

Further praise for *Darkness Was My Candle*

“As a sexual abuse survivor, I long for authentic tales of the human experience to help me reassemble the pieces of my life in a way that creates meaning for it. Lora’s story, *Darkness Was My Candle*, encompasses the disturbing and haunting reality of our humanity along with astonishing moments of beauty and exquisite tenderness that buoy our capacity to heal. She illuminates a spiritual path forward beyond traditional therapy that eases my soul-shaking traumas and offers an invitation for all of us to examine one of the greatest struggles of our lives: Will we and our collective energies remain incomplete or courageously step into wholeness, for ourselves and one another?”

Sheila Bauer, M.Ed., Parent & Family Educator, Faculty with The Center for Mind-Body Medicine

“To read *Darkness Was My Candle* is to experience a deep and profound healing. Lora DeVore’s memoir has a revolutionary premise: spirituality and compassion may blossom from the basest of soils, may arise from abuse and trauma. As Lora takes us on an intimate journey from trauma to transcendence, the impact of her story has the power to evolve us. Her life experience encompasses post-traumatic stress from sexual abuse and medical torture, as well as the tortuous withdrawal from enforced medication within a psychiatric hospital. This book also explores our collective systems and their history through the personal lens of one who has endured horrendous systemic abuse – from psychiatric and medical, to military, as well as religious violation. Lora DeVore skillfully weaves together her memoir – a healing journey that embraces dreamwork, visionary experience, and a Kundalini energetic awakening. Trace the development of spiritual embodiment through the process of healing fractured and dissociated selves. This author is someone who truly embodies the soul of the world.”

Janet Elizabeth Colli, author of *The Dark Face of Heaven*

“*Darkness Was My Candle* is a must-read for anyone that is interested in transforming hardship into personal growth. The life story of Lora Devore, a gifted mind/body/spirit guide, is both heartbreaking and inspirational. The lessons learned through her suffering easily apply to all that want to add meaning and purpose to their lives.”

Joel M. Evans, M.D., Director, The Center for Functional Medicine

“Struck by Lora’s deep empathy, I once remarked to her, ‘you must have had a mother who loved you a great deal’. Little did I know that Lora had been birthed to a mother incapable of parenting but had found mothering and mentoring throughout her life in ways that reflect both grace and self-efficacy.

Lora’s story is one of almost unimaginable trauma, abiding memory, and the triumph of the human spirit. It is a true ‘hero’s journey’. Told with intelligence and with the intent to teach, it shows us how hope can be kept alive by simple acts of kindness by ordinary people, how easy it is to fail the most vulnerable young people in our midst, and how presence and compassion can change the course of a life. *Darkness Was My Candle* deserves to become a classic in the literature of trauma and healing. It should be required reading for all students and practitioners of the healing arts as well as for educators, who have more power to transform young lives than they may realize.”

Penny George, PsyD, Chair of the Board, George Family Foundation

“*Darkness Was My Candle* is a story of horror and hope, a searing indictment of individual and institutional cruelty, and a soaring celebration of our human capacity to find light in the darkest places and saving grace in small kindnesses. Lora DeVore shows us how a terribly exploited, fearfully isolated, wounded child can learn to trust her own inner wisdom and grow into a deeply compassionate woman who brings hard-won understanding and skilful healing to others. She inspires each of us to look within the darkness of our own life’s traumas for the warmth and light of transformation. Lora DeVore is a wonder, and so is *Darkness Was My Candle*.”

James S. Gordon, M.D., author of *Transforming Trauma: The Path to Hope and Healing* and founder of The Center For Mind-Body Medicine

“The integrative and multi-disciplinary approach to the inner psycho-spiritual work that Lora describes in *Darkness Was My Candle* is a blueprint for a new humanity that comes about through the pioneers on the frontiers of consciousness suffering deeply, and daring to brave new inner vistas and possibilities for the human race.

This book is a testimony to the grace, devotion, hard work and vision she has had to share her process with the rest of humanity. She describes the labor and birthing of this new Self out of the degradation and misery of suffering, in a way that inspires us all to continue to search and devote our lives to the inner path. The great turning and transition from an externally focused life, to an inner life of integration of all aspects of our being is described. It is the great turning and shift that is required of us all if the planet is to heal, and humanity is to redeem itself so that true and lasting change can happen on this planet. The failure of every system in her life is well documented, and impeccably researched. Her capacity to find a way through the horrors of the systems in place to ‘help,’ is the map we all need to aspire to.

She introduces us to a community/communion of ‘saints’ in her life, angels in situations of hell – but they could not do anything unless she had wanted to become one herself. By her account she used every scrap of care that came her way, from every walk of life, every discipline, every opportunity, to learn to relate to herself in a loving, reverential, dignified, and integrated way. And so, through this inspiring account, we are all called to the inner path as well.”

Lyndall Johnson M.A., L.P., President, Aslan Institute, Executive Director, Sacred Service at Aslan Institute

“From the first shocking pages to the last inspiring ones, Lora shares the unvarnished truth of her life that began with betrayals, first by a deeply disturbed mother, followed by a cruel and sick therapist and later by the courts and a state hospital. She shares her inner responses to all that happened and we feel her helplessness and vulnerability.

This is also a story of the longing for life that was kept alive like a sacred flame inside her that flickered, but never went out, even in the most devastating circumstances. She tells of the light that can appear for a day, or a few weeks, in the deepest darkness as she weaves into her story the synchronistic appearances of ‘human angels’ that appeared, sometimes as a neighbor, a nun and even a woman on a snowy street corner who turned out to be a famous artist.

Readers also have the benefit of a skilled writer and natural storyteller who has the perspective and insights of the wise woman who is now a skilled psychotherapist and

teacher to others. Even though every aspect of this page-turner is a true saga, it reads like the best of a fictional page-turner. She shows us how the heroine – herself – not only survives multiple terrors of darkness, but conquers them through the alchemy of spiritual and psychological transformation. This is a timely book, a cautionary tale. In this era of secrets and abuses, systemic injustices are surfacing. Through Lora's courageous testimony, she invites us to look with clear eyes and awareness at what can happen in any system, including those designed to help, if we look away, refuse to listen or require accountability.

This book belongs in the libraries and teaching labs for all people who desire to live and serve consciously. It certainly should be required reading for doctors, therapists, ministers, lawyers, judges, social workers, prison personnel, teachers and volunteers in human service. I will be proudly and gratefully recommending this book to clients, workshop attendees and friends.”

Gloria D. Karpinski, holistic counselor, spiritual director, teacher and author of *Barefoot on Holy Ground* and *Where Two Worlds Touch*

“*Darkness Was My Candle: An Odyssey of Survival and Grace* is a work of the divine which guides us through the tenacity of the human spirit to endure the unspeakable, the untenable and emerge with the light that had fallen and has now been resurrected and restored back to its original brilliance. In this expedition of the heart and spirit, Lora gives voice to the many dark hallways of the soul, the raw honesty of experiences that left her reeling from betrayal and abuse in all its unforgiving forms. We watch the metamorphosis take place that will transform her from the inside out and the powerful recognition of being ‘beloved’ when she discovers that she was never alone and her sharing that neither are we. Her journey to becoming an unwitting Sage has come full circle and as a result of this work, she has created a reverberation of hope for all those who sit in hopelessness and despair, those who have lost their voice and those who think there is no way to heal from the damage done to them over their lifetime. Those who read this work, will truly be forever changed.”

Dr. Rita Anita Linger, PhD, CPC, CMBP

“In captivating and lyrical prose, this is a story of one individual's fortitude and determination, showing the luminosity of the human spirit to survive, and ultimately to prevail. *Darkness Was My Candle: An Odyssey of Survival and Grace* depicts the challenges in the life of an unloved and profoundly abused child. It reveals how hope and healing can be ignited through the caring acts of others as we traverse the depths of life's pain and disillusionment, to discover the power of love to ignite, evolve, and transform us. Lora DeVore speaks for those with no voice and illuminates the shortcomings of some of our medical systems today. She invites us to envision a more loving way of bringing healing to the world. The time is ripe for this message. We are called to become conscious of a deeper, more awakened version of ourselves, and in an unprecedented way, express ourselves as profoundly and soulfully empowered.”

Dr. Sue Morter, author of the National Bestseller *The Energy Codes: The 7-Step System to Awaken Your Spirit, Heal Your Body and Live Your Best Life*

“This book is an exquisitely authentic account of Lora's life journey filled with powerful stories of trauma, healing, and transformation. Lora's writing mirrors her courage to not just survive, but to embody a wise, creative and empowered voice. In a humble yet captivating way, Lora models the potential that each of us carries to heal. As a fellow

trauma survivor and psychiatrist with a focus on integrative approaches to mental health, I recommend this memoir to both mental health professionals and anyone searching for hope, healing, and meaning.”

Noshene Ranjibar, M.D., Medical Director, Integrative Psychiatry Clinic, University of Arizona College of Medicine

“*Darkness Was My Candle: An Odyssey of Survival and Grace* tells the captivating story of how one woman, despite a devastating and exploitive childhood, used her tenacity and brilliance to not only survive, but to thrive. At times searing and raw, Lora DeVore’s story reveals the transformative power of others’ care and love, as well as the capacity of the human spirit to endure the unspeakable and to emerge whole. Lora calls into account the institutions that fail us and offers us a vision of a more conscious way to bring healing to the world. This is a perfect book for these challenging times, as it encourages us to move beyond old boundaries and see ourselves and all of life in a fresh, new way.”

Marci Shimoff, New York Times #1 bestselling author of *Happy for No Reason* and *Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul*

“*Darkness Was My Candle* by Lora Devore is a riveting, can’t-put-down read, sensitively detailing the author’s harrowing and dark life experiences, starting at birth and extending well into adulthood. Unlike many individuals who suffer these intolerable, shaming, and life-threatening circumstances, Lora managed, over and over, to grasp the slender lifelines offered her. She learned and searched and, eventually, turned her knowledge and understanding into a vocation of healing and helping others. From the bleak cauldron of her life emerged a magnificent therapist and healer, who shines a brilliant beacon of hope to the literally thousands of lives she lifts up. Don’t miss this rare, astounding book.”

Jan Thatcher Adams, M.D.

“If you want to explore the darkest realms of human suffering and the potential of survival of unimaginable atrocities, this breathtaking journey into the abyss of trauma is a must-read. The author takes us on an excruciating process of excavation to retrieve her wounded soul from the hell of familial, systemic, and institutional violence. Illuminated most poetically with quotes from the wisdom traditions, is a healing path through a threatening perilous world of utter darkness to love, spiritual awakening, luminosity, and transcendence. Far from narrating only her personal history of abuse and exploitation, she reveals also the shocking collective shadow in psychiatric institutions, pharmaceutical companies and the therapeutic profession. I highly recommend this memoir of a transformative individuation process of dying and becoming.”

Ursula Wirtz, Ph.D., author of *Trauma and Beyond: The Mystery of Transformation*

David
Ava, Sophia
Gabriel and Morgan
You inspire me and light up my world.
And may you discover that:

*Only full, overhead sun
diminishes your shadow.*

*But that shadow has been serving you.
What hurts you blesses you.
Darkness is your candle.
Your boundaries are your quest.*

“Wetness and Water” from Rumi: The Big Red Book by Coleman Barks.
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DARKNESS WAS MY CANDLE

AN ODYSSEY OF
SURVIVAL AND GRACE

Lora DeVore



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Lora DeVore, November 2021

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Forgetting our pivotal experiences of the numinous that mark our lives or worse, perjuring them by acting as if they make no difference, exposes us to the risk of insanity. Encounters with the Holy are like flames. They must be shared, to keep the light alive, or they will burn us up or burn us out. The spiritual life is one of increased alertness, of keen watchfulness of what goes on between this mysterious Thee and me. Sharing with the community the secret numinous experience helps us to digest whatever the experience represents, gives us the meaning of the fire that inflames life itself.

Dr. Ann Belford Ulanov, *Spirit in Jung*
Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag

Introduction

War is the father of all things

Heraclitus, On the Universe, Fragments 44

War never occurs in just one place, one life, one family. It moves through the chambers of the heart, the underground trenches of the belly, the rivers of blood. It slowly and invisibly whittles away at the immune system and memory, impacting every aspect of a society and all we hold dear. The loss of human life, the loss of the land itself, including the plants and animals that inhabit it, each of the multitude of visible and invisible wounds turns out to be catastrophic. Sexual violence, trafficking, and prostitution increase during and following war due to the breakdown of values and the long-held belief that men need to be sexually serviced during times of war. This belief goes back to the Civil War in the United States and perhaps even further back in history.

I witnessed this breakdown first-hand as I was forced to watch my mother as she worked the strip, picking up men in uniform. Night after endless night. As a child, I observed bar-room brawls, the exchange of drugs, and the lure of scantily dressed women, colored in neon lights, outside the gates of local military bases. My mother appeared to be fighting her own war, using the art of seduction as a weapon, weakening men in order to conquer them.

Those who witness and participate in death, destruction, and torture return home with hyper-aroused nervous systems set on high alert, often resulting in an increase in suicide, domestic violence, alcohol use, and drug abuse. The effects of war are then passed down to subsequent generations, as they were in my family.

There are many forms of war. We have become a society that has

embedded war thinking and trauma so deeply within our culture that we don't recognize that it impacts our daily lives. As a mental health professional, I have daily encountered the effects of violence, fear, power, greed; I witness the exploitation of individuals alone and within families, neighborhoods, institutions, and across invisible lines of color, culture, religion, gender, and socio-economic status.

Another form of war is that which traumatized individuals declare on themselves. Not only did my dysregulated nervous system war with other parts of my brain for dominance but for years this form of warfare showed up in my life as constant self-criticism. I became the enemy, throwing words of self-contempt into my already battered psyche—like hand grenades—as I repeated the hateful and shaming, degrading messages that were being hurled at me. Adding to my arsenal of poor self-esteem were the secrets, too heavy for any child to carry. Shame became debilitating, creating invisible walls of separation between me and others. Isolation followed me into young adulthood.

We have implanted war thinking and language into the systems that claim to promote healing. We declare war on cancer, drugs, immigration, poverty, obesity, mental illness, terrorism, crime, and more. We are constantly engaged in the war of words, such as in politics with winning battleground states. The language of war is exciting for many and seems to create a desire for more war. There are endless wars we don't even begin to understand.

In a shameful and dark time in US history, this country declared war on its people, by subscribing to eugenics, judging who was valuable and who was not, and seeking to eliminate the latter. The eugenics movement took root in the United States in the early 1900s. Eugenics is “the science of improving a human population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable traits.” The US eugenics movement focused on what came to be known as “degeneracy” and the continuing decline of the “human stock.” Eugenics thinking extended its reach to psychiatric care and impacted me and so many others who were made research subjects without consent on behalf of the government and pharmaceutical companies during the cold war.

Several years ago, while conducting research for my writing mentor, Deena Metzger—I was preparing for a trip I would accompany her on to conduct interviews and research for a book she was writing—I stumbled upon references to experimentation in Illinois, a place that had once held

great pain for me. It reflected a time I hadn't ever intended to revisit. Seeing the words Elgin State Hospital on a computer screen in front of me awakened unbearable memories. It was not that I had ever repressed those memories, but my life had changed so much I believed they were no longer of influence or importance. Until that moment, I was unaware that I still carried the stigma of having been committed to a state hospital. Although I had begun to write this book, this portion of my life was not anything I ever intended to write about.

Few people knew anything about that time in my life. Although I had worked through those memories, psychologically, I was not aware of these larger aspects of my own and our national history. State hospital patients throughout the United States were easily available as research subjects, routinely and strategically abused and neglected, often resulting in premature death. I had my own painful memories of abuse and being given a great number of drugs, and suffering procedures against my will. Now, I reluctantly wondered whether I had been one of those patients experimented on in the 1960s.

Since then, I've come to understand that mental patients, prisoners, institutionalized children, African-Americans, Native Americans, newborn healthy infants, our own military, and cities at large were all used as unsuspecting research subjects. In reviewing declassified records, I discovered that those who were used in this way were labeled as "less desirables." I eventually came to learn that I was one of these subjects. The influence of the eugenics movement can be seen in the history of that research and is embedded in the history of psychiatric care. Declassified documents reveal that the United States, in the guise of national security, justified conducting research without informed consent on me and thousands of others because we were seen as less important, albeit American citizens.

A legacy of fear, poverty, and war was woven into my DNA, moving through my bloodstream while still in my mother's womb. My family's history followed me with toxic tentacles of ruin and destruction for years, into every interaction with my shell-shocked uncle who brought the Second World War home with him, my ravaged mother and her subsequent life of prostitution—leaving us both extremely vulnerable. Emotionally and physically malnourished, I was an easy prey to other children's taunts, predatory individuals, and eventually corrupt practices of medical research conducted on me, just one member of many defenseless populations.

Throughout elementary school in the 1950s, I joined classmates in air-raided drills, hiding under our desks, instructed to “duck and cover” as an imaginary enemy dropped bombs. Our developing nervous systems ramped up in terror as we were schooled in hate and fear.

We cannot deny the history of our country. All of it, even the lesser-known parts, is woven into our country’s DNA and nervous system, lingering in our lakes, rivers, and streams poisoned from the toxic waste dumped by pharmaceutical companies that benefit from such research, in our dying wildlife, and in the changing weather patterns. Ongoing news tells us of continuing ethical violations by psychology, medicine, pharmaceutical companies, corporations, and politicians. Everything hidden and criminal in our common lives is rising to the surface to be looked at on the collective level and the personal.

Discovering the social, political, and historic factors that had tormented me as a child forced me to yet another review of my personal life. Just as the dark was such a revelation, so it turned out was the constant coexistence of light. The life I finally created, the life I am living, did not come out of the blue. Potential seeds of transformation were buried deep within me from birth perhaps, as visible and invisible as were the unimaginable horrors. While surviving the impossible, I also drank from the wellspring of dreams and visions, where soul survival and thriving is watered. I’ve come to understand my life as a weaving of dark and light. For years, I searched to make meaning of my life and reached out to a transcendent God. In reviewing my life, I find signs everywhere. In addition to that transcendent presence, I discovered the immanent indwelling nature of the creator within myself where deep and sustained healing could take place.

This felt sense of luminosity and transcendence has come to me intermittently since childhood. This mystery has appeared throughout my life in synchronistic events. It has shown up in unexpected ways I identify as angels wearing flesh and a human face, carrying the medicinal quality of compassion and love. By their unexpected presence, they assisted in my survival and ultimate healing.

Somehow, I was sustained always through music, beautiful churches, sacred scriptures, and poetry. The rituals and ceremonies of many religious traditions and forms of meditation and prayer have fed my soul. The natural world, in the voices of trees, animals, birds, insects, and the beauty of flowers, has been a source of inspiration and peace.

Spirit has come to me over the years, in a quiet but undeniable inner voice of guidance, and consistently in the language of dreams. Luminous Presence continues to offer moments of reflection as it moves behind all things, which it did as I was writing this book—some of these unexpected moments are found in the sections titled *The Web of Life*.

Fifty years later, with an advanced degree in clinical psychology, a long history as a successful mental health professional, recognized as a national leader in training others in the field, and a sought-after public speaker, I was compelled to return to Illinois to revisit the site of where I was once kept in inhumane, degrading, and life-threatening circumstances. In this book, I trace my life backward and forward, seeking a resolution to unanswered questions. Having experienced such horrifying and traumatic events, how did I survive? And to what purpose?

As I've written this book and revisited my history, examined archival documents, and conducted other research, I've come to understand my past as a reflection of a much larger story. History reveals what needs to be known so that we learn even from the grievous mistakes of the past, even those we don't want to acknowledge. It is my hope that as you read this book, you will learn from my story and discover insight into your own stories, and learn some lesser-known facts about our collective history. Change begins with awareness. This is not the only time that humanity has been at a crossroads. We must each ask ourselves what is ours to do during this time. This book is my offering of radical honesty as I faced my past and learned about our collective history. It is also an offering of hope and transformation.

The Smell of Suffering

Patients in the 10 psychiatric hospitals run by the State of Illinois encounter conditions so filthy, harsh, and unsafe that they sometimes lie in their own excrement, are tied down for hours at a time, or become victims of physical assault, a court-ordered study of the system has found.

Court-Ordered Study Condemns Illinois Psychiatric Hospitals,
New York Times, December 22, 1995

I hadn't slept all night and still wore the clothes I had on the day before. As the sun rose, a nurse silently walked me to the front lobby and handed me over to a man in a white coat. He checked my name off on a clipboard and ordered me to find a seat in the back of the bus. There were a few others already seated, still and somber, avoiding eye contact. The bus drove from one hospital to another in the Chicago area, picking up other patients—it was half full as we left the city. We were all subdued and appeared to range in age; I seemed to be the youngest. The only people talking were the bus driver and the two men dressed in white, sitting in the front seats. Their laughter drifted to the back of the bus and seemed so normal. But nothing was normal, or was ever likely to be again.

April had brought an early spring. The world was waking up with the green growth of grass, tulips, and birdsong. In shock and grief, my world was dying. I cried silently with longing to be outdoors, wondering if I would ever again have that freedom.

My mind filled with the memory of the courtroom the day before, and the judge's stern voice as he issued my commitment. "By the power of this court and the State of Illinois, I hereby order the patient to be committed and removed to Elgin State Hospital."

DARKNESS WAS MY CANDLE

With the loud bam of the gavel ringing in my ears, I knew my life was over. For the rest of the ride, my mind returned again and again to the judge's voice and the sound of that gavel, going round and round in concert with the gears of the bus and the heavy tires moving me closer and closer to the end of my life.



One of the old entryways to Elgin State Hospital

Hours later, we arrived at the entrance gate to Elgin State Hospital. An ancient sign on the gate read “Northern Illinois Hospital and Asylum for the Insane.” My body jerked to attention, startled, as the bus came to a grinding stop at the gate. We waited as the men in the front of the bus talked and joked with the guards who then waved us through. The bus continued its slow drive through a deceptively peaceful, winding, park-like setting of trees and spring flower beds of tiny green shoots. Standing in stark contrast, the buildings were large, gloomy structures with windows covered by wire mesh and bars.

We stopped in front of the largest building. It rose up like a nightmare—an ancient, gothic structure. The man with the clipboard called out names one by one as I stared, aghast, at the ominous, dark building. I was both relieved to be getting off the bus and filled with trepidation. Panic broke through my apathy as my body began to shake in terror.

Directed to “hurry it up and get off the bus,” I hesitated at the bottom of the stairs and was pushed from behind. I stumbled down the final step and looked around, searching for a way of escape, and took my place in the line. We slowly shuffled forward. My turn to enter the building came

The Smell of Suffering



Elgin State Hospital

far too quickly as an attendant shoved me across the threshold. I caught my elbow against something sharp hanging from the heavy, metal door; I didn't notice the long bleeding welt until much later, as I watched one woman after another pushed or dragged by the men into a large area that I later learned was women's admissions. Two male hands reached out, directing me forward. One by one, we were each checked for jewelry, money, and legal documents. Everything was confiscated.

The smells and sounds of suffering nearly brought me to my knees. I was assaulted by the sharp stench of urine, loosened bowels, and over one hundred years of accumulated filth. From somewhere in the large, dark building, I heard unintelligible moans and terrified screams, and I began to sob with wracking grief and terror. The nurse in uniform leaned toward my face and looked at me, hissing between clenched jaws: "Stop that! Stop it right now. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You wanted to be crazy, well you came to the right place. You'll be as crazy as the rest of these loonies soon and won't even know where you are."

She stared at me with disgust. "I'm in charge here and will not put up with any crap, including self-indulgent crying."

I hung my head in shame and terror.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you. Do you understand me? I'm in charge. What's your name? Legal, last name first, no nicknames here."

She checked something on her clipboard. "Set your suitcase over there with the others, then move on and get your clothes off and leave them in the pile you see. Do what you're told. Now!"