

## Black and White Episode 3: Your Story Is Important

*Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.*

**CHAD MOSES** [over music]: We owe it to the people, uh, in our community to know what we're going through or else we rob people of the miracle of seeing it unfold. What he was saying is *'when I first, when I made the decision on the first night to not injure, I was able to tell a friend, and I am so thankful I did because that friend was able to celebrate with me at two days, at a week, at a month, at a year. But if I didn't share that moment with my friend, then I'd have no one to celebrate with me at a day, at a week, at a month, at a year.'*

*[music playing]*

**LINDSAY KOLSCH**: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and things that make us human. We'll be sharing stories and conversations about topics we tend not to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. With so much gray area in the world today, we feel it's important to draw a line in the sand when it comes to a few of the things we believe about people and mental health. Last May, during Mental Health Month, we highlighted four statements that have guided TWLOHA's mission since day one. This year, we're focusing on four more statements:

I Am Worthy of Hope  
It Is OK to Ask for Help  
Your Story Is Important

And finally,

We Need You Here.

*[music playing]*

**LINDSAY**: At TWLOHA, we believe these four statements are non-negotiable. To us, these statements are Black and White. So in honor of Mental Health Month, we've created a special miniseries featuring four episodes to highlight each statement. We're going to be sharing a bit more about what those words mean to us and this movement. We'll be highlighting a few action steps you can take that are also inspired by these words. And to learn more about what TWLOHA is doing this month, you can read the 'Black and White' blog post and check out our merch collection on [twloha.com](http://twloha.com).

Today I'm gonna be joined by Chad Moses, a member of our team. You heard his voice at the top of this episode. We hope this conversation is encouraging, and we're excited to share it with you.

[music playing]

**LINDSAY KOLSCH:** Hey guys, this is Lindsay Kolsch. I'm your host for the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast. I am joined today by our very own team member, Chad Moses. Chad serves as our Director of Outreach. We're looking this week at another phrase. We're talking this month about the Black and White collection. These are statements that we believe in. And we want to kind of look more intently, and have a more direct conversation about one of the phrases, this week being "Your Story Is Important." This is actually a really big theme for us. I think this is one of those core to the identity of To Write Love on Her Arms. We would not exist without a story. But I'm excited to kind of dialogue with you Chad and talk about, um, this idea of story and why we believe that that phrase is true: Your story is important. So welcome. And let's, let's jump in.

**CHAD:** Yeah, going way back in time on this one, it was almost kind of predates our, our vision statement then.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** For so long. And we still talk about it, uh, in design and communications. But, uh, there's three phrases that always follow To Write Love on Her Arms: Hope is real. Help is real. Your story is important. So like you mentioned, we would not exist without a story. And the only reason we do exist is because other people found a resonance with that story. They said, 'that sounds a lot like my life, that sounds like chapters of, of my own story.' Man, you guys are going to be hearing "story" a lot. Buckle up. Um, so yeah, it's, it's almost impossible to imagine To Write Love on Her Arms without a sense of storytelling. And I think you could even say it's impossible to imagine, you know, civilization without storytelling. We are products of the stories that we tell.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah. So if people aren't familiar, which I'm really hoping they, they do know, but perhaps they're finding this podcast just among the charts or a recommendation from a friend and are not super familiar with the To Write Love on Her Arms story. Do you mind giving us kind of a short recap?

**CHAD:** Absolutely. So To Write Love on Her Arms, we are a nonprofit organization that exists to present hope and find help for anyone struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. But this all began 13 years ago now, with no intention on being a movement, no idea that podcast or t shirts or music festivals would be a piece of this. But originally it was just about helping a friend and telling her story. So the name To Write Love on Her Arms... we're not implying that one gender struggles more than any other with these issues, but at its earliest moments, this was a literal two-page story about, uh, a *her*. That her was a friend, Renee. And the story was about her first five days in recovery from cocaine addiction and finding help with self-injury, all through the context of community. So during this five day period of, of a friend taking her first steps into recovery, another friend, a guy named Jamie Tworkowski, he asked her, '*hey, how would you feel about sharing your story?*'

**CHAD:** And she said, you know, *'I think if one person could relate to the pain in my life, then maybe we could find a purpose for some of this. I would hope that people would be reminded of hope.'* So through the simple telling of a story and posting it on Myspace.com in the year 2006, people solely stumbled across this story and they said, *'man, Renee sounds like my dad. Renee sounds like my best friend, Renee sounds like me. Is hope an option for me? Is help available to me?'* So as an organization we really grew as a response to *your* response to a story that was originally titled "To Write Love on Her Arms."

**LINDSAY:** Yeah. And story has remained the central element of what we attempt to do here at To Write Love on Her Arms. We talk about, as you just mentioned, the mission statement, presenting hope and finding help. The presenting hope piece really wouldn't exist without storytelling, without this idea that as we see journeys continue and as people share their own journeys, they're the ones writing this story. They're the ones sharing the story, and we get the chance to share that on our blog and through social media posts, and sometimes face to face or at college events. I'm curious when did you first realize or understand the concept of story and how did that play into your own experience with mental health, depression, or any other kind of seasons you've walked through?

**CHAD:** Yeah, I remember from a young age being absolutely infatuated with, with myth.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** I remember buying a copy—

**LINDSAY:** Star Wars or Lord of the Rings?

**CHAD:** More nerdy than that. When I was in fifth grade, I bought my first copy of the *Iliad*.

**LINDSAY:** Oh yeah. OK. Yep, There it is.

**CHAD:** So I just love this idea of, of stories. This idea of a hero's journey of the, of the noble quest of something that you're chasing, of something that isn't there, but, but maybe one day it could be claimed—

**LINDSAY:** Yeah, meaning and purpose.

**CHAD:** Yeah. Yeah. You know, just, I would now describe it as self discovery, uh, that every story on some level has this element of self discovery, of a truth that's been buried or forgotten that, that we can be reminded of. When I was in college, I thought I was going to wind up being a business major in econ and all that. But, um, I almost failed my, uh, my first Intro to Economics class because I was really wrapped up into the story of *Saved by the Bell*.

[Lindsay laughs]

**CHAD:** I really hope my parents aren't listening to this. I did not fail. A D minus is not an F. But from there I found that I kind of disqualified myself from, from the business routes. So I started just taking a bunch of classes that, uh, that I found interesting on, you know, just through their little, um, boilerplate memos on what the course is going to be about. And in that I started taking a lot of classes revolving around comparative religion.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** You know, these classes, they were not about theology, but they were about the stories that have been told how these stories have been told and how communities have formed around these stories.

**CHAD:** We're looking at a number of texts that communities considered sacred and analyzing it like literature. *'Who wrote it? Who are they writing to? Why do they write it? What are the themes here?'* So I found through the next three and a half years of my collegiate education, this value and this appreciation, not just of what the words on the page say but how the words even got there.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** And that's where I discovered the beauty of oral tradition. I remember being in a class on Judaism, actually, and I remember so vividly, I had never been more embarrassed. We're having a discussion and we're talking about a text and I said, off the cuff in this conversation, *'oh yeah, but that was just an oral tradition.'* And the professor stopped me and says, *'don't ever say just a oral tradition. These stories carry weight. And just because this culture hadn't written them down does not diminish what they are.'*

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** I think that's true to today. That most people that we've had on this podcast and the vast majority of people listening to it, you probably have not written your own memoir yet. You probably not.

**LINDSAY:** Or maybe won't.

**CHAD:** Or won't. You've not written an autobiography, but your story has still been told. And your story is still being told. So this oral tradition, this, this verbal telling of your life, carries immense weight. And that's something that, yeah, I've, I've now carried with me for over a decade, this appreciation of how we tell stories.

**LINDSAY:** When you look at maybe your own story and you're hearing that phrase and you think, perhaps I don't have an odyssey experience, I am not a hero or I am not going on some quest for a grail. Or you know, I am not necessarily in this adventure on a grand epic scale, I wonder what you might say or how we could reframe "your story is important" to be maybe more specific to just being human?

**CHAD:** I think that there's pieces of these epics that we admire just because of fantasy, but there's human elements to it that make it utterly relatable. Like man, what does it look like to be without hope, where you feel like there's people looking to you for, for help and the only thing you have is a wild hair of an idea that just might work. What about the times that that wild-haired idea did work like isn't, isn't that enough? I think when we're talking about stories, the most important thing about a story is not the storyteller.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** It's actually the audience.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** That a story does not exist until there's someone there to receive it. And historically the audience played a really important role. They weren't there to passively absorb the story. They were there to fact check the storyteller. They were there to make sure that the storyteller didn't project too much of their own experience onto the heroes that, that we're admiring. The audience was highly active. They were there to make sure that the storyteller wasn't being more self-damning than they deserved. They were there to make sure that the most important aspects, the most beautiful aspects, that those were the ones that were really elevated here. So it doesn't matter if the monster had one eye or five, what mattered is that a community made it out alive.

**LINDSAY:** So, how does that, cause that struck me as you were saying that—how does that compare to where we find ourselves today where when I say the words "your story," people may instantly think, "oh, like on Instagram, like my story on Instagram?" Or like, because now, because now stories, it's a highlight reel and I think everyone's fine saying that. When we say "your story is important," we're not talking about like a highlight reel. We're talking about the long story...the journey I guess.

**CHAD:** Man, that just totally made my heart hurt when you're, and I'm aware of it, I know how social media works, but it's like, yeah, someone publishes a story and then it disappears. Oh shoot, man, like I guess that means that your story deserves a retelling. So yeah, I think the kind of the magic of story isn't just in the characters and isn't just in the, in the storyteller, but it's in the people that can keep that story at the forefront. So even if that Instagram story disappears, having someone that's tracking with you, with your life to say, *'hey man, remember when you posted that? Like that, that made me smile. Hey, that was, that was great.'*

**CHAD:** Or you know, *'I, I saw another story posted on Facebook and it made me think of you.'* So the magic of story is not in where we started and where we ended. It's, it's in who is around to continue to retell that story.

**LINDSAY:** I do think kind of, you know, obviously social media has its pitfalls and we're talking kind of how that experience disappears in 24 hours and and and what not. But there is, there are those apps that, you know, do the timehop and they kind of remind you of something a couple years ago or a couple of weeks ago. And it does seem to me like our memories are so limited or like the capacity to hold them all in one cohesive narrative. I think that there is some, there's some value there to remind ourselves of some of the, the light and the good and the things that brought our spirits high and we felt happy about, but to not, but to not get lost and to assume that just those things are the things that matter because actually the things that break your heart or the things that were hard are equally as important but are probably not going to make the story reel.

**LINDSAY:** You know, you're probably not going to put that there. They all inform who you are and what story you're telling. But on the, you know, to kind of go in the other direction with this. You could also just focus on the hard things that nobody sees and nobody will see. You know, you could just say, well that is who I am. And then the truth is it's a, it's a mix of those things. There's a balance there. And one thing I've been aware of for a while now and kind of thought a lot about and have had, my husband went through some of this, it's called narrative therapy, and it's this idea of actually taking the time with a licensed mental health counselor... of course there's people who probably are naturally prone to kind of writing and doing this on their own...

**LINDSAY:** But looking at some of the experiences that you have had over the course of your life, sometimes they're the harder experiences, and writing them out, writing them out to kind of separate yourself a little bit, give yourself some perspective, but then to also say this was so hard, but then what does it also mean for the next chapter? Because without this chapter, what comes after wouldn't exist. And so I think there is some element there that reminds me of zooming out once in a while to reflect, to kind of, to be self aware is actually a really healthy practice and it gives value to the whole experience versus just the highlight reel. You know, you, you, when we say your story's important, we really mean the entirety of it, the length of it, the breadth of it, where it's going, where it has been, where it will be, who will be a part of it. We are a collection of stories. Our humanity is bound together with those things.

**CHAD:** That's something else that an audience is able to do is give you a wider breadth of, of perspective. Uh, it was funny even saying that, I meant to say that breadth like, like width, uh, but it came out as breath, like life, that thing that sustains us. That me telling my own story of navigating depression and substance abuse and self-injury and thoughts of suicide, I tell that story hundreds of times throughout the year. I can control when I tell the story, I can never control how someone receives it.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah, that's important.

**CHAD:** And sometimes someone is hearing a detail in my story that I've just glossed over. I'm just so used to telling it that I've lost the magic of, of a moment or a conversation or another character. But someone else hearing that for the first time could spark a change in their life. And I think it would be far too arrogant to say that my story changed someone else's life. I think it's more accurate to say that there's moments of collision where one person's story runs right into mine, and it creates this third branch of, of story that can go in another beautiful direction. You know, there's, there's 7 billion people on the planet. We're all living our own individual stories, but how many more stories can be made through the collision of these?

**CHAD:** And that's, that's something that, man, I can't, I can't quit smiling. Just the thought of, of all the ways that our individual stories can, should, and I think maybe even will inevitably collide to the benefit of future storytellers and future audience members.

*[music playing before break]*

**LINDSAY** [over music]: During Mental Health Month, we're inviting you and supporters everywhere to take this conversation into your community. The Black and White collection of t-shirts and merch is available for a limited time in the TWLOHA Online Store. You can purchase any of the four designs or purchase the collection as a whole. Every order comes with a print and info cards that you can use to start conversations and make an impact in your community. And because we love our podcast listeners, we're offering you 15% off your purchase, to be used at any time throughout the month of May. Enter May15—that's M-A-Y-1-5—at checkout. Thank you so much for your support.

*[music playing leading back into interview]*

**LINDSAY:** So when we say your story is important, I hope that people listening understand what we are not saying is that you should take your story and every painful detail and just share it with anybody and everybody. I wonder if you could kind of expound a little bit on the idea that your story is so important and it represents the collection of your existence. How do you navigate when and how to share it?

**CHAD:** Yeah. I think, as we mentioned with previous phrases and ideas, that practice telling your story is going to create a better outcome. So there are appropriate ways and appropriate avenues to share your story. But I'd say if you are still navigating heartache, I'd say limit that storytelling to the people that can immediately aid you in whatever we're going to be dredging up emotionally through this.

**LINDSAY:** Yes, that's good advice.

**CHAD:** There's a poet named Shane Koyczan and he says, '*you are worth the time it takes to take the time to get to know you.*' So if you are going to walk through the experience of sharing some of the most sacred bits of your life, then you deserve to make sure that the people hearing it are worth the energy it takes to to say that story. That being said, Twitter doesn't get to hear all of my story.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** I believe that no one is owed your story. You have this sense of agency to share your story when you are ready and how you are ready. And you know, there is bits of my story that I would easily share now that would have been unhealthy for me to share seven, eight, nine years ago.

**LINDSAY:** Why, why do you say that? I'm curious. Just so people can—

**CHAD:** Yeah, I think that there was still a lot of healing that needs to be done before I announced what the lesson was or, uh, there's, there's a lot more maturing to be done around it. I needed more support. I needed to learn how to lean on my support structures more fully before I started walking on my own.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** I was just at an event, where a man showed me a picture of a tree, um, that he saw on a walk. And this is, this is in the woodlands of northern Georgia, and this guy was on a walk and he saw this brilliant oak tree that had snapped, but it was caught by a tree adjacent to it. Right in like the Y section of that tree. And who knows when that happened, but over time you can see where the trunk, the original trunk of that tree was still scarred and was still weak and could not stand on its own.

**CHAD:** But this fallen tree was able to use the support of its neighbor to grow taller than the neighbor tree.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** So you can see this, there's radical 45 degree bend in this tree of where it kept growing because of the support of its community.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah. You weren't ready in the, in the broken piece.

**CHAD:** Yes, I had been caught, but I hadn't started growing again yet. I just needed to, to kind of nurse the wounds that I had emotionally, uh, and just trust. But yeah, I think, uh, like I was saying earlier, no one is, is owed your story. But you, you deserve to, to find the proper avenues to share it in a way that keeps you healthy. I have a rose tattooed on my rib cage and that



means something very special to me. And depending on if someone sees that at like at a festival or someone sees a picture of that tattoo and someone asks about it, I immediately take like a quick emotional inventory of, *'OK, what story do I give them? Uh, do I tell them every decision I made that wound up with this tattoo that talks about life lessons and talks about healing and talks about love and talks about heartache and eventually about community? Or do I just say I really love Beauty and the Beast?'* And that is still a good enough reason for that tattoo. So you could ask me that same question, *'Hey Chad, what's that tattoo mean?'*

**CHAD:** And I would tell you the entire story depending on, on the day.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** You are allowed to, to share the bits of you that you care to share at the pace that you want to share. That is all together different than saying your story isn't worth sharing.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah, exactly.

**CHAD:** In fact, we're saying you, you get to call the shots here. This is your life. This is your recovery. And our hope is that you have people around you that give you options on when and how and how deep to share your story. But just because someone's asking a question about your life, you can find a reasonable way to say not right now. Or maybe for you not ever, but this is my story and I want to make sure that when I tell it that is worth the telling.

**CHAD:** I think that's another really cool thing about the, To Write Love on Her Arms story is that when this was written, Jamie says it all the time, there is no guarantee of a happy ending. There was no proof that, that Renee would survive detox. There was no promise that three months later we wouldn't be back at square one. But the telling of the story was in the hope that other people would connect to it.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** That's the entire reason To Write Love on Her Arms exists is Renee saw the value in aspects of her life that she believed weren't specific to just her, that the question she had, the heartache she had, the joys she had, would be things that other people would read and say, *'yeah, I get that.'*

**LINDSAY:** I've witnessed over the past 10 years, even with my partner, my husband Denny, who had struggled for three years with a heroin addiction, um, and shortly maybe five years in recovery, he started to be able to share his story and give a lot of people hope. So after the next five, 10 years, the way he got to tell his story changed, right? What was important in that story over years has changed. I think that's the beautiful part is that the story can change and it'll keep changing if we allow it.

**CHAD:** Yeah.

**LINDSAY:** And we keep fighting for it.

**CHAD:** It doesn't need to be perfect or polished in order to be shared.

**CHAD:** We have a friend named Caleb and, uh, Caleb, and he said that, *'look man, we owe it to people around us to share the crap in our life. We owe it to the people in our community to know what we're going through or else we rob people of the miracle of seeing it unfold.'* What he was saying is when I first, when I made the decision on the first night to not injure, I was able to tell a friend, and I am so thankful I did because that friend was able to celebrate with me at two days, at a week, at a month, at a year. But if I didn't share that moment with my friend, then I'd have no one to celebrate with me at a day, at a week, at a month, at a year.

**LINDSAY:** So I wonder what are some things we would encourage people faced with this particular statement and confronted with it? What are some steps they can take? I think writing things down, creating songs, creating art to reflect, finding a safe person to talk to, sitting with the counselor if you're interested in that idea of narrative therapy or you just want to get some perspective on your own experience to understand what story you are living in, what your story could look like. I think those are all steps that you can take this month.

**CHAD:** So often we're not aware of our narrative arcs as they're happening, but if you can take the time just to jot down what your morning, afternoon, and night look like, the places that you felt most alive, the places that you felt, maybe a little dull, uh, that these are all important because we get to learn lessons from those. And they're not always clear in the moment. Sometimes you have to have four weeks of time between your entry and now before you see exactly what the pattern was.

**LINDSAY:** I think this episode or this conversation, we'd be remiss to not acknowledge that there are people listening, who know that there are, there are people in their lives that they're, they're missing that, that they've lost whether they've died by suicide, whether they have died as a result of substance use disorder. There are a lot of families grieving. There are people grieving. And so we get the question, "what do I do with that story and does it matter?" And our response to them is that story is so important.

**LINDSAY:** We get a lot of families who reach out to, To Write Love on Her Arms with the loss of the loved one and they're wondering, *'does this just mean all is lost?'* And, and our response would be: no. The funds that are donated, the intention and the time you take to share this story. Like this is a legacy and this is going to be a legacy of hope. You still get to change the narrative around the end of this because, because it means that someone's going to find it. They're going to hear that this person was struggling. They have an opportunity to change the course of their story by hearing of the ones we've lost.

**CHAD:** Yeah. Our stories have already been built on countless generations of those that came before. There is some generations down the road that will wildly benefit from the stories that we tell, that's going to be of triumph and it's going to be of heartache.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah.

**CHAD:** We don't get to choose when tragedy strikes, but we do get to choose who and how we invite into that story and we hold onto this greater hope that perhaps through sharing even the worst parts that there's going to be someone that says, *'I get it. Yeah. I can find some courage. I'm ready to start again.'*

**LINDSAY:** So I think if that's you, I think if you're listening, we hope that you do feel encouraged by this phrase. Your story is important, your loved one's story is important. Let's keep these conversations going.

**CHAD:** I get this question all the time. *'So how's Renee now?'* Uh, so Renee was very gracious in sharing her story 13 years ago that launched this organization and the story is still unfolding in ways that we could not have imagined 13 years ago. Renee is alive. Renee is well. Renee is a mom, and we've now encountered a generational sense to, To Write Love on Her Arms, and we can't wait to see how this story continues to unfold. Mostly because we can't wait to see how your story collides with ours.

**LINDSAY:** Chad, thank you so much.

**CHAD:** Thank you.

**LINDSAY:** It's been awesome.

*[music playing]*

**LINDSAY:** Thank you so much for listening to this special miniseries of the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast in honor of Mental Health Awareness Month. Thank you to Chad Moses for lending your voice and your heart to this conversation. We would really encourage you to read the full [Black and White blog](#) and check out our merch collection on [twloha.com](http://twloha.com).

**LINDSAY:** We hope each episode is a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone. We understand that so many of you listening might be struggling with or know someone who is struggling with the issues we've been talking about. We believe that help exists. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources at our websites: [twloha.com](http://twloha.com). Click the FIND HELP at the top of the page. Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T-W-L-O-H-A—to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

**LINDSAY:** If you enjoyed this episode and you want to hear more, we hope you'll subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And, if you can do us a favor, we'd really love for you to write us a review. It will help more people find this podcast and the mission of TWLOHA. If you have any feedback or questions, please send us an email to [podcast@twloha.com](mailto:podcast@twloha.com).

**LINDSAY:** A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. This episode was produced by Mark Codgen, with editorial support by Claire Biggs of Lore de Force and Becky Ebert. And music assistance provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

To Write Love on Her Arms is a nonprofit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire, and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery. You can find more information about TWLOHA at [twloha.com](http://twloha.com).