



PART 1 OF 3

Weathering the Storm

In the wake of a disastrous flood, Sara Cress has finally managed to rebuild her home. She's hoping O life coach **Martha Beck** can help her recover her spirit.

FOR HOUSTON RESIDENT Sara Cress, August 27, 2017, was a living nightmare. She woke to the sound of rain; within an hour, the floodwaters of Hurricane Harvey had destroyed the home she and her husband owned, and most of their possessions were three feet underwater. Insurance allowed the couple to rebuild, which took nearly a year; however, Sara's still dealing with the disaster's psychic damage. "I'm agitated and depressed," says the 41-year-old. "I've been eating and drinking too much, and I'm so easily overwhelmed." She's lost her creative spark, too: "I'm a poet, but I'm having a hard time writing about this experience. It seems like nothing matters because everything could be taken away again." Fortunately, life coach Martha Beck is coming to the rescue. Let's listen to their first session.

Martha Beck: Sara, how are you?

Sara Cress: Excited—but on edge. A storm's coming this weekend, even though it's not the usual season.

MB: Tell me how that's affecting you.

SC: It's hard to sleep because the rains often

come overnight. When our house flooded, we woke up at 5 a.m., and the water was starting to come in. I think that's part of my insomnia. I have to stay awake to make sure we're safe.

MB: The rain is triggering your trauma the way a backfiring car might trigger a soldier who's been traumatized by war. Are you having flashbacks?

SC: Yeah, I'll be going about my day and suddenly see the water coming into the house. Or I'll think about some random thing I lost, like a suitcase, and picture it floating.

MB: When that happens, do you grieve or push the thought away?

SC: Part of me thinks, *What's the point of dwelling?* I'm still mourning the mementos, though—letters from my grandmothers, my high school yearbooks.

MB: In those moments of grief, how do you feel?

SC: For the first couple of months, I would tear up, but then I'd shut down. And despite my nighttime insomnia, when I get really anxious I feel like I have to go to sleep.

MB: You're reacting from the emotional, animal part of your brain, which is what we do when we're thrown into a traumatic situation: We shift into survival mode. If an animal is in danger and can't fight or flee, it freezes in hopes that the threat will pass. Sleep is your

way of freezing. Your brain's saying, "Let's just shut this whole thing down." You have the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as I'm sure you know.

SC: I know.

MB: Your traumatic memories are imprinted on the emotional part of your brain, and the logical, rational part can't process those memories because they're locked away. That's why you feel numb. But when something in your environment triggers that vivid sensory recall, you may have a volcanic internal response. Does that sound familiar?

SC: Yes. I got a trauma workbook, hoping that would help, but I couldn't bring myself to do the exercises. It was too much.

MB: You can't really resolve a serious trauma on your own. You need a compassionate witness who can listen and acknowledge what you've experienced. Have you told anyone the details of what happened that day?

SC: The thought of that makes me weepy.

MB: The fact that your body is allowing an emotional response right now is a good sign. It means that maybe you're ready to trust me just a little. Do you think you could tell me what you remember? We can stop at any time.

SC: [Deep breath] Okay. I woke up before my alarm, and when I looked out the front

window, water was forming enormous pools in the yard. It was still dark, and I could see the streetlights reflected in the water. I woke my husband and said, "I think we need to be prepared."

MB: What did that feel like?

SC: Everything became a blur. We were rushing around, grabbing whatever we could. My husband went into the office, and I heard sloshing. I felt crushed, like *Oh no, it's really happening*. As I was trying to figure out what to put on, my feet started to get wet. The water was seeping up through the floor. Then I started hyperventilating.

MB: I'm sure.

SC: My husband and I were yelling at each other about what to do. At first we went to the attic. We knew we weren't supposed to because we could get trapped there—you're supposed to get on the roof—but we were panicking. We couldn't find the cats, but I grabbed our two dogs and scrambled up. My husband handed me an ax in case we had to break out. Then he went back down to shut off the lights. I could hear splashing, and everything went dark. That's when he yelled that we should get out while we could and go to our friend Josh's, who lives close by on higher ground. By that point, the water was a couple of feet deep.

MB: My God.

SC: I came down, still holding the dogs. The water filled my rubber boots. And there's this thing I can't get out of my brain: My husband had given me this really cool neon sign for my birthday. It was plugged in, and somehow when the water reached a certain point, the sign turned on.

MB: So weird!

SC: But only halfway. It was buzzing, giving off this awful half-light. That's the last thing I remember before we left the house. Outside it was still partially dark and raining. We were slogging through the water, stumbling because we couldn't see our feet.

MB: How are you feeling right now?

SC: Like I could cry.

MB: Did your breathing change as you talked?

SC: It got quicker, and my muscles are tense. I think part of that is holding back tears.

MB: That's called armoring. You can't loosen those muscles, because as soon as you do, emotions start to come up, and there's still a part of you that says, "No, no, no." This is a normal response to trauma. The problem for humans is that unlike animals, we get stuck in that frozen feeling. After this experience, did you ever physically shake?

SC: I'm shaky all the time, but that actually started years ago. I have torticollis, which



means my neck muscles are painfully twisted, and my head tends to wobble a bit. But since Harvey, it's gotten much worse.

MB: After an animal escapes from a predator or a disaster, it trembles violently, which is an important part of recovery. We don't know why, but if you physically, violently shake after a trauma, it seems you're less likely to have the symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

SC: That's interesting because I took a trauma course for Harvey victims, and there was an exercise called the Unseen Shaking where you shake your entire body for six minutes, which seems so long, and then dance. It was the best I'd felt in months.

MB: Did you try it at home?

SC: Yeah, but it was strange. Doing it in a group felt very healing.

MB: Yes, finding a community is essential. I'd like you to search online for tension and trauma releasing exercises, or TRE. They were developed by the trauma specialist David Berzeli and involve shaking.

If you can find a TRE group, I recommend it. There are also videos, so you can keep trying at home. Put on some rhythmic, rapid music; think about that night; and shake. It may feel more natural to start dancing and then let the shaking take over—and it will, although it sounds bizarre. This might help you through the coming storm I know you're worried about.

SC: I feel low-level nauseated when I even think about rain.

MB: Have you made any changes in your emergency preparedness?

SC: Yes, now we have life jackets and emergency backpacks, and when we rebuilt

the house, we made adjustments that will help us recover faster next time.

MB: If another flood came, you'd have a completely different experience.

SC: Absolutely.

MB: Next time you won't be helpless.

The flood put you at the mercy of a force beyond your control, and you're finding it hard to let go of that feeling, which is why even daily life seems overwhelming. But remember, you're a smart, capable woman who knows how to take care of herself. I want to mention a couple of other things. You're a poet, correct?

SC: I am.

MB: What I'm about to suggest sounds counterintuitive, but as a writer, you may find it easier than most people would. This weekend don't try to shut out the rain. See if you can approach it the way you'd play a game—try to stay open and loose. Thinking of coping as a game can give you a sense of mastery; instead of dissociating, you're

engaging with your circumstances in an empowered way. And

see if you can notice beauty in what's happening. Maybe you'll be inspired to write afterward. Imagine you're writing a poem with advice for someone who's about to go through a flood.

SC: That's a good assignment.

MB: Sara, remember, healing is a process. You may find you need to fall apart more before you pull yourself together—and that's okay.

SC: Thanks for saying that.

MB: And don't forget to shake, shake, shake. It's the key to the kingdom. As you will see.

MARTHA BECK is the author of, most recently, *Diana, Herself: An Allegory of Awakening*.

Would you like to be considered for a future column? Email marthabeck@hearst.com and tell us your story.



PART 2 OF 3

Shifting Tides

O life coach **Martha Beck** helps hurricane survivor Sara Cress harness the transformative power of trauma.

In August 2017, Houston resident Sara Cress was forced to evacuate her home as it filled with floodwaters during Hurricane Harvey, and she hasn't been the same since. The 41-year-old writer has struggled with anxiety, insomnia, and eating and drinking too much, as well as flashbacks of that terrible day—classic symptoms of PTSD. Life coach Martha Beck encouraged her client to talk about her experience, which will help her process the overwhelming emotions she's kept locked away. And when Sara expressed concern about facing an upcoming rainstorm, Martha had some unconventional advice: She recommended Tension & Trauma Releasing Exercises, which involve physical shaking. "After an animal escapes from a predator or a disaster, it trembles violently, which is an important part of recovery," said Martha, who then suggested that Sara try to approach the rain playfully, which would be more empowering than trying to shut it out. To learn how Sara's coping, let's drop in on their second session.

Martha Beck: Sara, I've been thinking about you a lot. Last time we talked, there was rain in the forecast, and you were really anxious. Did you get through it okay?

Sara Cress: I steeled myself for it, and I was fine. I tried playing with the rain, as you suggested, which was interesting.

MB: Tell me about it.

SC: I decided to go outside and catch raindrops on my tongue. They tasted sweet, like fresh water. Then I saw a possum walking across a power line. He slipped a little but managed to get to the other side, and I thought, *Good for him*. I remembered what you said about trying to see beauty, and I noticed the raindrops falling off the fig tree. Then I came back inside and put on a song I love, "If I Dare" by Sara Bareilles. I danced and eventually started shaking and crying, and let my tension go. Around 2 a.m. I went to sleep.

MB: That's fantastic. So the dancing and shaking were cathartic?

SC: Yes, but when I woke up the next day, I was really depressed. My husband was out of town, and I was supposed to go out with a friend, but I couldn't. I spent most of the day in bed. Finally, I told myself I had to do something, and I Googled David Berzeli's trauma release exercises, which we had talked about. I did some stretches and then got on the floor and just shook.

MB: That's great.

SC: You're supposed to shake for 15 minutes. At first it was awkward, but after a few minutes it felt more natural. About ten minutes in, I teared up and thought, *Great, this is having an effect*. But almost immediately, the emotion passed, and then I got bored and stopped. I did feel better afterward, though.

MB: Many people who have severe post-traumatic stress, like soldiers who have been to war, feel fully present only when they're on the battlefield because that's where their mind is all the time. During the rain, you could cope because you told yourself, *Okay, the water's here. I know this scenario*. When everything calmed down, the emotional waves started to hit, which is why you couldn't get out of bed the next day. When you were shaking and started to cry, you were accessing the trauma—you know that, right?

SC: Yeah. The emotion came up quickly and then went away quickly. Maybe boredom isn't the right word, but once the feeling passed, I was done.

MB: You were wise to stop, especially since you were home alone. Pushing yourself could trigger a full-on flashback. But be aware that many people with PTSD who try these exercises report that they get bored at a certain point, which means

they're coming close to the emotion.

The feeling genuinely seems like boredom, but it's actually a shield between you and the emotion.

SC: I've had a realization since the last time we talked. I was watching a show on PBS about soldiers with PTSD, and one said that the bomb goes off in his head every day. The idea that this thing continues to happen all the time—I feel the same way. I thought I'd experienced loss before the hurricane, but I really hadn't, not in any meaningful way. Now I know what loss means.

MB: What does it mean to you now?

SC: I'd been through difficult things before, but nothing so life-altering. Knowing that brings me some kind of strength. It's hard to put into words. I really wish I could write about it, but it's too overwhelming.

MB: Sara, you're healing. You're doing exactly the right things, and if you can't write at the moment, that's okay. When you hear me say that, how does it feel in your body?

SC: It feels great. Because I thought the second we finished rebuilding the house, I'd be fine, and it hasn't worked that way. The people close to me have been waiting for me to become the person I used to be, who wanted to make plans and show up.

MB: I've got some bad news, which is also good news. Do you know what caterpillars do in a cocoon? They don't just grow

wings—they dissolve. They become completely liquid, and the cells reconfigure themselves into a totally different animal. Trauma puts you into metamorphosis. You're about to become someone with powers you couldn't dream of. You'll be able to fly. But if your friends are waiting for you to turn back into a caterpillar, they'll wait forever. You're going to come out a different creature. I've watched it happen a thousand times. But right now you're in that dissolved state.

SC: That makes sense.

MB: Don't push yourself. You are changing and learning to be a person who lives with things she cannot control. The idea that you're caught in the hurricane every day—could you tell me more about that?

SC: Yes. I think a lot of it has to do with being in the same place where it happened. I don't know how to resolve that. Everybody in Houston is living with that vulnerable feeling, and our politicians are living with it, and we're all trying to figure out how we can prevent this, even though we're only human. We're trying to figure out how we deal with the ocean, which is a crazy thing. We'll always be at risk.

MB: In a way, anybody who thinks otherwise is delusional. Landslides, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes—disasters happen

everywhere, and all it takes is one big, shattering event to destroy your innocent belief that the earth is a safe place to live. I love that phrase "trying to figure out how we deal with the ocean." On dry land you can think about that, but if you push out to sea in a raft, you realize how tiny you are and how vast the ocean's power is. Think about that saying "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." You're learning to surf not just events, but emotions: fear, sadness, loss.

SC: At the moment, it feels like I'm drowning.

MB: That's a useful response. What you're doing is giving up on the idea of life being the way you wanted it to be. In Asian philosophy, this is called ego death. The person who thought everything was safe has died. You can't get past death without grieving. Are you willing to have a funeral in your heart, maybe even a little ceremony, for the Sara who believed nothing bad could ever happen in her house?

SC: I love that idea.

MB: You've grieved the loss of many precious objects, but what you actually lost was your innocence. Letting yourself grieve that loss is the only way to get to the other side of the trauma. Have you ever grieved

the loss of someone you loved?

SC: I've definitely grieved the loss of relationships.

MB: When you have a bad breakup, some days you say, "I'm okay, I can put on makeup and go out in the world." Then something reminds you, and you crumble. You think you literally can't survive and have to huddle in bed. But 12 hours later, something lightens and you get up again.

SC: Yes.

MB: Grief happens in spasms. It's like giving birth: You're giving birth to a new self. At the height of labor, you'll have 90 seconds of agony followed by 30 seconds of relief. Interestingly, they call that period transition. That's what you're going through. How's your husband? Is he comfortable being present with you?

SC: He tries, but it's not always easy for me to articulate what I'm feeling. For instance, we were hiking recently, and I lost sight of him in the brush. I started panicking and screaming his name, because instantly I was reliving a scary

incident when he went back to our house in a boat to get some things and I was sure I'd never see him again. On the day of the hike, once I calmed down, I told him what was happening. But in that moment when I was triggered, I couldn't calmly say, "Hey, I'm experiencing trauma." All he knows is that I'm yelling.

MB: You need a code word to use when you're having a flashback—*hurricane*, for instance—that instantly lets him know what's going on. When you say the word, he has a script: "Tell me everything." Then he can just let you talk, and all he has to say is "I'm listening." What you need most is to be heard. And it would be nice if he could hold you, too. Do you think he can do that?

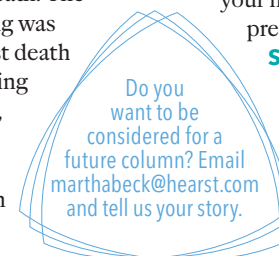
SC: I think so.

MB: So that's one piece of homework. The other piece is hard, but I think you can do it. Could you try to find a trauma recovery group in your area? Being present with other people as they go through this, and having them be present as you go through it, is necessary in order for the trauma to heal.

SC: Okay, I'll check that out.

MB: And remember: Be kind to yourself. We'll talk in a few weeks.

MARTHA BECK is the author of, most recently, *Diana, Herself: An Allegory of Awakening*.





PART 3 OF 3

Liquid Asset

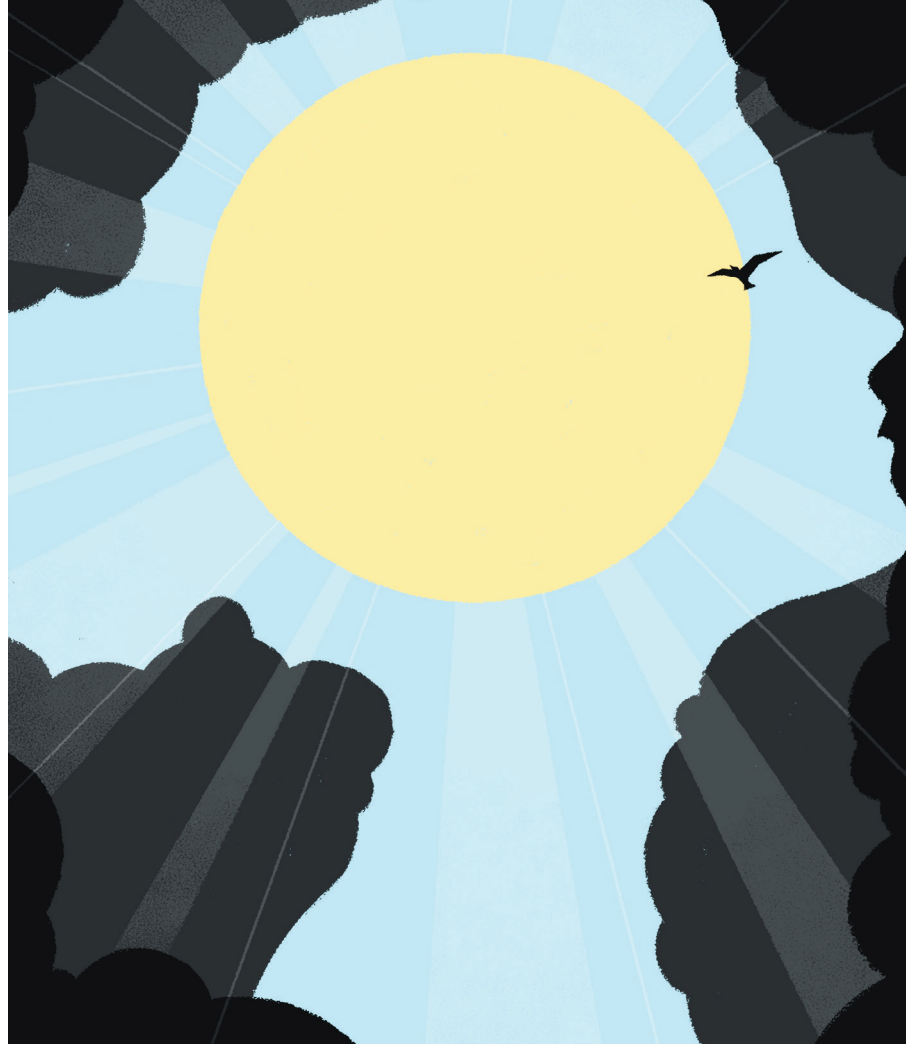
Hurricane Harvey took almost everything Sara Cress owned—but O life coach **Martha Beck** is helping her realize what it also gave her.

IT'S BEEN NEARLY two years since Houston resident Sara Cress watched helplessly as most of her possessions were destroyed in the floods of Hurricane Harvey. The disaster left the now 41-year-old writer anxious, depressed, and devoid of creative energy, so she called life coach Martha Beck in search of relief. Martha, who confirmed that her client was experiencing symptoms of PTSD, encouraged Sara to tell her story as a first step toward healing. She also advised self-compassion and patience, since trauma provokes a transformation as profound as literal metamorphosis: "Do you know what caterpillars do in a cocoon? They don't just grow wings—they dissolve." Though Sara's currently suspended in that liquefied state, Martha is confident that she'll eventually be able to fly. To check on her progress, let's drop in on their final session.

Martha Beck: Sara, how have you been?

Sara Cress: I'm feeling better. In our last session, when you and I talked about just accepting that things are different after the hurricane, it was really freeing. It's been easier to let myself cry when I feel like it instead of just pushing the emotion down.

MB: Fantastic!



SC: I still dream about the flood a lot. Usually the dreams aren't about the water itself. They're about the aftermath, and being in this weird place where I don't know what will happen next.

MB: It might be useful for us to talk about that. Dreams reveal so much about what's happening in our subconscious. Is there one that's particularly vivid for you?

SC: Recently, I dreamed that my husband and I were living in a temporary apartment because we'd been flooded. I realized a window was open and got up to close it, but then a man came lumbering through. I was paralyzed. He started to attack me, but my husband pulled him off and jumped on him. I ran outside for help and saw a family who told me they'd get someone. I was afraid to go back into the apartment, but when I did, my friends were there and the guy was dead. My husband came out of the bathroom completely unruffled and told me everything was fine.

MB: Fascinating! The psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that every single thing in a dream symbolizes an aspect of yourself. My method of dream interpretation is based on his work. It's challenging because you have to pretend you're different symbols in the dream, which may feel foolish at first,

but since you're a poet, I think you'll get the hang of it quickly. Do you want to try?

SC: Sure.

MB: So first of all, I want you to imagine you're the flood. I know it's not even in the dream, but sink into the feeling of that terrible thing and say "I am the flood." And then start to describe yourself.

SC: Okay. I am the flood. I'm...unknowable. Catastrophic. And eventually, I'm going to kill you.

MB: Ooh, you're good at this. Okay, catastrophic flood, why do you exist? Just throw anything out there that comes to mind.

SC: I exist because no one has been paying attention to me.

MB: Very interesting. And what is your message for Sara?

SC: Life is suffering.

MB: All right, now I want you to be the apartment. Describe yourself.

SC: I'm empty. I have no personality. I have no art.

MB: Why do you exist?

SC: To shelter.

MB: And what's your message for Sara?

SC: You will always end up back here.

MB: What about the window? Describe yourself as the window.

SC: I'm insecure. I'm going to fail you.

MB: Why do you exist?

SC: For people to come in and out.

MB: What's your message for Sara?

SC: Make sure I'm always closed.

MB: Okay, I have another question for you, window: How are you trying to help her?

SC: I'm her path to safety.

MB: Now describe yourself as the robber.

SC: I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have the right tools, and I'm highly disorganized.

MB: What's your purpose here?

SC: I want to destroy something, but I'm not sure what. I'm chaos.

MB: Okay, let's go through what you just described. A catastrophic thing has happened to you, and its message for you is that life is suffering. And now you're in a place where everything's been stripped away. You're stranded in a part of your psyche that's empty—you've given up art, you've given up feeling. You're seeking shelter here, but it's depressing and empty. You feel like a snail inside its shell, right?

SC: Yes.

MB: The window is intriguing. Though your instinct is to keep it closed, you also believe it's a path to safety. In our sessions, you're opening a window into your feelings, which is scary because that's how chaos gets in. When the robber comes through that window, you want to jump on this guy and kill him. A big part of you is paralyzed, but there's another powerful part that fights back. The fighter may look like your husband in the dream, but he's actually the part of you that knows exactly how to save yourself. The vulnerable part of you runs outside for help, and you meet a big family who's right there for you. That's you reaching out to other people, by talking to me and, eventually, I hope, joining a trauma recovery group where you'll find compassionate witnesses to what you've been through. When you go back into your apartment, the chaos is dead, and you are absolutely A-OK. How is this interpretation landing for you?

SC: It makes total sense. I'm stunned by how much information is there.

MB: When I asked you to be the flood and tell me why you exist, you said, "Because no one has been paying attention to me." That sounds like you were already suffering when the flood broke into your world, and the horrific experience forced you into a reckoning.

SC: You're right. I started therapy years ago, long before the hurricane, and my therapist keeps saying things like "I know Harvey was very traumatic, but even before that, you were in a bad place." It's true. I already had tendencies to obsess about things and cope with anxiety in unhealthy ways, like turning to food and alcohol. I'm starting to see that what I've been going through is about more than Harvey.

MB: Sometimes a catastrophic event can break down the doors of your psyche. You may end up looking back and saying, "Harvey set me free."

SC: It did force me to make some big decisions. When it happened, I was working as a social media manager, and the job was so stressful that I was losing my hair. Once I added PTSD to the mix, coping was so much harder, and I finally realized it was time to quit. I'm a freelance writer now, which is something I'd wanted to do for years, but I was afraid. I'm not a huge success yet, but I'm doing okay.

MB: You can apply the idea of Jungian symbols not just to dreams, but to things that happen in real life, because that's how we make meaning: We turn things into symbols. Could you imagine yourself as Harvey and describe yourself to me?

SC: Sure. I am Harvey. I'm going to cause a lot of pain for a lot of people. I am inevitable.

MB: And why do you exist?

SC: Because generations of people haven't cared enough about the environment.

MB: And what are you here to tell Sara?

SC: I'm trying to help her think about the larger world instead of dwelling on the small things she tends to obsess over.

MB: When things happen, the meaning we give them is very personal and individual. You could make Harvey mean that life's a bitch and then you die. Or you could make it mean that it's time to pay attention to your inner ecosystem. Are you nurturing your feelings? Are you being kind to yourself? Because if you don't tend to your inner life, eventually the stuff you've pushed back will come and flood you. What stirred inside you during this session?

SC: It felt like things were clicking into place in a way that my brain found very satisfying.

MB: As you continue to allow your emotions to surface and figure out the role

the trauma has played in your life, you'll continue to feel those clicks. It's almost like finding the solution to a math problem. I have a wacky suggestion: Maybe you should write a short story called "My Friend Harvey," about all the things Harvey ended up doing for you.

SC: [Laughs] That's probably a good way to get going again as a writer.

MB: Writing is another way to make meaning out of the things that happen to you—and to help other people who are living through chaos of their own. That's very powerful.

SC: Going through this with you has been very powerful.

MB: I feel the same way. I expect things to get much, much better for you in the months to come.

SC: Thank you for everything.

MB: Thank you. I'm looking forward to reading the great work you're going to create.

MARTHA BECK is the author of, most recently, *Diana, Herself: An Allegory of Awakening*.

