

Episode BW03: “Hope Remains” - A Conversation With Renee Yohe

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

RENEE YOHE: And, again, that defiant response that something in me was still sitting there saying, “But, but that might be different. There might be something else, but just in case there's something else, at least, you know, put a lifeline out. Just one more thing.” And I was willing to take that action in calling. I made a phone call. And that's all it took. Even though I couldn't see it in that moment, even though I was in the depths of despair, that hope that I still mattered and that there was a future for me, and that nothing was beyond redemption in my story or anyone else's—that was something I was able to hold on to.

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LINDSAY KOLSH: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms Podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. Each episode we bring you conversations about the things that can feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We share stories and explore big themes like hope, healing, and recovery.

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CHAD MOSES: This is the second of the three Black and White statements we released a few weeks ago in honor of Mental Health Month. You may recall that, as we introduced this statement, we were drawn back to the original story where Renee told us to “Remember hope.” Renee likened it to the stars, saying that while our view may be obscured by dust and clouds and storms, they're still there, that hope still remains. Today I'm incredibly honored to be joined by Renee Yohe to talk more about how hope has looked different for her over the past 14 years, how it has changed and transformed, and how staying curious about what life could look like helped save her life. This is a conversation I'm going to cherish for a long while, and I'm grateful to share it with you now.

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CHAD: Renee! How are you doing?

RENEE: I'm good! How are you?

CHAD: I'm doing well! It's been far too long, but I'm so happy that we are able to connect. So some life has happened since last we were able to hang out. Let's start with a quick check in, how are you doing? And what's life looking like?

RENEE: Well, there's so many answers to that. You saw me while I was pregnant, we went and got a coffee. So I mean, it's changed drastically. My baby's now on the outside of my body and running

around now, which is crazy and amazing. He's changed and growing so much all the time is just fantastic and exhausting.

CHAD: Little over a little over a year now?

RENEE: Yeah. 15 months.

CHAD: It's so funny how parents judge time in months and weeks.

RENEE: Yeah, that's true. It's like I survived this long and managed to keep another human being alive this long. So every bit counts.

CHAD: Fair enough. I'll be rooting hard for the next 15 months as well. Let's double it. Again, thanks so much for checking in with us. Thanks for helping us kind of unpack this phrase of "Hope remains." So we wanted to lock you in this, because hope has been such a central word in not only the story of *To Write Love*, but even back on the first sentences, the first paragraphs, the first moments of this story. We figured that you would be a great person to check in with. I mean, it's been 14 years now since this has taken off and I'm curious, from your perspective, how has the phrase "Hope remains" or how has this concept of hope itself changed or evolved for you over the past 14 years?

RENEE: I think it's been a pretty drastic change for me. When I was 19, and even periods of time after that, I think it was more based on survival. My hope then was that things wouldn't always look that way, that I wouldn't always feel so suicidal. There were moments where it was just this idea that it wouldn't always be that way, and if anything could change, and I might not feel like that, then I owed it to myself to find out. It was almost like a trick I would play on myself to keep myself from falling through when things were really really bad at my darkest time. It's evolved from this hope that I could move past that, that there were other things, to now. My hope is what kind of future I can build for me and my child and maybe I can crush it in school. The hope that there is still purpose in my story and its ability to affect my son. It was just for me then, it was a very simple but huge thing. That survival to now, being more than myself. How can I in turn even in going to school, how can I give that to others and see others heal? And that's been important to me for a long time. I've been very humble and blessed and grateful to play a part in people's healing over the years. Being able to expand on that and add to my knowledge and abilities. It's really exciting. It's something I couldn't have even imagined before.

CHAD: Even how I phrased that question, how has hope changed, and your response was, "Hope is change, hope is the belief that things can change." I mean, that's so beautiful that that journey from survival to this idea of helping people down the road after school. Let's talk about the school piece for a second. That's super exciting. What's the plan?

RENEE: Yeah, it's wild. I had resigned myself to the idea that that's a boat that I missed, or chose not to get on a long time ago, and it wasn't the time for me, but I just see that opening a lot more doors. These years I'm much more clear headed and able to be present. I love learning, and I think it's something I really enjoy. I'm excited to pursue just learning more. I love horses and I love people and the idea of being able to do some kind of trauma work and therapy and have horses doing like a equine

assisted therapist. I think that would be really powerful, and I think it would be really fulfilled doing that. But regardless of how it goes specifically, there's so many different ways that you can help people. I know that's something I'm created to do. I know that I've experienced a lot of different things and walked through a lot and I can't see that going to waste. It's just finding what way is going to be most effective and helpful to others and enjoyable for me, too.

CHAD: That's awesome. I know that I have very limited experience in that animal therapy world, but I do recall visiting a clinic that had an equine therapy track. Just watching a 30-minute presentation on modalities that they use and different exercises that they use with clients and with these horses. It was something that was super beautiful to see unfold. I think a piece of that beauty was just in how multifaceted it was. How it was encouraging people to engage with this activity with their entire self. Obviously, working with the horses, that's super physical. You have something that you can see, something that you can touch, something that you can observe reacting to you. I don't know, I guess all that to say I think that's awesome how you are hoping to blend the physical and the mental part. I think when we talk about trauma responses, that is so important. Just to address entire people as entire people.

RENEE: Yeah, it's funny, because right before all of the shutdown and everything began, I was just getting ready to start my first session. I was going to get to experience it myself. And it's been delayed, but I'm so excited. I've never gotten to go through it myself. But I know that I love horses, I mean, I love animals in general. But I know that's my happy place. And they're just so powerful. And I know the experience of riding is just—I don't even have words for it, it's something completely other to me. To be able to bring that together, it just really excites me.

CHAD: To kind of bring this back to the statement that we started the conversation with, "Hope remains." When I offer this statement, what kind of response does that elicit? What comes to mind? What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel when I say "Hope remains?"

RENEE: This could be a little outdated, but I always think of the scene in Twister when the tornado is, when they're about to get sucked up into it and they tether themselves to that pole and everything is just being sucked up and flying all around them. But they can trust what they've tethered themselves to and even though they have no idea how it's going to work out, there's some kind of peace in that at the same time. There's this anchor that you're dropping essentially, when you have hope. Despite your circumstances, no matter what it looks like, independent of how it might resolve even, it's just this constant thing. It's like it's home base that you can breathe and sink into. It allows you to go out into all the chaos, you know that you've got this spark that inspires you to action. I think of dropping anchor at sea or having something to hold on to in the middle of a storm. Or that Emily Dickinson poem about the bird, "Hope is the thing with wings perched in the soul," or something like that. I totally butchered it.

So, it's a lot of things. I think that's something that's changed for me, too, is how I imagine or interact with the idea of hope. Even not that long ago. I think I still am kind of coming out of the season of it was really hard and difficult and lonely, and just more questions than answers. When things are really hard for me, I switch to the other side of my brain, the logic side, I don't really, the feeling side isn't serving

me so much, so I go more to logic and facts and it helps me to get through those until I can go back to the other side, if that makes sense.

CHAD: Yeah, totally.

RENEE: So hope was more of a peaceful knowing of something that was true. And it was more of a fact of, "Okay, fact is that change is a constant variable, but it's a constant, I'm guaranteed that." That's helpful to me. So that allowed me to stay when I didn't want to, or didn't know if I could. And it was these simple facts that allowed me to carry through. Then now allowing it to have that feeling side of me again of being able to feel excitement and getting back in touch with the side of me that dreams of things, that feeling, that spark. My counselor said—I was talking about it with her and she mentioned that hope is a spark, sometimes it's just a spark, and that really hit me because I had been really on the logic side of it. And it robbed me of some of the joy in feeling.

CHAD: That's awesome. I could not have guessed in a million years it would have brought up Twister, but I love that you did. I absolutely loved it. Because I mean in the original To Write Love on Her Arms story. You liken hope to stars and you mentioned that they are these anchors, they are always there. You mentioned that we may miss them in the clouds. We might miss them in the storms, whether it's a tornado or not. But I think that's a really honest point of view that there are times that that hope can still feel elusive, right? There's still daily life that gets in the way of hope. I don't assume I'm alone in feeling that.

RENEE: I got the email asking if I wanted to do the podcast, and I was reading what it was about. Yeah, the idea of it being distant and not being ashamed if it feels that way. I needed to hear that in that moment when I read it. I'm laying there you know, nursing Mitch to sleep, just noticing my reactions to the idea of hope in that moment, like sometimes even through the course of the day, it changes for me. You know, I can feel really overwhelmed. It's easy to lose sight of things or forget to look up, which is so important to me. But I still forget when I'm going through the day and wondering, "I don't know what my future looks like, I don't know how I'm going to accomplish all the things that are important to me and that I need to accomplish just for us to be okay." And that's all really hard and doing it alone is really hard. Yeah, it can seem elusive, but it is still there. That's when I am grateful for that logic side of me that you know, it might not always feel, I might not always feel hopeful, but I know that it is there. Even if I don't feel it, I know it, and I can come back to that feeling. Does that make sense?

CHAD: Absolutely. I think for me personally, I've learned that hope requires some sense of patience, right? Hope is not just a quick positive response to a crappy situation. That's cheap. But hope, hope you need to see with a wider view. You mentioned that logic piece that perhaps our own stories can kind of bear testament to the times that hope has shown up. So I guess bouncing that to you, how have you seen hope play out in a longer view? What is that logic that you defer to to remind you that it remains?

RENEE: I think it's played out over and over in my life, from complete pits of despair to just the hope that maybe something could change. Maybe there was another answer other than taking my own life,

that maybe there was something else and just with that idea of reaching out and me reaching out, turned into this massive response, which became something way bigger than that.

Even with Mitch, when I found out I was pregnant, I was terrified. So unexpected. I had no idea how I was going to figure any of this out. That's such massive news. I just knew that I wanted him and that I had the hope that I could be a good mother, and that allowed me to take the actions and take the steps that I needed to to bring him here and set me up where I am today. In the time that I've had him, there's just been so many beautiful gifts and so much change in me as a person. From literal change—like I'm up at 7 am every day. Who on earth would have ever thought I was even remotely capable of that. I'm cooking and cleaning up after another person all day long. I never imagined myself being any of these things. But it's amazing. Just this simple belief that if I show up and I take the action, these changes are on their way. I might not have a guarantee of certain things, but I know they will change and I know that I will have peace of mind. I'm taking steps towards them. I'm taking the action. Even on another level, personally with the physical aspect of recovering after pregnancy. That has been very, very hard. It's not something I was prepared for or knew anything about. I just keep looking back to, okay, My body's done amazing things. It's taken many shapes over the years. I've been athletic, I've struggled with addiction, and certainly was nothing close to being in shape. But I took action. And I showed up, I didn't wait for motivation. I just made choices and the reward was there. It took a long time before but I've done it and I felt amazing. I've just gathered the knowledge and put it into action one step at a time if that's all I can do. It's one day at a time and I get up and I move my body and I do something to take care of me. I'm slowly seeing changes and things. It's amazing to be strong and able to run after this kid and show him you know what it feels like to be happy and strong and confident in your body and to love it well, and that's definitely something that's taken patience, too.

[music playing, AD BREAK]

LINDSAY: Hey podcast family, it's Lindsay Kolsch. As we make our way through the Black and White miniseries, we've loved getting to see people wearing these statements and the conversation happening online.

We want to continue to hear what you're thinking about and how these statements apply to your own mental health journey and experience. Remember to tag TWLOHA in your posts online or you can send us an email to podcast@twloha.com.

And as we move through May, we know these conversations will continue to matter, so we're giving you 20% off the Black and White collection in the TWLOHA Online Store. Just Visit store.twloha.com, and use the code PODCAST2020 that's PODCAST20-20 at checkout. Your purchase is an amazing way to support this mission of hope and help.

And now, back to our conversation with Renee.

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CHAD: You mentioned the word “imagining” when you found out that you were pregnant. Just kind of imagining what the next step is. I think for me, that’s one place that I keep coming back to, or at least one word that I keep coming back to when I consider hope. Hope is imagination. It is curiosity. It’s an anticipation of “what ifs.” What if life can look a little bit different? What if I haven’t experienced everything yet? What if there’s something else out there? What if change is available? You’ve always struck me as an incredibly curious person, in the sense that you’re always learning, whether that’s a new poem or, or exploring music or exploring writing, or just in conversation, seeing you interact with people has always been something that I’ve seen as super beautiful. I think it’s because you do have this “what if” factor about how you see the world. I’m wondering if that’s always kind of been a piece of Renee or if that’s something you’ve learned or been inspired by. What’s kind of that spark of curiosity? Where’d that come from?

RENEE: I’ve always just naturally looked at things and just seen adventure and different experiences. It’s all very exciting. I guess that almost kind of made me tear up, hearing you say that. I think now, especially, it’s just such a foreign place for me to be in. I think a lot of other moms have experienced this. I mean, I’m so new to the mom community. I’m not that well connected yet, which has been really hard too. I need to fix that or hope to fix that very soon. But I think you lose a lot of yourself. There’s this weird feeling of like, “Who am I? What’s still true about me?” You just don’t even have time especially as a single mom, you just don’t have time for yourself. So much of it is you’re investing everything into this person who’s dependent on you and wanting to curate their experience and trying to stay curious with them and introducing all these things and thinking about their feelings. Does he feel safe? Is he happy? Has he experienced this yet? What about this food? And what does he learn? It’s just so all-encompassing, you forget, or just don’t have time or maybe it’s just that you move yourself to the back burner. For me, I came into this from a pretty dark place, so I wasn’t thriving beforehand. So it’s been a little while that I felt, you know, that I was just off and then this has been amazing, but it’s still been very disconnected from what I’m used to about me. Getting that back and just even hearing that spoken over me and that reminder of, “Yes, these are things that are true about you.” I think I find myself questioning. Am I this? Am I that? Am I so out of touch with everything now that I don’t know how to communicate anymore? Or do I know how to? I don’t know. But I think that is the key, that curiosity. What would it look like to do this? What am I? Let’s ask those questions. Let’s try and find a way to discover that. I don’t know. I think it’s just all the books I read and wild imagination I had since I was little. I think maybe it’s just the way I was wired to be curious.

CHAD: We’re super thankful for that curiosity and for that imagination. As you were speaking, it occurred to me. When we’re talking about hope here, that hope isn’t just like a linear relationship, right? I think hope is definitely a worldview. Hope is a way that you encounter just about every relationship that you’re a part of. What brought that to mind was you musing about things that Mitch has or has not experienced yet. You are embodying hope, by being curious about his life, to the extent that you know, a 15-month-old can express what they are experiencing. But I think it points to something a little bit deeper, really, that hope is not self-sustained. That hope requires pouring into someone else and having someone kind of pour back into you. Hope is not just something that is a personal natural resource. So playing off of that I’m wondering, what are some of the wells of hope that you’ve relied on over the years?

RENEE: My family has been a huge factor for me. They've been just so supportive and always believing in me and believing with me. Always. They've been huge and I'm very, very grateful for that, that I have those relationships with them. I was blessed with such good people. Counseling has been a major resource and being able to touch base with myself and have someone on the outside of things be able to shed light and perspective and remind me of things that are true. The friendships that I've had. I mean, they, they reflect back to me that hope. For me personally, I believe in God. Hope is synonymous with that. God is good and that I believe that he loves and cares about me and has good plans for me. That's something that I am able to trust. So even when I don't have a lot of external factors and validation that I know, that remains. I think that's what I've had to rely on the most, especially in the last 10 years, mainly. There's been so many big changes in my life. I had such a strong community and really close friends and then experienced such significant loss. Those people moving, some of them passing away. I haven't really had that again since. It's been my family and it's been that spiritual relationship, not the religion, but that relationship. It's not dependent on anything else either. That's been huge for me.

CHAD: This may sound like a very similar question, and it may have a similar answer, but just in case it's not the same, looking back at some moments in your life when you did feel hopeless. I'm wondering, with this kind of "director's cut" of our stories that we are privy to, are you able to identify some places where hope was still present even if you couldn't perceive it at that moment?

RENEE: I think that the night that kind of launched everything with David and Jamie, that night I felt completely hopeless. I wanted nothing more to do here. I just couldn't imagine suffering any longer. And, again, that defiant response that something in me was still sitting there saying, "But, but that might be different. There might be something else, but just in case there's something else, at least, you know, put a lifeline out. Just one more thing." And I was willing to take that action in calling. I made a phone call. And that's all it took. Even though I couldn't see it in that moment, even though I was in the depths of despair, that hope that I still mattered and that there was a future for me, and that nothing was beyond redemption in my story or anyone else's—that was something I was able to hold on to.

I think there are several points in my story. It looked different, but yeah, it's kind of like this hovering thing over you can't always see it. Looking back at it, it's interesting. To see where was truth or where was hope in that moment. I think even in finding out that I was pregnant, I mean, again, you know, from the position I was in, I couldn't see how it worked. I couldn't see. I had no job. I didn't have finances. I didn't have—it wasn't anything I could imagine it to be. I didn't know how it was going to work. It felt hopeless in a way. It was like Indiana Jones, when he steps out. I think that one's used a lot. You have this faith, you have just this gut instinct. That's the way you're supposed to go, and then it's going to work. So you take a step, even though nothing visually is even confirming. You just take that step and suddenly you're walking on solid ground, and it's working out. I couldn't see it. I couldn't see how all these things were going to be so good in that moment. That split second finding out. I couldn't see it, but I believed I trusted, even if I couldn't name it. I trusted that it was good, and it was going to work out.

CHAD: That's awesome. What does hope sound like to you? You know, maybe music or maybe people. Does hope have a voice in your mind?

RENEE: I don't think it has one distinct voice. But there's this band Mother Mother. A lot of their stuff I used to listen to. It's so quirky and strange and demented.

But there's a song called "It's all right" that they have. It's just so comforting and soothing. It's just saying, "You had a bad day, you made a mistake, and you're not gruesome. You're just human. You made a few mistakes. It's alright, it's okay." He's just saying over and over, "It's alright. It's okay. It's okay. It's alright." It's one of those songs. It just does something to you inside. I love it. And "The Worst Things Beautiful" by Ours. That one literally saved my life once. Jimmy Gnecco voice is incredible. He is powerful. There's a line that comes out that says, "Wait, wait see if morning comes around, wait for something beautiful. Some things come that make the worst things beautiful and it's just all right." That song is really important to me. A lot of the songs by Sleeping At Last. They're hopeful and soothing and lovely. My friend Tambor, her song, "I Will Go Plant Little Flowers" has always been a very coming alive, hopeful, life-affirming song to me. Patrick Watson, Luscious Life. He's magical.

CHAD: I remember once upon a time you telling me that we could not be friends if I did not listen to Pedro the Lion.

RENEE: I believe it. I love Dave Bazaan.

CHAD: Yeah. Do you still come back to some Dave?

RENEE: Yeah, he's actually one of the few that I have on my iPad. I have, I think it's like the original iPad. Me and technology have never been friends. We don't do well. I've lost all my music collection so many times over and now I don't have a lot. But yeah, I have several of his albums.

CHAD: Pedro remains.

RENEE: Always. Always and forever.

CHAD: That's awesome. How about people? Friends, family. Are their voices from friends or family that represent hope to you?

RENEE: My sister. Definitely my sister. She's been in my corner cheering me on and encouraging me and making me laugh and reminding me that I'm not alone. She's my best friend. She's been a really powerful relationship in my life. She's definitely one big one.

CHAD: I guess just to kind of put a bow on this, what would you say to someone who's having a hard time believing that hope remains?

RENEE: I think in part I would say it's okay if you don't believe that it remains. But if you're willing to take some action, and wait. I think it ties into, I've heard a million times, fake it till you make it. I think that's bullshit. I hate that phrase. I've always said take action and wait for your heart to catch up. Again, playing with that logic side, even if you don't believe that hope remains or that it applies to you, it does. Trust the facts and the truth and not your feelings. The truth is that it does in fact remain for you always and definitely. That is not dependent on progress or resolution. It's independent of any choices you've made in the past or in the future. If you can take action and wait for your heart to catch up, wait for those feelings to come. But take some actions, take some simple steps. Choose to stay, choose to reach out and wait and see if those feelings change. Give it a chance because change is guaranteed. It cannot stay the same, and that is hopeful. Remember that change is guaranteed. That it's new opportunities, new chances for things to be better. You're not powerless. You're not stuck. You have the power over your life and your choices. You can choose how you respond to this life. You're not a victim to everything. Everything is not happening *to* you. If you can change your mindset and ask yourself instead, why is it happening *for* you? These things are happening for you. There's opportunity. There are gifts in it, but to scale it back to keep it simple in the dark moments. I would just stick to the fact that hope remains. You don't have to feel it. Believe it. Even if you don't just believe it with your feet, just take action. Don't wait for the motivation or the feeling. Just choose actions one little bit by little and see what happens because I guarantee you it will change and it does get better.

CHAD: Well, I'm glad this microphone can't pick up tears because you just made me spring a leak here. But I love that. Believe it with your feet. I love what you painted there. These actions, they don't have to be grandiose, they don't have to be mountain moving actions. That action can be choosing to stay. That action can be picking up a phone and calling someone, even at three in the morning. That action can be texting our friends at Crisis Text Line. That action can be turning on your favorite song that reminds you of hope. These actions, like the circumstances, they can change. These actions, the same actions that work for you may, work a little bit differently with me, but they're worth exploring. Right. It's worth doing whatever possible to allow change to happen. And you promised us that change is guaranteed.

RENEE: And isn't it worth it to be curious about that?

CHAD: I vote yes.

RENEE: Little boy here that would definitely say so. Can you imagine? If I would have checked out his kid wouldn't be here. I couldn't fathom it. But I couldn't fathom that he would exist today. He's the most wonderful thing in the whole wide world.

CHAD: We can't wait to see him, can't wait to see you, can't wait to hang out. My hope remains that the current circumstance that we're in with stay-at-home is not permanent. Even if it lasts longer than I'd want. Renee, we're just so thankful that you would take this time to share with us. To take a stroll down memory lane and also to share a bit about your present and future. This is a super valuable moment, and I'm just so honored to be on the receiving end of it.

RENEE: Thank you, Chad. It's refreshing. It's refreshing to be able to talk to somebody other than the little guy who can say real words back to me. And to hopefully offer some something back from what I've gotten from all of this. These are crazy times, but I think if we can keep things simple and remember what's true, we can get through this and we can thrive through it, no matter how long it goes.

CHAD: Right on.

[music playing]

CHAD: We're incredibly grateful to Renee Yohe for joining us for this conversation and sharing her heart, perspectives, and wisdom. She is a true renaissance woman and since inspiring the original TWLOHA story, she has gone on to be published author, a musician, and a jewelry maker. It's been an honor to cheer for her over these past 14 years and I cannot wait for the next opportunity for our stories to collide.

So once again, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you Renee.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: We hope this episode has been a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it is okay to reach out and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website twloha.com. That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Lindsay Kolsch, with editorial support by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was 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 non-profit 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.