

## **Cheryl Strayed: The Journeys We Take**

*“Whenever people talk to me about my book, my favorite thing is they talk to me about themselves. Memoir gets this bad rep as the narcissistic form. And I think that that’s really a misunderstanding of the form. Obviously, bad memoirs are narcissistic, but good memoirs are about all of us. There are people who are using themselves so that we can see ourselves better.”*

Over 400 people from 17 countries gathered in Bucharest on October 14-15 for the sixth edition of The Power of Storytelling, a conference built around the idea that stories can change our worlds. 13 speakers – bestselling writers, journalists and poets, visual artists, musicians, audio magicians and story innovators – shared their stories on this year’s theme, Dare to Wander.

Best-selling author Cheryl Strayed, author of “Wild”, opened the conference with a talk on finding the courage to put our lives back together, and using our story to create something others can relate to.

This is an edited transcript of her speech:

Dare to wander is really literally kind of the theme of my life. Certainly it’s the theme of my book “Wild”, which chronicles the hike I took in the summer of ’95 on the Pacific Crest Trail. For those of you who don’t know, it’s what we call a national scenic trail in the United States which goes from the Mexican border in Southern California through the states of California, Oregon and Washington, not along the coastline, but rather up the crest. So about 120 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, the crest of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Range. And it’s an incredibly rugged and remote trail miles from anywhere and almost any place, any spot on the trail. You’re far away from cities and towns.

I wrote about this journey in my book that was published in the US in 2012 and recently here, in Romania. When I was reflecting on what I would talk about today, I decided to tell you about my walk, but, like that journey itself, it extends so much into the best things in my life. Daring to wander on the page, daring to wander in all kinds of metaphorical and figurative ways in my life, in my relationships, in my work. And I think so much of that begins with that

physical daring, that physical going into the world and seeing and hearing and trying to do things.

So here I was about to take this epic hike that was going to be very challenging in ways that I imagined but didn't yet know. And the day that I began my hike in June of 1995 I was really at what was with no question the most broken moment of my life. I essentially chose to go on that hike on the PCT not because I felt I was this strong, brave, wilderness trekker, but honestly because I felt like "What have I done? How can I move forward?". That really began, that sense of being lost in the world began about four years before my hike, when my mother died. She was 45 years old and she died very suddenly of cancer. And the day she died, which was many years ago now, like 26 years ago, I remember very distinctly thinking that my life was over too. And one of the things I thought that day was that I was all alone in the world. That nobody else knew that feeling of not being able to live any longer when someone they love dies. What I learned through my writing is that to so many people, this is what it feels like when someone dear dies. I actually had this whole tribe of people all over the world who felt exactly how I felt on the day my mom died. But it was years before I would learn that.

So there I was this young woman, 22 years old, I was a senior in college and the only thing I could think of was "I can't live without my mother". Obviously for most of us, our mothers really are that essential primal person. That person we need to feel okay in the world. But my mom, you know, she was something beyond that. She was my only parent. My father had not been in my life since I was six. He had been violent, tyrannical and really a bully. And he dominated with great sorrow my early years. Until my mom was brave enough and found the strength to leave him. She was 26 years old when she left him, and had three kids, and our life after that wasn't easy. We lived in poverty, my mom worked as a waitress. As I said, she raised three kids. There were all of these outside forces that made life difficult. But what made life beautiful is that I happened to hit the jackpot with my mom. She was the kind of mother who loved her kids with wild abandon, at full velocity, as I wrote in „Wild“. And I always felt in so many ways, even though there was that deep father wound that would really come to bear on my life, I always felt my mother had loved me and my siblings so well that she healed that wound, that she made it okay. And so when she died, what happened, what I can see now looking back on that moment of my life is that I really had to finally face this sense of being alone in the world, being parentless. At a time when I was definitely a grown-up but still needed that sense of home and that sense of belonging. And I didn't have it. And

so what I did is what we do, what humans throughout time have done when they were suffering. I tried to be good. I tried to suffer in ways that we think of as noble and right and I also finally felt that I couldn't do that anymore. And so I turned that sorrow and that suffering inward in the form of self-destruction and rage.

I had once been this very ambitious girl. Even though I had grown up poor, grown up not in a house full of books or opportunity, I had always been driven and ambitious, I had always loved books and wanted, felt this call to be a writer. And all of that came undone in the years after my mom died. I essentially decided again, what I can see now, that I didn't know then, is in so many ways I was trying to honor my mother by ruining my life. My mom had been this extraordinary person, but really incredibly ordinary. The only time she even appeared in the newspaper was her obituary. And one of the things that absolutely stunned me as a young woman trying to contend with this grief is how the world could just continue to go on as it does when this amazing woman was no longer in it. And so, I think in retrospect what I was trying to do by spiraling into this self-destruction that manifested itself in promiscuity and eventually heroin use, which then brought me to a deeper sense of despair, I felt like I was in some ways saying "She's such a big deal, I'm gonna ruin my life to prove my life for her'.

About three and a half years after my mom's death I had what can only be described as a kind of awakening. I realized that that self-destruction was the exact wrong thing. That actually if I wanted to honor my mom, if I wanted to make all of those sacrifices that she had made for me and my siblings, all of that love she had given us in spite of all of these difficult circumstances, worth it, I actually just needed to go ahead and become the woman she raised me to be. But the trouble was, I realized at this moment when I was young enough, that I really thought I ruined my life. You know, one of the things the 48 year-old me standing before you knows is it's actually pretty hard to really ruin your life. You can almost always find your way back. But when I was 25 and contemplating this, all I knew is that I felt like a piece of shit and it's really hard to gather yourself up when you feel that way. So what I started to think about was: I'm not strong enough to gather myself, how do I reach, find my way back to any of that strength that might help me do that? I had grown up in northern Minnesota, middle of, it's in the Midwest in the United States, not far from the Canadian border. I'd grown up in the woods. All through my teen years I didn't have electricity or running water or plumbing. I knew the wilderness, I knew that being in the wilderness made me feel whole, it made me feel a sense of solace. I was not sure what I was going to do to get my life back together. But I had that back there, in my mind and in my body, from when I

went to a store outside of Minneapolis, where I was living at the time, a REI - in the United States there's this sort of chain of outdoor gear stores - and I went there to buy a shovel because I was living in Minnesota, where it snows a lot. I went to buy a foldable shovel to dig my truck out. It had been mired in the snow in this blizzard. And I was standing in line waiting to pay for it when I just happened to glance up and see these guide books on this rack of books near the cash register. One of the most rewarding things about writing a memoir is all you really have to do is pay attention to your life. Because life often enough offers up all kinds of metaphors and images and symbols. There I was holding this implement waiting to dig my truck out. But what I was searching for was a way to dig myself out; out of this hole that I'd really buried myself in, in the midst of my grief. And I saw this guidebook, called "The Pacific Crest Trail Volume 1 California", on that rack in line at REI, and I picked it up and I read the back and it just... You know, so many books have been so important to me, have, in many way, saved my life, have been my greatest counsel and solace. But I hadn't expected that one of these books would be a guidebook to a trail. It described in that little paragraph on the back this national scenic trail that stretched this long distance and went through national parks and wilderness areas and deserts and mountains and every kind of landscape that you can imagine. And I felt this thing that I felt a few times in my life. It was essentially the voice of truth. It wasn't even a voice, it was like a blossoming in my heart. Literally like an opening in my chest in this part of my body that actually felt crushed and changed forever. And I had a feeling that I just had to go. And part of that was I think that I loved the magnificence of... There was something about this vast wilderness of this uninterrupted trail. This huge beautiful thing paired with the sheer simplicity of walking. You know, the only way to do that trail is to just put one foot in front of the other. And I felt like I could do that, even in my weakness, even in my darkest hour, even when I really was honestly doubting why I needed to be here anymore. I thought "Okay, I'm this pile of shit, but if I attach myself to this magnificent thing, maybe it can bring me back to what I used to be". I think so often when we think about daring to wander, we think about journey, we think about escape, leaving the past behind or leaving our mistakes behind or leaving who we are behind. And I think there was a tiny bit of that in my decision to hike the Pacific Crest Trail. But more than anything, I keep using this language of returning to who I was. And I think that's actually the deeper meaning of journey. I think that we are born whole and so often we need to wander and find and seek, to find ourselves back to that. To that sense of wholeness and that sense of strength; that sense of knowing and that sense of being able to again trust your intuition, which is trusting who you are. And I really just decided to trust it. It's advice I always give at

Dear Sugar: trust your gut, and that's about listening to your body. And I listened to my body and I saved my money, I was working as a waitress at the time in Minneapolis and every weekend I would go to REI and I would walk in with a lot of cash from my tips and I would buy wilderness equipment, backpacking equipment. I set myself off on this adventure, I shut down my life in Minneapolis, I got divorced, I had been married and ruined that. And I got myself to the little town of Mojave, California. Those of you who saw the film, there's that scene of Reese Witherspoon, at that motel and hiking the first day. That's exactly where I began hiking the trail, it was shot in precisely the same location. This is really a desert town and I checked into a cheap motel and I was by myself and I had all of this stuff and I looked at all of it in sort of wonder and thought "What the fuck am I doing here?". I put it all into my backpack and it was sort of a complicated task, because one of the things I had overlooked in my planning was that I was really a day hiker, but I'd never actually gone backpacking until I decided to go on the PCT. So it was one of those lessons that I learned the hard way, which are the lessons you never forget. And so the morning of my hike I packed all these things in my backpack, some of them wouldn't fit. I also decided to begin my hike in a really dry section of the trail, the Mojave Desert. So what that meant was that I would need to carry enough water for a few days until I reached a water source, which added an enormous amount of weight as well. And what I found was that I couldn't lift my pack. And it was really an actual moment, a moment when I'm not being sort of hyperbolic when I'm saying that I couldn't lift my pack. I couldn't lift my pack, and yet I had to lift my pack. And it was years later when I was writing "Wild", when I first wrote that scene I didn't even know "Wild" was going to be a book. I thought I was writing an essay and one of the most common questions I get about "Wild" is "Why did you wait so long to write it?". I took the hike in 1995, I didn't begin writing it until around 2008 or 2009. I think that the answer to that question is bound up in that scene, that scene when I finally did turn back and I wrote about being a woman alone in this motel room with a pack she couldn't lift.

I wrote "Wild" exactly when it was time to write it. One thing you hear writers talk about when they talk about the stories they tell, we always say "You know, you have to have something to say". I tell my students that when I teach writing. You have to have something to say. And I think that what I mean by that and what's meant by that by other writers is that you have to have some sense of the meaning of your story that isn't just about you, that transcends simply the interesting life of the South. I did not write "Wild" because I thought my hike was inherently interesting to anyone but my friends and my loved ones. I did not

write “Wild” because I thought the love I had for my mother or the grief I had over her death is any more tremendous than anyone else’s loss. I wrote “Wild” because I finally, in writing that scene with the backpack, came to have a sense about how my story of a journey might resonate with others. That might also be not only *The life and times of Cheryl Strayed*, but rather *What does it mean to be human*. I think that that’s always the question that art in all of its forms seeks to answer. And I certainly was interested in exploring it as a writer. Every story I write I was trying to tap into that deeper mission of seeking truth. So when I wrote that scene with the backpack I couldn’t lift I realized that my conundrum was a physical one, “I can’t lift it”, and it was also very much evoking what I was feeling inside, which is “I can’t live without my mother. I have to live without my mother.” And I didn’t know how to hold that paradox in my hands. And there was something about being alone in a room with a pack I couldn’t lift and then lifting it that, from that first step, taught me, it began to teach me what I needed to know about healing. And when I was doing that as a writer what I realized was that every one of you in this room has had to bear something that you cannot bear. And if you’re not someone who’s had that experience yet, it’s coming. Because, as we know, part of being human is to suffer. And part of the beauty of our struggle is to learn how to carry that suffering with grace. So I picked up my backpack and as a writer, when I wrote that scene I thought “Here we are” and I set off on the journey of that book. But in life I picked up the backpack and I went out onto the trail; the backpack I couldn’t lift, I got it on my back and I walked. I couldn’t even stand up beneath its weight. But I walked forward and I did it because I didn’t really have a choice. It was either do it or fail. And the cost of failing at that moment in my life was so great that that was more unbearable than the pack I couldn’t bear.

So I went out on the PCT and I, as I said, you saw the movie, where I began walking was this kind of grim desolate patch of Mojave desert in this sort of foothills that lead to the foothills of Sierra Nevada, which is the highest range on the continental US. And I was really shocked by how hard it was. I knew it was going to be hard, it was so much harder than I thought it would be. It was so much more solitary. I didn’t see another person for the first eight days of my hike. Completely alone on the planet, me and the wild things for eight whole days. And that was profound. That level of solitude and silence was unexpected. And the level of physical suffering too. That pack that was too heavy everywhere it touched my body, it shaved off my skin. It was hot and it was cold and it was everything in between. I was rained on, I was snowed on. I went through this fierce passage in those first few weeks. And one of the things I really felt at the beginning of my hike is I was sort of furious with myself because

I thought I'd done the wrong thing. I'd gone on this hike seeking emotional healing and spiritual redemption and I thought the way to that was going to be through a kind of... the beauty of the wild places, right? Reflecting upon the sunsets and the sunrises and weeping over my mother and reaching closure and all of those things we kind of think about, I think, in this sort of soft and focused way. But what ended up happening was I didn't, I wasn't in my head at all. I wasn't in my emotions at all. I was in my body because my body was suffering. I was in actual physical pain. I had actual physical needs that needed to be met and that's what I consumed myself with everyday. And pretty soon what I realized was like all good journeys, you set out to get one thing and then you get this other thing and it ends up being the thing you actually needed. Because the reason you had to go was you can't imagine what you need. You have to go as a seeker. And what I figured out was really this: the way that I survived physically, the way that I endured physically, the way that I put one foot in front of the other, always, even when it hurt, the way that I kept faith with that - like the sacred object was contained in that physical action - was exactly the way we figure out how to heal our emotional wounds, or the things that have hurt us or harmed us or convinced us that we can't do this or that because this is what we have to bear. And it was a beautiful and profound thing. And it wasn't an *a-ha* moment, but an accumulated sense of meaning over time.

For me, too, I didn't think this consciously when I was on the trail, but in reflection, as somebody who wrote the book about this journey and who has received so many stories about other people's journeys, I have really thought about deeply... The journey, wandering, daring to wander is essential to our humanity. It's not some sort of luxury thing that we do if we're lucky. We are all the stories, going back to ancient, those first ancient famous stories are about people who dared to wander. It is the classic journey that we go into the unknown world and come back to the known world altered and forever changed because of what we saw out there. And I also really came to think about my hike on the PCT as this thing I made for myself in a culture that would no longer give it to me. That is a rite of passage. That's another thing that goes back to ancient times, cultures all over the world, many of our cultures have fallen away from this now, but I think it's a great loss to us as a people. So many cultures used to help young people grow up by sending them out on rites of passage that have everything in common with what I did on the Pacific Crest Trail. That is there is a physical challenge that must be endured, there is solitude and there is deprivation. There is a demand to live outside the comfort zone in some ways. So that you can find your strength. You can find who you are in a situation where you are in difficult circumstances. Sometimes it's as

much as suffering, sometimes it's just uncomfortable. All of you who have had those experiences know what I mean. That you get to see who you are and then that thing stays with you forever.

And that's certainly what I felt on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1995. I had been on the trail for 94 days. I got my way to the Bridge of the Gods, which is this beautiful bridge that spans the Columbia River, which is this great river that forms the border between the states of Oregon and Washington. And I reached the end of my hike and I looked down at the river and I felt this sense of connection to so many people who had journeyed before me. I felt more than anything a profound sense of gratitude and humility. It was such a hard scene for me to write, that final scene. Because the editor kept saying there has to be a sense of the extatic or a sense of victory or grandor when you finish this trail. And what I ended up, what was so challenging for me, all the things that I felt were, I think, the humbler emotions. As I said, gratitude, humility, acceptance. The biggest one was probably acceptance. This coming to understand that part of being able to bear the things we can't bear is not about tossing them off, not about making the weight lighter, but simply learning that we have the capacity to carry it.

And I would say that that's what I learned on the PCT more than anything. I wrote that that experience would be like a secret I always told myself, and it really is that. It's an experience that has stayed with me through every hard time I have had since, that I can drop on it and remember the time that I was strong. And I think that's one of the most powerful things that we can do. You know, in some ways, that initial decision when I had that moment of realization and thought I can't dishonor my mother by ruining my life. I have to honor my mother by becoming the woman she raised me to be. That was about the love she'd given me all my life. I'd been loved too well to ruin myself. And in so many ways I think that something like a hike, or a journey, it stays with you and it forms you the same way that love does. It's really the greatest gift of the hike. Obviously, all this great stuff happened when I wrote about it, the unexpected things. But I would say that the most beautiful and powerful unexpected thing for me has been that the thing I set out to do which was to tell a story that wasn't ultimately just about me, that was about all of the people who have been on journeys or who have been through things they thought they couldn't bear. And the gift was of people telling me their stories.

Whenever people talk to me about my book, my favorite thing is they talk to me about themselves. Memoir gets this bad rep as the narcissistic form. And I think that that's really a

misunderstanding of the form. Obviously, bad memoirs are narcissistic, good memoirs are about all of us. There are people who are using themselves so that we can see ourselves better. And I think that that gift given back to me, it also deepens my sense of what happened out there on the PCT.

I wanna tell you just a little story about my kids, who are staying here on the front row. Hi, Carver and Bobbi. Sorry I swore. In so many ways they have been the teachers for me when it comes to kind of extending what I've learned from that hike I took well before they came into my life. And that is, they do this to me everyday, but it really crystalized in one experience we had a few years ago in France. I was teaching a workshop in Charlesmagne, France, which is in the Alps, right near the border with Italy and Switzerland. It's this beautiful mountain village with these high snowy peaks. We went there in the summer. It's a great place to hike in the summer and when we arrived in town we looked up at these beautiful snowy peaks and all among those mountains there were little dots of people in the sky. "Parapentes", paragliders we say in English. In French the word is parapentes. And both my kids immediately said "we're gonna do that." And my husband and I immediately said "You will absolutely not do that." Because what it actually is you're jumping off the top of the mountain into the sky, basically with nothing but a kyte attached to you. And that is not what you want for your children usually. And so we said "No, you will not, you will not do this. You can do it when you're 18. You can do it after we're no longer responsible for protecting you and so forth." But they kept it up in the way that children have this amazing capacity to keep things up all week "We wanna go, we wanna go, we wanna go." And so finally I sort of weakened and I said to my kids "You know, the thing is, it's not that I'm keeping you from going. I'm sure that it's against the rules. You're too young to do it." And of course my daughter marches up to one of the parapente guys out in towna and asks "How old do you have to be to jump off the mountain with only a kite? ", and he says "Eight". Which, the French are absolutely crazy, we know this. And so, then, they sort of had us. But my husband and I were set. "It doesn't matter, you can't do it." And I said "You know, the thing is you can't do it because I know what's going to happen. I'm your mother and I know you guys. I'm gonna pay the money and you're gonna go up the gondola with the Frenchmen and the deal is to do this." They strap the kid or the person who is going on flight to the front and then they have to run off the side of the mountain and jump into the sky. And I said to my kids "You're just not gonna do it. You're gonna be too afraid. You think you wanna do it, but in the final moment when you actually have to jump into the sky, you won't." And my son looked at me, just with

this steady gaze, these big brown eyes, this great sense of clarity and he said: “Mom, you know, the truth is I really am afraid, but I don’t wanna be a person who doesn’t do things just because they’re scared of it.”

And I loved that moment. First of all, I knew they totally had us. But I realized that that was it. That’s what I learned when I was on the trail, over and over and over and over again. Right? We do something scary, we have to constantly reconjure that sense of our strength or that sense of our courage. And I loved that my son and my daughter had absorbed that. I taught them that and then they taught me back. It was absolutely terrifying for me to let them go, but I did. And my husband and I had to stay down in the village. We sent them up and then the Frenchmen say “Go stand in this meadow and your kids will appear from the sky in about an hour.” Seriously? And my husband and I were like “Bye, kids.” You I told the Frenchman “Will you please check all the buckles?” And they go up and then we’re in this meadow and time is passing and there’s nothing and we keep looking into the sky and they’re up so high that you can’t even see them by the naked eye. And after nearly an hour suddenly these beautiful colorful kites start coming down. And our children are attached to them. And they’re saying “Mom, dad!” And they land and they’re not dead. And they come swooping out from beneath this great kite that’s landed all around them and they both have this look on their faces. And it’s such a beautiful look. Because it was a look that I recognized, it’s an expression that I’ve had in some of the best moments of my life. It’s an expression you’ve probably had in some of the moments of your life. And you can only get it when you do something that was hard or scary or made you feel absolutely outside of the realm of what you used to know or think you were. And you did it and you landed and you’re okay.

And I think that that is to me what I wish for all of you. That’s what daring to wander is all about. It’s simply that thing that will be like the secret you tell yourself for the rest of your lives.