everybody. That sounds great. It'd be a cool adventure. Um, great story. Brings all the focus on me when introduced to aa. Like I'll get all the attention from everybody cuz I had been gone and nobody knew where I was. And, you know, I disappeared and then reemerged and, and I didn't have a problem. I hadn't been using drugs that long, so it wasn't that big of a problem.

The licensed and well-educated professionals thought differently, um, and recommended me for extended care. So that one month turned into four months. And I spent, after the one month in Minnesota, three months in Pennsylvania at a different rehab facility.

I mean, I loved rehab. All of a sudden I had structure, and I didn't have to think. I didn't have to figure things out anymore. It was all figured out already for me. So I could just, I could be free. And it was very much one of the happiest times of my life. And also one of the saddest.

And I was introduced to AA. And for the first time in my life I saw people who were just like me, who didn't need to do the things that I was doing. Who didn't feel the way that I felt at that moment, but had felt that way before. And they had a solution that was not drugs or alcohol.

And it peaked my curiosity. You know, I thought maybe it would work for me, you know. If it works for them, maybe it would.

And so I went into it and I, I did the whole 12 step thing, sponsor, steps, and it worked. . I didn't need drugs anymore. I started to learn how to behave normally.

And I should also mention that around my teenage years was when a lot of my behavioral and neurological things started to fall by the wayside and started to go away.

Candice Schutter: Was it around the age of 14 by chance?

Christian Studebaker: Uh, well, part of it probably has to do with that. But ultimately, it was something else actually. How I just started to, you know, these things started to go away. I stopped hearing voices. And I was able to sit in a chair and not fidget and squirm and, and do all that kind of stuff. I wasn't obsessed with different things. I didn't have to tap something four times. Or I didn't have to do this and that anymore. It just started to taper off and go away.

It was the first time that I started to do therapy and I wanted it. And I thought that it might work. Cuz all the therapy that I went through as a kid, I wasn't aware that things were wrong. I was there because I was a bad child and there was nothing they could do to fix me. So.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Christian Studebaker: So it was like my first real case of really looking inward and looking at the things that were going on. And I now, in November celebrated 14 years clean and sober. As a senior in high school, 17 years old, that was the last time that I ever did any drugs or drank any alcohol. And I, you know, it's a bit of a faux paux, to be in AA or any kind of 12 step program and say like, I'm never gonna do this again. I'm, I'm never going to do that stuff. Because I refuse to go back to that gym storage room. I refuse to go back to being alone and angry at everybody. And I refuse to go back to being unlovable.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Christian Studebaker: Is my whole sentiment. So I was told to do things a certain way, so I did 'em. And they worked. And then I got the opportunity through other means, other forms of therapy, start to look at that childhood stuff. You know, we, AA had a big focus on the drugs and alcohol and why do we do those things? But it wasn't until my twenties that I really started to look, not look inward, but go inward. You know, AA gave me the tools necessary to look inward and be able to correct my behaviors and try to act appropriately from that point on. But the other forms of therapy allowed me to go back inside and start to address the things that were broken.

When I came back from rehab, I met the first group of friends. Real friends who weren't using me for drugs or alcohol or whatever I could give them, but just wanted to be around me. They were the first ones that I'd ever had in my life. I had, you know, 17 years without friends to make up for.

So I worked at part-time jobs just to pay the bills and stuff. I worked at all these different jobs like Safeway. I was a bag boy. I did these, all these dead end jobs, and I was so confused cuz I knew I was smart. You know, I, I can do more than this. But there was so much fear of failure of not being good enough. That was the big deep thing was just the fear of not being enough.

And through different circumstances ended up going to Portland Community College. I, I needed the money essentially. I was in a situation where money was being taken outta my paycheck, and I was desperate. I didn't have enough experience or education or skills to be able to make enough money to survive.

And so, I talked to different people like my mentor, my sponsor and friends and family. And my sponsor at the time had told me that if I go to college, I can get financial aid, and the government can't take that money. So I initially went to community college so that I could take out the full amount of the loans so I could afford to live, pay my bills, have fun, do all that kind of stuff. And I did the bare minimum. I started to learn a little bit. But I didn't know how to be a good student. I just showed up, paid attention in class, did the assignments and all that kind of stuff.

But then the classes got harder and I wasn't able to just get by with my smarts, just by paying attention in class. It required studying and I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know what studying meant. What do you do for studying? Do you just read the content again? Like, I, I didn't know what, you know, nobody, my parents were so busy with trying to keep me out of jail as a kid that I never learned how to be a good student. They never taught me, this is what

studying is. And my grades started slipping and I would lose my scholarship. And that meant I would be homeless and I would die. Everything was, you will die.

So that, that was the, uh, catastrophizing mindset that gets survivors of cults and other various things. All too familiar with catastrophizing.

And that's not exclusive to cult survivors, you know, lots of people have that experience and can empathize. And Yeah.

So I started failing community college, which what, what's supposed to be really easy was really hard.

When I failed out a community college and I didn't know what to do, I attempted suicide. I'm four years into recovery from alcoholism and in drug addiction. I found my solution and it wasn't enough to fix the things that were just going on in my life in the past and at that time.

I took my car down to this boat dock and it was a manual. And I, I got it right to the edge, over the edge of the boat dock. So I'm fully going down at a slant on the slope, and I roll up the windows. I lock the doors. I have my foot on the brake, but I, I put the car into neutral release the e-brake, and I take my foot off the brake and the car did not move.

I was confused. It just didn't move. There were no rocks or anything impeding the wheels from moving. I was on a slope that's meant to like, for boats to get up and down. Um, if you've seen those docks, like they're not a very, they're a pretty aggressive slope. And my car did not move. And I sat there for like five minutes, just flabbergasted, you know, why it wasn't working.

And then I backed up, went over to a parking spot and I cried. And I cried for an hour. Cuz even wanting to kill myself, I failed.

And I got scared and, and ran. And I joined the Navy. That was my other alternative. Cuz that was four to six years guaranteed pay. And this whole thing. And I, and I approached it with the adaptive mindset of like, this will be an adventure. I'm all for it. I'm excited and I would justify it and everything.

So I, I joined the Navy and it had a lot of ups and downs. Um, you know, I was very much ready to get out before it was time to get out. Like anybody who was in the military is probably chuckling a little bit at that. I don't regret it, cuz it was a really good experience for me. It put a lot of, it reemphasized a lot of the structure and foundation that rehab had put in me. Like when to wake up, how to make your bed, what to eat, when to eat. Having that kind of structure, it frees your mind up from everything else. You can become like, you know, hyper-focused.

Candice Schutter: Well, and I think also having been a child in a cult, you know, even though structure was oppressive to you as a child in so many ways, it, it's actually all you knew was for everything to be defined and chosen for you. And if your sense of self isn't

being encouraged, developed, and nurtured, then to have the relief of not having to choose for oneself, I think can feel a lot like home.

Whether it's good for us or not, it can feel like my sense of self is being defined for me and there's a certain kind of relief when that's all you've ever known.

Christian Studebaker: Right.

Yeah, it was, it was just very freeing. And it's odd, but rehab and the military almost felt like a vacation. Because I didn't have to worry about money anymore. I just show up when they tell me. I do what they tell me. And everything will be taken care of. And it was, you know, most people may not have grown up poor. I mean, my family was, we were poor. You know, we had donations from people given to us, food stamps, you know, we were on that whole spectrum of needing financial assistance. And that was also given to me as a young child, was the fear of financial, you know, the financial insecurity.

I do the Navy thing, it's really great, um, it's also really bad. Met some amazing people, people that I still talk to, to this day.

I leave the Navy and I'm 26, somewhere around there. mid to late twenties, and it was just like being 10 again. Like leaving the cult. It was like all of a sudden, I was free. I don't have this financial obligation. I can do whatever I want now. And at this point in time, I, I reconnected with AA. I had kind of taken a step back to a certain degree cuz I had seven years or, you know, whatever. And not that I thought that I didn't need AA or any 12 step program. I knew that I needed it. But I, I got overwhelmed with the social side of AA. There's a lot of cliques and things like that. And even in AA, I felt alone to a certain degree with those cliques of people. So I took a step back and.

But I leave the Navy. I reintroduce myself to AA through a friend on Facebook who reached out. He had just left rehab. He takes me to meetings at that point, and I get reacquainted with AA and I meet all these amazing people in Portland. And I met a guy who is a really close friend of mine, and he's a manager at New Seasons. And he got me an interview with New Seasons and I went to the interview and I got the job. And I started working there and it was like, oh my God, this is so much money. Because I didn't, 30% outta my paycheck, wasn't taken out for this financial obligation as well as the 20 to 30% for taxes. So I have all this money and I'm free.

And I did that for like a year and a half. And at some point I had gotten a new sponsor. And we started going through a book called The Road Less Traveled which fucking amazing book.

Candice Schutter: M. Scott Peck. Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. Scott Peck. I'm, I'm not one to you know, I'd be like, oh, this book will change your life and all that, you know. I'm not into all that, but that book changed my life.

You know, the looking inward process in that book. And then also the kind of renegotiating thoughts and feelings that I had about myself. And the, the inner void started to become filled. I for the first time in my life, reading that book and going through it with my sponsor at the time, and doing some of the work that it kind of talks about and practicing these things. I remember my sponsor and I, we came to the realization that I didn't love myself. I loathed and hated myself because I was the problem. As what exactly what had been told, you know, taught to me as a child.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: And so we started off by doing the most uncomfortable thing imaginable, which was, he said, your homework is, I want you to, every morning after you wake up, and every night before you go to bed to look in the mirror and say, I love you.

And I'm like, oh my God. What kind of nut is this voodoo magic bullshit. Want me to throw some salt over my shoulder too, buddy? And, and I asked, well, when do I stop? And he said, when it becomes comfortable. And it took me a little over a month of doing that every day to where it became comfortable. And he is like, all right, now you're ready to start. And we started going through that book, and it changed my perspective on a lot of things in life. And we made a lot of progress through my years of working with him, amazing work that I am, you know, profoundly grateful for.

Um, but at one point he was like, all right, it's time to graduate past New Seasons. I'm like, what do you mean? He says, I have friends who have master's degrees in engineering, and you're smarter than they are. It's time to go back to college.

And I'm like, so hesitant. I'm flattered, but then also scared. Like, but I failed. I failed community college. I can't, I don't want to go back to that. And it took a lot of talk, but eventually I went to Portland Community College again with the mindset of I love myself. And having the tools necessary to deal with those fears, especially that inner talk. You know, the, you're worthless, you can't do that. All those thoughts, they were still present. But then I had the tools to then repeat until they drowned out by saying, you are worthwhile. You are lovable. You can do this. And you know, those kind of like inner child talk.

Candice Schutter: All the things you wanted to hear when you were a little one. Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. And that was a big one. Being able to kind of imagine myself in my mind as an adult, as I was that time going up to the child, me, and basically being like, I'm gonna be your father, the father that you wanted. Yes, I know you are scared. And it's going to be okay. You are going to be okay. You're not going to die. And that was huge.

So I had these, these tools. And I start going to this community college again. And I did well. And I'm like, oh my God, this is, this is amazing. I could do anything. Like anything now. Uh, it was like everything that was holding me back before that I needed drugs for. I didn't need the drugs anymore. But now I had the tools to fight those thoughts and those feelings and the fears and insecurities. And I could just, like, our parents should tell us as kids, you can do anything you put your mind to. I was the one telling myself that.

And I began to learn. I asked this sponsor, how do you study? And I started to develop those tools, which are what you're supposed to do at community college anyways. And I start doing that. And I get good grades. I got some A's. And, and that was really significant.

And then, and then it was like, okay, I'm ready to go to a university. So I, I put in my application for Portland State University and the day I got the letter that I had been accepted, I cried. My grandpa cried. My mom cried. It was such a big deal cuz nobody in our family had ever gone to university. And I got in. And, you know, Portland State accepts about 99% of the applicants. I didn't, I didn't care, you know, I got the chance to go.

My safe haven from the abuse that my dad would put me through and all the feelings and fears. I would go to my room and I would play with Legos as a kid. That was safety to me. Of getting out of that world, focusing in on just this one thing, becoming hyper-focused. And Legos and drawing that, you know, I would draw. And I was really creative and talented for doing that kind of stuff. So just creating things.

And my dad was a contractor who worked on houses and when I would get in trouble with school, get suspended, I'd had to spend the day with him at his job where we would drive around fixing people's houses and things like that. And it all kind of clicked, you know, my first year of Portland State where I'm like, I'm supposed to be an engineer. Like people had told me that I should be as a kid because I would always fix things and build things outta Legos, and they were amazing.

And,

Candice Schutter: And take freezers apart and put them back together at

Christian Studebaker: And radios and other, yeah. And other things.

And, and so I started off studying electrical engineering. I'm like, okay, engineering. That's, that's it. That's my solution. And I would spend like 18 hours a day, seven days a week at school studying it. I'm putting in all this work and I was failing. And it was that fear of you're not good enough, came right back up. And it was okay, this one seems insurmountable. I can't, the, the inner child talk and all the affirmations that I was practicing, they weren't working as well. And I'm like, what do I do? I had a crisis of identity. Like I had thought I was supposed to be an engineer. This is what I've been told my whole life. And so I, I failed one class after putting in so much effort, and it was like, okay, I need to figure something else out.

I'm like, okay, well what's the other option? So I take this architecture class. And that very first day of class, the teacher's kind of going over this stuff, giving this presentation and we're asking questions. And it was, it was that I have arrived moment. My, my shoulders dropped my jaw, unclenched, my tongue dropped. And I, I understood what was being talked about, like I had questions that were relevant and it just all made sense to me. And then I started to realize all the things that I thought that were pointing me towards engineering were actually pointing me towards architecture. Everybody in my life had told me to do engineering. They didn't know what engineers actually do or what architects really do. Had they known, they would've pointed me in that direction because then I realized, oh, yeah, building things

understanding how they go together and being able to draw sounds exactly like what my escape from my childhood was, you know, as a child. Drawing and fixing things.

Cause I couldn't fix what was wrong with me, but I could fix this. And I could build this imaginary world where everything is okay. Where I'm loved, and things like that.

I do my research and it's, it requires a master to become a licensed architect, and I switch over to that after my first year at PSU and I do a rapid program where I took summer classes that I had to pay for out of pockets.

I was working during the summers to pay for these classes. And I started getting straight A's. And as I got closer to that grad school application, which was in December of my senior year, I was talking to one of my professors, I'm like, should I apply to PSU? They have a grad program.

And he says, I'll kill you if I see you walking these halls as a grad student.

And I'm like, what? What are you talking about? And I say, what should I do then? Should I apply to University of Oregon? He said, that should be your safety school. That should be the bare minimum. And I'm like, well then what should I shoot for? He said, shoot for the stars. And I'm like, what are the stars? Like I'm the only person in my family to ever make it this far in college. I have to figure everything out by myself. What, what is a dream? You know, what, what is a future?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: And he mentions a few names of different schools and I'm like, okay, you're high as shit, obviously. Like the problem kid that hated school, that was gonna end up in prison and was the dumb one. And, and all these things. What do you mean I should apply to Harvard and Yale and MIT and Stanford and the best schools in the world? What are you talking about, dude?

I combated that fear of not being enough. And I, I did my applications and I could only afford a couple. So I, I sent out one to University of Oregon as my safety school, and I applied to Harvard and I applied to MIT. A couple weeks later I hear back from U of O and they're like, yep, we want you 40% scholarship. And I'm like, holy shit, I'm going to grad school.

And, and my fear was at that point, what if I'm rejected by these other two schools. And it's like a couple months long process of waiting to hear back from them. And I go to work one day at an architecture firm that I had an internship with. And I sit down at my desk, and I'm working on a project. I'm 30 minutes in, and my phone screen lights up and it's a phone call and it says Massachusetts. And both Harvard and MIT are both in Massachusetts, in Boston or Cambridge technically. And, I got goosebumps and an anxiety rush, cuz it occurs to me in that split second, they don't call you to let you know you suck. You know,

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: And so I'm just like, oh my God, what is about to happen?

And I answer the phone and it's this guy who's a professor at MIT and he says, Hey, I am so and so, and I just wanted to let you know that we just finished going over your application and we wanna offer you admission to MIT for a Masters of Architecture and we're gonna give you a full ride scholarship.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Christian Studebaker: And I'm just like, I mean, I'm so confused and like, overwhelmed with emotions.

I sold the van that I'd been living in for six years. I hang out with friends and family, and the really hard work began. I, I moved 3000 miles away by myself without knowing anybody, without ever having been there.

What reality is this? Where good things like not just good, but life changing once, not even once in a lifetime type things happen to me my entire life has been pain and suffering and rejection and not being loved and all these different things.

All of a sudden, not all of a sudden, but over time, you know, it, it grew and changed and my reality was, became this thing.

And so, I mean, even right now, we're talking and I'm in my dorm room right now here in Cambridge. My second semester starts in a week and a half. Uh, I'm working on a project in Africa right now with a partner of mine at school. As a volunteer project, we're designing and building a, a learning center for this village in Africa that then MIT is going to pay us to go there this summer. And I get to go do the exact kind of work that I wanted to do, which is the humanitarian stuff. Like making a million dollars sounds great, uh, I'd much rather be happy with myself and what I do and be of service to people, basically give people what was never given to me kind of thing. That's my whole motivation.

And it's, it's just so surreal. And it's, yeah, it's imposter syndrome, it's all of those things, um, yeah. Totally.

Candice Schutter: That's, I mean, hearing the full arc of your story, it just really demonstrates that journey and where it can lead.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, and I, and I realize, you know, we can get caught up in these stories that we tell ourselves, and I think that was my response from listening to my mom's podcast was like, okay, I wanted to point out one really significant part, I mean, hugely, uh, significant part of my story is that at some point in my twenties, everybody in my family started going to therapy. We all started getting our own forms of help in one way or another. And, my brother is on that journey to some extent. My mom, as she expressed in her podcast, is. My dad found his own type of 12 step program actually, of all things, and went to marriage counseling and saw a therapist individually and group therapy sessions and divorce

therapy and all this stuff. And my dad came to realize that he was as much a victim of his own childhood as I was.

And that was the really significant realization for me, was that this man that I hated, that I had planned out how I was going to murder, was a victim just like me. And he started to correct his behaviors. He started to fill that void inside as best he could. And he changed as a person. Just like I did.

And that's why I was saying like at the beginning, he is a different person just as much as I am a different person. And because of that, because of going through these periods of growth and change and accepting the way things are, accepting what the mistakes we've made in the past. Not turning, you know, not shutting the door on them but embracing them and trying to correct them. He and I have a really great relationship now. It's a different father-son relationship. Um, and I have a great relationship with my brother. I have a obviously a really great relationship with my mom. We can talk about pretty much anything and everything.

And yeah, my parents got divorced and that was, you know, really hard cuz I was like 27 at the time and that was really hard to go through. But I had the tools to deal with it. And the incredible thing was that was seemingly insurmountable for my dad. Like, he was so codependent. He needed my mom. And all of a sudden they're getting divorced. My dad's going to therapy, and he, this is when he's breaking down. I mean, every, every bit of him. He looked in the mirror and saw what he had done. And I had the incredible opportunity to be his friend, his only friend during that time.

Candice Schutter: How were you able to do that? I really think it's remarkable given what he put you through as a child. Say a little bit more about how you were able to go there and do that for him.

Christian Studebaker: I mean, I think it is a combination of things. But inherently I am the type of person that I, I fix things. I help people.

When I was, uh, 21, I was working at Home Depot, another cart pusher job.

There was a baby that had been locked in a car in the summer, and there were people gathered around this car and they were like frantically trying to f you know, like they called the police and this whole thing. And it's like 90 degrees outside. So it's, God knows how hot inside and I just walk up and I'm like, what's going on? They're like, there's a baby in the car. And I look in, I see the baby there. I immediately break the window, and get the baby out. Take it inside, got it in front of the fan. The, the medics said that, it saved the baby's life.

Um, that was just, that's just how I react to everything. I react and I save and I fix things. I put myself in danger if need be for the better of somebody else.

So when my dad is going through his thing. Yeah, I still hate him to a certain degree. But I'm able to look at myself and then to look at him, and it was almost like doing the inner child work on him. I could see the adult him who I hated and that I wanted to die. But then I saw

the inner child in him that the adult him was ignoring. And nobody was showing that inner child any compassion or love.

Candice Schutter: Which is what you needed so much as a child. I mean, it does, it really does come full circle in a way, right? Like to love the un, the technically, quote unquote unlovable. Like you have the capacity to do that in a way that most people probably don't because you were that child.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah, possibly. Yeah. And, and I also think I romanticized to a certain degree the possibility of a future with a relationship with him. Like if I can accompany him on this journey and be there for him, maybe there's a future that resembles what I always wanted out of a father.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Is that what you have now?

Christian Studebaker: I have a really good relationship. I do not have what I wish that I had. Because of my dad and brother having autism or being on the spectrum. They are not capable of expressing themselves in the same way that my mom and I do, uh, through emotions, passion, tears, things like that.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Christian Studebaker: Um, so there was a quote that I read in a book about a guy talking about his own relationship with his father. And when he realized that it was never, the relationship was never going to be exactly what he wanted. And it was to forgive him for what he's not and love him for what he is. And I try to practice that now.

And I get to maintain a for the most part, healthy relationship with my mom. Um, I don't know how hopeful it is to have an idealistic relationship with my mom when we've been through the things that we have. Like our relationship will never be normal. My life will never be normal.

And part of my journey now is coming to that conclusion that it's funny, as a kid, they would tell me, you're a special kid. You know, and they'd say it in that way, like, boy, you're special. But now I'm, I'm kind of special. I'm kind of unique. And I don't want to phrase special in a way that gives the idea that I think I'm better than anybody else. It's not that.

Yes. I have a unique experience growing up. I get to have a unique life now and unique relationships. And, it's crazy. It really is. Especially like then I get these opportunities, you know, to very much where my mom kind of opened up and created this environment for people that may have been in the same kind of situation or a similar one. And through her podcast and her talking, they get to realize they're not alone in this world.

And I wanted the focus of mine, of this episode to be more about, yeah, all this terrible shit happened. But that doesn't have to define a person and you can get past it and become anything you want.

There's nothing, truly nothing holding a person back other than themselves.

Candice Schutter: I can't imagine a better way to wrap than that. I mean, that's really the heart of why it was a no-brainer. When I sat down with you, I could feel that transformation in you from the first words you uttered. And you know, not even realizing that I was coming to the conversation with an expectation or preconceived notion. We always have these implicit biases, and so I didn't even realize I had it until you started speaking. And we started connecting and I realized, wow, like we need stories like this so that we aren't carrying that bias around. Like once a problem child, always a problem child, you know, or like whatever it is. Or this person went through this terrible cultic experience, so therefore they're gonna end up fill in the blank. Like that your story feels so important in this series cuz it's a demonstration of not just hope, because I feel like hope even that word gets hijacked and in cultic environments.

Like, not even a sense of that idealism that you spoke about, but a sense of this is the real trajectory of a life when someone goes through the process of recovery, and this is what can, one possibility of how it can turn out.

And it is an, it is an inspired story and not because of some magic, some special sauce that got sprinkled only on you, but because of the work that you did.

Christian Studebaker: Right.

Yeah. I mean, and like I said at the beginning, like it's weird to look back and to like talk about those things cuz, just like my relationship with my dad and how we're different people, it's like, I remember it and I remember the emotions, but I don't remember it.

Like, it's not me anymore.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Christian Studebaker: And it's, it's so bizarre to, you know, live my day-to-day life now where I wake up and I eat breakfast and then I go to MIT. And I do this stuff and to just be one of those students, it's so bizarre and surreal and I definitely still experience, I mean, even my classmates who didn't have the same kind of experiences that I had growing up, everybody that I know has suffered from imposter syndrome, but we just, the way we get through it is just by showing up one day at a time and just doing what we need to. And being honest and healthy about it. I force myself to take a day off from schoolwork, to have me time, to recalibrate, to recenter myself, whatever it is. And most importantly, to give myself those words of like, it's okay, what you're feeling right now is okay. You're gonna be okay.

And just accepting that. And, you know, that that's everybody needs that. And if they don't have anybody in their life already to tell them that it's gonna be okay, we are entirely capable of doing it for ourselves.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Well, thank you for being so open and transparent with your story and for being willing to give us another vantage point on the experience that your mom shared, and to speak for yourself and to show up in this full expression of who you are now.

It's just really, it just really moves me.

Christian Studebaker: Yeah. If I can, if this story touches one person's life, mission accomplished.

And thank you for, you know, not only having me, but providing this space for people. This is a really amazing kind of thing where it's like these kind of spaces exist, but a lot of 'em require in-person interaction. And what a cool opportunity to be able to provide this digital meeting place for people to be in their own comfort and their own safety and be wherever they are on their journey and get to, you know, touch back in kind of thing.

it's, it's really cool. I imagine in five, 10 years time, you're gonna get a lot of emails if you don't already, from people saying that the podcast changed their life. So

Candice Schutter: That's kind of you.

Yeah. Well, it's changed, it's changed mine and it's changing mine and it's stories like this that are doing it. It really is incredibly transformative to sit down and have these long form conversations. And then I get to listen to them over and over again while I'm editing, and it just gets in that deeper bone deep, you know?

So thank you for showing up here today.

Christian Studebaker: Of course.

Candice Schutter: It's so good to know you. Yeah.

And I cannot wait to see what you do next.

Christian Studebaker: Me either.

What will he do next? I was, I'm familiar with that.

Candice Schutter: And right, what will we do next?

Wow. It has a whole different meaning now. That's incredible. I love that. Oh, I love that.

Candice Schutter: What will he do next? I'm so looking forward to finding out.

This bittersweet story has transformed me. I wanna thank both Christian and Trina for their incredible courage. What a fucking gift y'all, to witness a child and a parent making room for one another. This, my friends, is what is possible when we stop pledging allegiance to familial and group identities, and we forge honest connections based on self-trust and mutual respect.

Parent, child. Leader, follower. They're just labels. At times necessary. But what if we're not bound to the roles that we play?

And what if, cultic conditioning has it backwards. What if the things that happen to us stop defining us when we are willing to name them aloud in the presence of trusted witnesses.

We recently had a group call in our After The Org support group. And one of my new and now forever friends, who so happens to also be a therapist, said it well. "Trauma thrives when we are left alone with it."

Yes.

And I would add to that, we have to do our own work if we wanna learn how to make room for other people's stories. I'm gonna keep working at that, and I hope you will too.

Oh, and one more thing, which may not need to be said, but I'm gonna name it just in case.

You heard Christian speaking about how his AA connections helped to positively alter the trajectory of his life forever.

If you by chance have the thought, well, wait a hot minute lady, just two episodes ago, you did an episode on 12 Step 'Cult'ure. Yeah, I sure did. And I am so pleased that you noticed on both counts. Because I'm hoping to continually demonstrate this series, is not about sorting the groups we occupy into tidy little categories. This is a cult and this isn't .

No. It's about acknowledging that culty culture is every-damn-where and that when we get caught up in labeling our groups as culty or not culty, we are much more likely to miss the dysfunctional dynamics that are operating right underneath our upturned noses.

No individual, group, or human-created system is immune to this shit. And as soon as we think we're no longer susceptible, and trust me on this, I've done the legwork, look the fuck out.

Okay, I'm gonna stop swearing at you now. And just say this one last thing. Let's keep connecting with each, and let's celebrate when we get it right. And let's hold ourselves accountable when we don't.

Thank you so much for tuning in and please consider taking a moment to rate or review the podcast on your favorite streaming platform. Your listens and your shares are deeply

appreciated and I do not take the privilege of your attention lightly. So thanks for being here and I'll see you next time.

Caio.