

## WHO WOULD I BE WITHOUT

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Nathan intentionally slowed his breathing and watched as everything softened. The flashes slowed and his sense of panic lessened. He felt the inner voice guiding him to listen to her voice and telling him to go where she was taking him.

"This body suit is unique..." Debbie continued.

The image returned and there he was, standing in the field inside his fence, looking down at his material-covered hands and feet.

"...because unlike most of your life, you control what comes in and what goes out of this internal boundary. So, make a door in the suit in the center of your chest with a handle only on the inside."

Nathan felt tears welling in his closed eyes at the thought of having the level of control she implied he now had. He looked at his chest in the image and saw a panel. He pictured a handle, a French doorknob, on the inside that only he controlled, just as she said.

"Okay, now you are there with your external and internal boundaries. One more thing, if your external boundary goes all the way around you like a bubble, you have to make an opening in the top to let the light of your higher power reach you. Do that now. Picture it. There you are in the field, and the loving light of your higher power is flowing down on you, all around you."

Nathan's image changed again. He was outside of the fence and behind the image, observing as before. An intense beam of light shined down on him now as he stood inside the fence. The light encased him completely and reached out beyond his body a few inches. It did not fill the circle made by the fence.

Again, the image faded and this time Nathan saw only black. Complete blackness as he had seen so many times in therapy. All that remained for Nathan were his intentional thoughts telling himself to let it be, to look at the blankness and rest.

He took a deep breath and on the releasing exhale, the image appeared as it was before it faded. A soothing sensation of calm and warmth filled Nathan from head to toe. He sat, looking at himself and feeling completely protected by his external boundary, his internal boundary, and the total safety of his loving higher power.

Debbie reminded him to keep his eyes closed and soothingly expressed her confidence in him. She told him he was doing fine before she addressed the others, telling them they could open their eyes

and that they now had their image to hold for their own process. She explained that from here on would be specific to Nathan and depending on his sense of safety, he could decide if he wanted them to have their eyes open or closed for the remainder of his process.

"Open," Nathan said.

"Nathan, where were you in 2004?" Debbie said in a soft and gentle voice.

It sounded to him as if she was leaning in close to him now. Her voice came as a whisper in his ear. He watched as a picture materialized.

"Riding in a car with Kim," he responded.

He told her the first image that came to mind, and he assumed that was fine because Debbie immediately said, "Okay, good. Where were you in 1999?"

"At work in my cubical working on the computer."

"Where were you in 1992?"

A thought came to Nathan, wondering how long it had been since he started this. Another thought made him aware that the uncontrolled flashes of images had stopped. These held his attention for a second when an image from what he thought was 1992 appeared.

"Running a training class in a hotel in Phoenix."

Each image came as soon as Debbie asked for it, and Nathan stayed with her in the process, surprised at the clarity with which they came. Nothing else existed in his world now except Debbie's comforting voice and the images shifting with each question.

She went on through the years, taking him back in time.

"Where were you in 1985?"

"Where were you in 1979?"

Nathan responded to each year with whatever image appeared.

"Okay, Nathan, keep going back until you get to the point where you are a kid, somewhere between one and ten years old. Let me know when you get there."

Images filled Nathan's head like a movie reel going backward at lightning speed. Nathan was not thinking anymore. His brain was running itself and doing what he asked it to do without resistance while Nathan relived the experiences with each passing image.

The images slowed as they approached his childhood years, and there were fewer and fewer actual pictures now. It became as if he sensed his age, or the year he was in, and then moved on. The memory flashes came as if in slow motion and eventually stopped. Nathan did not see a specific image but sensed he had gone far enough.

"Okay, I'm there." Nathan said, breaking what seemed to him to be minutes of silence.

"So," Debbie continued, "picture yourself standing on the sidewalk in front of your house. Do you see it?"

"Yes," Nathan replied, seeing his childhood house in complete detail. He realized he was alert and aware and noticed he could look around at the neighborhood without losing the image. This was no longer an image in his mind; his perspective had shifted so that Nathan was actually in the experience and he could move around freely within it.

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Debbie had him describe the outside of the house, the street, and the neighborhood in some detail. She directed him to go inside and describe that for her as well. He took her through the entire house, upstairs and downstairs, describing everything. The experience became real enough for Nathan to include his sense of smell and when the odors of the house filled his senses, they evoked reminiscent feelings he identified as love, safety, and nurturing. The experience of smell shifted his energy and caused Nathan to pause. His body became quiet and still inside.

"What's happening, Nathan?" Debbie asked.

"Nothing." He paused.

"I can smell the inside of the house. It smells just like it did then." He held back the tears trying to fill his eyes as he followed her voice leading him outside and into the backyard, which he described in the same detail as the inside. He was standing in the backyard when Debbie offered her next guiding question.

"Can you hear the noises from the swimming pool at the end of the street?"

Suddenly, his silent world came alive. The noise of kids playing and screaming at the public pool four houses away brought the final element needed for the experience to become Nathan's reality. He had forgotten how much the sound spilled into his neighborhood, and it filled the background of his memory now just as it did for so many of his childhood years. His body released whatever tension remained, and he felt himself sink deeper into the chair.

Debbie saw his shift and waited a few minutes to let him fully integrate the experience.

"If we were to look for six-year-old Nattie," she said, sensing Nathan was ready to move on, "where would he be?"

The image did not shift or change at all for Nathan as he stood in his backyard, looking at the house and driveway. "He would be at the house next door playing cars in the dirt." His entire body knew he would be there, and Nathan pictured the area.

"Okay. How would you get there? Do you have to walk around the neighbor's house?" Debbie said.

"Yes, I would walk across the front lawn to their driveway. The dirt area is on the edge of the drive by their side door under two big pine trees."

"Okay, Nathan, go ahead and head over there; let me know when you get there." Debbie paused and waited for Nathan to tell her when he was there.

He walked up his driveway, between the houses, across their front lawn, peered around the corner of the house. There he was. Nathan saw himself as a six-year-old, sitting on the ground in the dusty dirt with his friend. They were playing with Hot Wheels cars, just as he remembered. Nathan's breath became heavy and his mouth tightened, curling down from his efforts to hold in the emotion now surging through his body. He felt his hands tighten their grip on the arms of the chair as he stood in the neighbor's driveway, looking at himself, and said, "I'm there."

"Is six-year-old Nattie there?" Debbie said, needing to be sure he saw the child.

"Yes," Nathan said. His voice was soft and airy.

"Okay then, Nathan, go ahead and move closer to him, not too close, but close enough to see him clearly."

He walked cautiously from the corner of the house and into the shade of the trees. He got within a few feet of the boy and heard Debbie saying, "Is he in front of you now?"

"Yes, he is on the ground playing right in front of me."

"Okay, Nathan," Debbie said in a soft voice, as if honoring the delicate nature of this timely reunion.

"Tell him, and listen closely, I want you to say this to him, say—"

Emotion filled Nathan's body as he considered the words she spoke next. He was working hard at holding back his tears and that took much of his attention and energy. He inhaled and repeated the words Debbie gave him in a shaky and barely perceptible voice.

"Hi, Nattie." Tears ran down his cheeks as his chest shook from deep inside. "I'm you and I'm all grown up now."

Nathan got the words out despite his resistance and he sat slouched in the chair doing all he could to hold his tears back. Debbie's voice offered enough relief for him to breathe again when she asked, "What did he say?"

"Nothing," Nathan responded. "He just kept playing and didn't even look up at me."

"Okay," Debbie continued; she was not going to stop until he made contact. "Move a little closer and kneel down so you are more level with him. Not too close, though. Let me know when you are there."

Nathan took a few steps forward, knelt down, looked at his six-year-old self from about two feet away, and said, "I'm there."

"Tell him, and say it exactly like this: I've come back to protect you. I know all the feelings you are going to feel and all the things you are going to do, and I have come back to go through them with you."

Nathan took a breath and repeated her words exactly. This time, speaking aloud came easier and he noticed he was no longer holding back tears.

"What did he say? Debbie asked, anxious herself to hear his response.

"Nothing," Nathan stated. "He looked up but he didn't say anything. I know what he's thinking though."

"Oh really," Debbie inquired with anticipation in her voice. "What is he thinking?"

"That's what everybody says."

Nathan saw his inner child sitting in the dirt and looking up at him, convinced that nothing Nathan said was going to happen.

Debbie said, "Ask him if he wants a hug."

It took some time for Nathan to come to terms with what he knew he had to say. After what seemed like an eternity, Nathan took a deep, camouflaged breath, and on the exhale, tried to squeeze out the words he felt building inside him.

"Do you—"

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The words did not come. He felt them pressing up from his core, trying to come out, but his lips would not part. He paused, took a few deep and shaking breaths, told himself he had to say it, and with all his will and might, he let the words free to fill the room.

“Do you want a hug?”

Tears filled Nathan’s eyes again and his body was shaking. His legs were bouncing uncontrollably as sweat dripped off his chin into his lap. He was on the verge of total shutdown, and his efforts to stay with the experience only strengthened his resistance.

“What did he say?” Debbie asked.

“Nothing, he stood up and came to me and—is—hugging—me.”