

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF HARM*

*Jennifer Thompson***

I'm Jennifer Thompson, and I often say when I present that I think, more often than not in life, that we do not choose our journeys. I believe that the journeys somehow choose us, that we are put on a path and we don't necessarily know we are going to be put on the path, and we probably don't necessarily want to be put on the path, but we're on the path. And you always stay on the path, I think, until you learn what you need to learn from your journey. And that has certainly been my experience for most of my adult life. I'll tell you a little bit about me, to put my story in maybe a deeper, more meaningful context. I was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Which is like *the* tobacco belt, right? It's the home of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. It was Winston's cigarettes and Salem cigarettes—combined, we get Winston-Salem. And so of course as a tobacco industry city, it was very, very wealthy. It's also the home of Hanes Hosiery; it's the home of Babcock Medical School. There is some very significant wealth in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. But it's also the home of some very significant poverty. As you can imagine, there were the people who made the money from tobacco and there were the people who worked the tobacco. And right down the center of Winston-Salem was a railroad, truly, and it

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** Jennifer Thompson is the Founder and President of Healing Justice, which aims to address the collateral human damage of wrongful convictions to all involved. Jennifer founded Healing Justice based on her experience with a failed criminal justice process that sent an innocent person to prison and left the true perpetrator free to commit additional crimes. Along with Ronald Cotton, who spent eleven years in prison after being wrongly convicted for Jennifer's brutal attack as a college student in 1984, Jennifer co-authored *Picking Cotton*, a *New York Times* bestseller, after DNA testing led to Ronald's exoneration and identified her attacker in 1995. Jennifer is a nationally-known advocate for criminal justice reform, focusing on the human impact of wrongful convictions, the fallibility of eyewitness testimony, the need to combat sexual violence, and the healing power of forgiveness. She currently serves on the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission.

was really one of those cities where you lived on one side of the tracks. And so, by some genetic lottery, I was born on the “right” side of the tracks.

I was born to a lovely mother and father who had four children in four years and four days. They were madly in love for fifty-three years. I had a great education and never went hungry. I always had a roof over my head, and I didn’t really question my upbringing because that was just my reality. That’s just how I grew up. For people who grow up like I did, that’s privilege. But like most people who grow up the way I grew up, you didn’t really think about any other experience; that is also privilege. I was told and stood very firmly on the foundation that people who went to prison were bad—after all, they did a bad thing and deserved to be punished. And victims who were hurt received justice. This belief was my birthright, encoded in my DNA. If you had a pair of handcuffs on, and if you had a jumpsuit on, and if you were behind the defense table, you did something—you deserve to be there. I believed in the fairness and equality of our criminal justice system. I never had to question that, even to the point where I never questioned capital punishment. I believed that if you did something terrible and you were sentenced to death, then you deserved it. And that’s the way it worked. And like most children in the United States, every day you go to school, you put your hand over your heart, you pledge allegiance to the flag, and you say, “for liberty and justice for all.” Because that was my truth, that was my reality. And I stood on that reality for my whole entire childhood.

In the summer of 1984, when I was twenty-two years old, I was going to college. Between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, like many young people, I had gone to the wrong school, chosen the wrong major, dated every single wrong guy you could ever date, and ended up kind of making some mistakes. However, by twenty-two, I felt like I had this thing figured out now. I’m in the right school, I’m dating the right guy, I’ve got the right major, and it’s going to be really easy from here. So, at twenty-two, I was going into my senior year of college; a little late, but still, I was there. I was maintaining a 4.0 GPA, and my parents were just shocked. I was making straight As, and my advisor in my department said, “Jennifer, you’re doing so well, you’ve got such great grades that you’re going to graduate summa cum laude. You’re going to graduate as the valedictorian of your class, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is going to offer you a teaching assistant position during your master’s program in

exercise physiology.” Because I was going to be a physical therapist and put broken people back together again, everything was in place for me.

I was dating a dental student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We were talking about getting married. I had two jobs. I was working really hard because I wanted to be that independent woman, and I wanted to pay my own bills. I wanted all of that. I was doing it, and I was actually really proud of myself. My family was proud of me as well.

On July 28th of the summer of 1984, it was a pretty typical day for a twenty-two-year-old. My boyfriend was in town. We’d gone out to play tennis earlier in the day. I went back to my apartment to shower. He went back to his home where he lived with his mother when he was in town because they were Greek, and the mother needed to know where he was every second of every minute of every day. Truly. And so, the plan was he would come and pick me up at my apartment. Later on, we would go have dinner, and we would end up at his friend’s house for a summer party. Pretty typical for a twenty-two-year-old.

Everything was going fine until he took me to dinner. I have a habit of eating large, *really* big quantities of food. I was one hundred and three pounds, but I could eat like a linebacker! And that was a problem. It was a problem for men who dated me because I could be an expensive date. So, my boyfriend at this time would always take me to buffets for dinner. Because for \$2.99, I could have all I wanted to eat, and he was happy, and I was happy, and that was what we did that night. We went to the China Inn Buffet. I ate large amounts of sodium-laced products. And by about 8:00 PM, I came down with a major headache. I felt really sick. I told my boyfriend, “I can’t go to this party, you’re going to have to take me home. I feel really bad.” He took me home, was polite, gave me an aspirin and some water, and my last memory that night would be him standing by my bed making sure that I was okay.

The police reports the following day would show that he left my apartment somewhere between 9:00 and 9:30 PM, but I had gone to sleep, and I didn’t hear him leave. Not only did I not hear him leave, but I also didn’t hear police sirens outside of my apartment; they were canvassing the neighborhood looking for a man who had attempted to break into my neighbor’s home around midnight. Thankfully, she was awake and was able to hear the glass breaking. She called the police, and he ran. What we know

now is that he ran straight to my apartment and broke in. And so, sometime between midnight and 3:00 AM, he was in my apartment, while I was sleeping. He would help himself to my beer in the refrigerator. He would smoke some cigarettes in my den. He would go through my wallet. He would take money. He would even take a photograph out of my photo album as a memento of who his next victim would be. And then around 3:00 AM, as I was sleeping, I would feel this very uncomfortable feeling that many women have in the middle of the night when you think you might hear something in your home. You are afraid, and terror causes to you struggle to wake up because there's part of you that thinks, "Well, if I don't wake up maybe it'll just go away. Maybe it's not really happening; maybe I'm just imagining this. So I'll just stay asleep."

Then, something brushed my left arm. As I opened my eyes and I looked to the left side of my bed, I could see the top of someone's head that had crouched beside my mattress. I could hear his feet moving across the carpet. I frantically began to search for meaning: What was happening? If any one of you have ever witnessed a car accident, you see something happening very quickly, and your brain processes this information in what I call nanoseconds; stuff is coming into your brain so fast that you're trying to make sense of it. And for me, making sense of it meant that my boyfriend had fallen asleep on the floor and that he was leaving and didn't want to wake me up. But I realized as that thought went through my mind that that was impossible because my boyfriend never spent the night with me. As I said, his mother lived about a mile and a half down the street, and when he came into town, he had to check in first. He could take me out, but then he would have to go back and stay at her house. He never spent the night with me, ever. I said, "Who is that? Who's there?" And at that moment a man very quickly jumped up on my bed, and as I screamed, he put a gloved hand across my mouth and a knife to the left side of my throat and said, "Shut up, I'm going to kill you."

Again, your mind is trying to make something logical out of something that is completely illogical. What made sense to me at that moment was, "This has got to be a joke. This has to be some guy from the University. He's going to say, 'I'm just kidding, I had to do this for a prank.'" But again, I lived three and a half miles off-campus. And I worked. And I studied. And no one knew me. I didn't go to the bars, and I didn't go to parties. Students really didn't know who I was or where I lived. Then

this had to be someone who was breaking in, and he was robbing me. “I’ve startled him. I’ll offer him everything I own: ‘Please . . . you can take my car, you can have my wallet, you can take my money, you can have my credit card. I don’t care. I won’t call the police. Please don’t hurt me. You don’t have to do this.’” He looked at me, and he said, “I don’t want your money.” And that’s when the reality hit me of what was going to happen. Every rape survivor I’ve ever talked to knows, in that moment, you know what’s going to happen.

But what you don’t know is, Will you die? Will you live to see the next day? You start thinking, How will I die? You start wondering, What will it feel like? And you wonder, Will it be quick? Will I just die fast? Will I not know I’m dying? Will it not hurt? Maybe it’ll just be over with. Or will it be slow and will it be long? Will he beat me and I die slowly? That was the question. I knew he was going to rape me, but I didn’t know if I was going to live to see the next day.

Other things go through your mind. You start thinking about your mom and dad. You start wishing you could have one more day to tell them how much you loved them. You want to call them and say thank you for everything you’ve ever done for me. I wanted to tell my boyfriend that I loved him. I wanted to see the sun come up just one more time. And those were the thoughts that I was processing as I realized what was happening to me. And then something strange took over. I remember thinking to myself, “Yes, I might die, but I’m not dying here, not on my back. You may kill me, but it’s not going to be in this bed. If there is a way to live, I will find it.” And so, I began thinking about how I was going to survive.

My sister is three years younger than me, and we went to the same college. We had taken a walk just a few days before this. Like most women, we talk about things that men don’t talk about. As we’re taking a walk, I said, “Janet, what would you do if you knew you were going to be raped?” My sister said, “I would bite him. I would punch him. I would scratch his eyes out. I would vomit on him. I would kick him. I would fight.” And I remember saying to her, “I’ve read somewhere that if you stay calm, you might live.” And that conversation came back to me at that moment. I thought to myself, “Jennifer, you’ve got to stay calm. You can’t physically fight.” I was at a terrible disadvantage: I was on my back; there was a knife to my throat; I weighed one hundred and three pounds; I was 5’1”. I could smell

alcohol coming out of his mouth. I knew that I wasn't his first victim. I knew I wasn't going to be the last victim. I knew intuitively that physically fighting was not going to save me.

But I was smart, and I knew that my mind and my ability to stay calm and pay attention to detail was good. I was a straight-A student. I knew how to memorize. So throughout the rape, I paid attention. I would look at his face in those moments that I was able to get a good look at his eyes and his nose. I remember thinking to myself, "Pay attention to details, Jennifer. See if he's got a scar; see if he's got a tattoo; see if he has a piercing. You want to look for things he can't change later. Listen to his voice; maybe he'll say something." He began to talk to me, saying, "You're from Winston-Salem, aren't you? The town where they burn witches." Getting Winston-Salem and Salem, Massachusetts, confused. He said, "You miss your boyfriend, don't you?" My brother had been backpacking through Europe and writing me postcards all summer while he was studying abroad and signing them "Love, Joe." He said, "You can't see me because you're not wearing your glasses." He had even asked me permission to keep the photograph of me.

He had been in my apartment for a long time. Everything that I could remember and recall that night meant I would live to see the next day. At one point, he tried to kiss my mouth. I turned my head to the right because I knew I was going to throw up and I didn't want to choke to death on my own vomit. But that action would actually save my life. He looked at me and said, "Relax baby, I'm not gonna hurt you." For some reason, that I believe is some ancestor out there working on my behalf, I said: "I have a phobia of knives. If you'll get off of me, if you'll walk out the front door, if you'll go down the steps and drop the knife on my car and I hear the metal and the knife hit, I'll let you come back in." Surprised, he looked at me, and he said, "Really?"

I knew the power had shifted. It wasn't a lot; it was slight, but I needed it. I promised him: "Please just get off of me." As he got off of me, I grabbed the blanket at the edge of my bed and wrapped it around my body because I knew I had to stand close to him to figure out how tall he was. The police would ask me that question. They would ask me his height. They would ask me his weight. They would ask about his clothing. He was wearing khaki fatigue-type pants that were maybe olive green, and he was wearing a navy-blue shirt that had three-quarter length sleeves with three white stripes that went across his bicep. He had on

short knit gloves that were like a child's gloves; they only came to his wrist. He had on dark slip-on shoes like canvas boat shoes that were black or navy blue in color. Everything I could remember that night was one step closer to me living to see my mom and dad. He pretended to drop the knife out of my front door, and he came back in and grabbed my arm and said, "Let's go." I wasn't going back in that room; he would have to kill me in that hallway first. "I have to use the restroom. Could I just take a moment to use the bathroom please?" He told me to hurry up, make it quick.

As I went into the bathroom, I turned the light on because I knew that they would ask me, "How much light did you have?" And as I turned the light on, he quickly told me to turn it off. I went in the bathroom, shut the door, and locked it, thinking maybe I could escape through the bathroom window. But the bathroom window was small, and there was a drop all the way down to the cellar. I would break my legs if I tried to jump. Then I remembered he had told me he had come through the back door, through my kitchen. I needed to get to the back door, maybe his way in would be my way out. I came out of the bathroom and asked, "Can I make a drink of water first?" "Yeah, make me a Seagram's, and we'll have a party," he said. I said, "Sure, okay, I'll make you a drink," as I began to walk towards the kitchen. He went over to my stereo and turned it on, looking for 98.7 KISS FM because he thought we were going to have a party. As I went past him, he had turned on the stereo, and a light had come off, illuminating his profile. Again, it was another glimpse, more information that I could remember as I walked by.

I quickly made my way to the kitchen and immediately turned the light on to give myself distance, to give myself some time. It gave me fifteen feet, maybe five seconds, but I needed it. I knew he wouldn't come in the kitchen with the light on. I began to make noise with ice hitting the metal sink, opening cabinets, and running the water. Praying, I pulled the blanket tight, opened up the door, and I took off running. It was now raining, and it was 3:30 in the morning. It was dark, and I didn't have a plan as to where to go. My first thought was I would go to 27 D next door, and my neighbor would be home. I would bang on the door, and he'd let me in. But I didn't know he was gone for the weekend. As I was banging on the door, I looked over my shoulder, and I could see him coming out the back door after me. I had made him angry, and I knew that I would probably die. I did the only thing that made sense to me, and I just took off

running through the neighborhood. I kept thinking to myself, "I've got to make it to light. I've got to find light. If I can get underneath light and he starts to kill me, maybe somebody will drive by. Maybe somebody will see it, and they'll call the police."

I saw a carport light on. So, I ran in the direction of the carport light. Once I got into the carport, I began banging on the neighbor's door. I didn't know who lived there, but I prayed that they were home. The man who lived there with his wife and children came to the back door and looked out the glass at me, and I screamed, "Please let me in, I've just been raped! Please let me in!" And he and his wife looked at me, and she said to her husband, "Oh my God. It's one of the students from the college. I see her every day on campus. You have to let her in!" I quickly fainted. They called 911. I could hear the sirens. I could see the blue lights. They had canines that tried to pick up the scent of the perpetrator, but the rain had washed it away, and he was gone.

I was quickly taken to the emergency room where I would learn what a rape kit was. My body had become the crime scene. The evidence is now on me, it's in me, and it has to be collected to be sealed in neat little bags and labeled for the police. I thought to myself, as they were plucking my hairs and swabbing my body, "I wish you could just take my skin off. You can just have my skin." Because I didn't ever want to feel my skin again, it made me sick. I was so angry, so broken. Suddenly, I began to hear a woman down the hall loudly screaming. I asked the police officer in the room with me: "The woman crying, is she okay? What happened to her?" They looked at me and told me that she had just been raped. I asked, "Was it the same man who raped me?" And they said, "Yes, it was."

He had left my apartment, and in less than a mile, he crawled through this woman's den window as she was sleeping on the couch. He bit her, and he punched her, and he slapped her, and he put a flashlight in her eyes and a pillow over her face, and he raped her. She was my mother's age. That's when I learned rapists aren't really particular about who their victims are. They simply just don't care. In under an hour, this man had destroyed two women's lives. I could look in the mirror, and I could recognize my face as Jennifer Thompson, but that girl from just an hour before was gone. She was gone. I would never ever see that girl again. I'd never see her again. I hated this man. I could have shot him between the eyes, and I would have walked away

smiling. I wouldn't have cared. I hated him. I hated what he did to me. I hated what he did to her, and I wanted him to die for it.

When the police asked me if I got a good look at him, I said, "I did. I really did. I know what he looks like. I can help you." The second victim couldn't. She had a flashlight in her face, and she had a pillow over her face. She had been beaten. She couldn't do it. I had to do this for her, for me, and for every woman who would never receive justice.

I went to the police department within two hours of my rape and began to give a description of my assailant: a young African-American male in his early twenties, pencil-thin mustache, short, close-cropped hair. I knew his height. He was 5'11", maybe 6 feet tall. I knew his weight. He was around 175, maybe 185 pounds. I knew everything about him. It was so clear. They asked if I could do a composite sketch, and I said, "Yes I can, and I want to. I want to do this." We began to use an identikit, pulling out the features of the face. You overlay them one on top of the other until you come up with something that is the perpetrator. When they looked at me and asked if this looked like the man who raped me, I said, "Yes it does. It looks just like him." It ran in the newspaper and within hours of it hitting the stand phone calls were flooding the police department. But the most important phone call came from a woman who said she had seen a man by the name of Ronald Cotton around three o'clock in the morning on July 29th standing outside of Brookwood Gardens condominium complex with a bicycle, wearing khaki fatigue pants and dark canvas slip-on boat shoes, white knit gloves on his hands, and a navy-blue shirt with white stripes on his sleeves. That was the perpetrator.

I was called to the police department three days after my assault. Detective Gauldin, who was the investigator, explained: "I'm going to show you a series of photographs. Don't feel compelled to choose anyone, the suspect may or may not be in here, but if you see him, pick up the photograph and initial the back of it." "I can do this," I thought. I know how to take a test, right? I know how to find the answer, and I found it. It was number three. I picked it up and told them, "This is the man." "Are you sure?" "Yeah, I'm sure." I initialed the back of it, and they said, "Good job. That's who we thought it had been." The relief was huge. I had gotten it right. The second victim couldn't do this. This was important. This man had to be removed off the streets of Burlington, North Carolina. He was going to strike

again. I knew that.

One week after the photographic lineup, I was called back down to the police department for a physical lineup. I had seen physical lineups on cop shows, right? You go to the room, and there's the window, the one-way mirror. They can't see you, but you can see them. You're protected because you've got that one-way mirror. But the room at the police department they used was being renovated. So I was taken to an abandoned schoolhouse, on the top floor, into a classroom. The only thing between the seven men in the lineup and me was a folding table. There was no glass; there were no mirrors; there were no curtains; there were no doors; there was nothing. It was just me and a table and seven men. I was scared, and my knees were shaking because I thought, "My God, if I get this wrong, he's walking. Now he can see me, and I'm going to die. I gotta get this right." It was number five. I wrote it on a piece of paper, I handed it to the police officer, and I said, "It's number five." They asked, "Are you sure?" I said, "I'm sure." "Good job, that's who you picked out in the photograph." And again, the relief was huge. It was overwhelming because I got it right. I was a good victim.

In January of 1985, we headed to court. *State v. Cotton*. I had prepared. I needed to prepare. I wanted to know who he was. I wanted to know who his family was, where he'd gone to school, everything about this man. Two weeks of trial, where I would listen to lie after lie from his parents and his siblings, going up to the stand saying the same damn thing over again: "Nah man, Ron was with me. We were watching television, drinking beer at the house on the couch. He was wearing khakis and a white t-shirt." One after another, like they'd been given a typed statement. They were liars. They were all liars.

For two and a half days I had to testify and describe over and over what he had done to me—in front of strangers, in front of my family. Then, the defense attorney had the audacity to second-guess me and actually look at me and say, "Well, Miss Thompson, don't you know that when you go to bed in your underwear that that lures rapists? Don't you know that? If you were afraid, why would you go to bed just wearing your underwear? Because that lures people, they can see you through the blinds. It's like you encouraged your own rape." Everything was awful and disgusting, and my character got assassinated as my family sat there watching.

Fortunately, the jury only deliberated forty-five minutes. They came back with the only conclusion, and that was that Ronald Cotton was guilty of all charges. Ronald Cotton would receive life and fifty-four years. We would go back to the district attorney's office. We would toast the criminal justice system. We would have little Dixie paper cups of champagne because the system worked for me; because I was the victim and I deserved justice. That is good, and that is fair. Then they pat you on the head, and they tell you, "Now you can put your life back together again, Jennifer. You can move on now. Move forward."

Except, I didn't have anything to move forward to. I didn't have a life. My boyfriend found that I needed a lot of support, and he just couldn't do that. And my friends? Well, they didn't call me anymore to go out because I cried a lot. My family didn't want to ask me about the rape because they didn't want to upset me. So, the only thing I knew to get through the days and the nights were copious amounts of drugs and alcohol. Because if I could just snort enough cocaine up my nose and drink enough vodka down my throat, and if I could just numb, for even just a few hours, and not feel my skin, then it was good. It was okay. I could get through the days and the nights. The problem with that, though, was that I couldn't sleep at night. Which means I couldn't get up in the mornings. My grades began to slip. I made my first *C*, and I wasn't going to graduate summa cum laude. I wasn't going to graduate valedictorian. I wasn't going to get my master's degree. I wasn't going to marry the dental student.

I tried to recover. That summer of 1985, I left North Carolina. I met another man. I fell in love. I came back to North Carolina, and I started working in a bank, only to find out in 1987 that the North Carolina appellate court decided to overturn the conviction, saying that the jury should have known there had been a second victim who could not make an identification, and if she couldn't make an identification then perhaps my memory had been wrong. Fortunately, it had been three years and the second survivor said, "I remember now, it was Ronald Cotton. I was just afraid to say that, but I know now it was him. I'm willing to stand in a courtroom, put my hand on a Bible, and swear that it was Ronald Cotton. I can never forget that face." Of course you can't.

Ronald had been in Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, and had come up with this really interesting theory that not only was he innocent of the crime, but the actual

perpetrator was a man by the name of Bobby Poole, who was sleeping in the same dorm and working in the same kitchen, twenty feet away. The guards would get Poole and Cotton confused, and so his theory was that Bobby Poole had actually committed these crimes. In 1987, during the second trial, under *voir dire*, they brought Bobby Poole into the courtroom. Bobby Poole of course denied everything and said, "Nah man, I didn't do this crime. I never said I did this crime, that ain't me." Then both of us, the two survivors, were asked if we recognized Mr. Poole, and both the second survivor and myself said, "No sir, we've never seen him before in our lives." "Do you see the man in the courtroom today that raped you?" "Yes, we do. It's Ronald Cotton." That's all they needed to know. This time, Ronald would be found guilty of two first-degree rapes and two first-degree breaking and enterings *and* two first-degree sex offenses. This time, Ronald Cotton would be sentenced to two life sentences and thirty-five years.

Again, you get tasked with trying to find those broken pieces and trying to put your life back together again. You try to move on, but you can't, you just can't. Because every time, your life gets broken, and it's shattered. And the pieces are everywhere; you can never find all the pieces. There are holes, and there are gaps; there's hemorrhaging.

I got married in 1988. I got pregnant in 1989, and in the spring of 1990, I gave birth to Morgan, Blake, and Brittany. These were my gifts from God. I deserved these babies, and they were mine. I had to move forward, right? I had babies now, and they depended on me. I had a job to do, and I loved it. I loved every minute of it. But in the spring of 1995, I received a phone call from Mike Gauldin and the D.A. of Alamance County, Rob Johnson, saying they needed to come and visit me. I said, "Sure, I'd love to visit with you and catch up."

They came to my house, and after we exchanged pleasantries they looked at me and said, "So, have you ever heard of this thing called DNA?" I said, "Well, yeah, I've heard of it. Why?" "Well, Ronald's still proclaiming that he's innocent. We know he's not. But if this post-conviction DNA thing goes through the courts, your blood sample from eleven years ago in your rape kit has disintegrated. We need a new blood sample. Now, you don't have to give it to us, but the court might order it." I said, "Look guys, I have five-year-old triplets. And I don't have time for this. So, we're going to go to my doctor right now, and I'm going to give you

a vial of blood, and you're going to do that test because we're done with this. I have five-year-old children. And that's my job now."

We went to the doctor that day, and I gave them the vial of blood. I didn't think about it. March rolled into April, April turned into May, May rolled into June, and they called me. They needed to talk again.

It was the first week of June of 1995, and standing in my kitchen, they said, "That DNA doesn't belong to Ronald Cotton. It's Bobby Poole's." The world stopped. There is no foundation. Then the earth opens, and you are swallowed into a big black hole. You suffocate, and you become paralyzed. What do I do with this? It's been eleven years, and now I don't know what to say. When is he coming out? Is he angry? Does he know where I live? Do I need to change the locks on my door? Do I need to notify everybody at the children's school? How do I do this? What do I do? Am I safe? Are my children safe? What's going to happen now?

Ronald walked out of prison on June 30, 1995. He was swarmed by cameras. He was on *Larry King Live*, he was in *People* magazine, and every time, people would say, "Have you heard from the girl? What does the girl say? Is the girl sorry?" I would hear that, and I felt awful. I was literally suffocating on guilt. But I didn't know what to do. There was no blueprint. There was no handbook or guide as to what I was supposed to do next.

So, I did what most people do, which was nothing. Until the summer of 1996 when a producer from Frontline PBS in Boston found me and told me, "I'm doing this documentary all about the fallibility of eyewitness identification. Would you tell your story? Into a camera? For everybody in the world to see?" Now, I thought, "Well that's about the stupidest thing anyone has ever asked me to do. Why in the world would I participate in something like that?" He said, "Well, Ron's going to tell his story." And I thought, "Well that stinks because if he tells his story, who is telling my story? And there is only one person who can tell my story, and that's me." "So," I said, "I'll tell my story on the condition that Ronald stays in Burlington, North Carolina, and I'm going to stay in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He's not going to see me because if he does, he's going to kill me." And they agreed.

Over the next couple of months, as they were putting

together *What Jennifer Saw*, they would come to my house and tell me, “Gosh, we were at Ron’s yesterday having lunch with him. He is the *niciest* person—gentle, sweet, kind, not-angry person.” I thought, “You’re lying, you’re all trying to lure me to my own murder! And I’m not falling for this because there’s nobody in the world that’s not angry after four thousand days in prison for something you didn’t do. I’m just not buying that.”

What Jennifer Saw aired in February of 1997. The last thing I say in the film is, “I know that Ronald’s an innocent person, but I still see his face in my nightmares.” And the last thing Ronald says in the film is, “I know Jennifer’s sorry, but I need to hear that from her.” That was the catalyst for me; that’s when I knew what I had to do next. So, in a small church about a mile and a half away from where I had been raped thirteen years ago, I sat in a pastor’s study waiting for this man. In walked this ginormous 6’4” man, and I could not get out of my chair. I started to sob, and I said, “Ronald, if I spent every minute of every hour of every day for the rest of my life telling you I’m sorry for what happened, could you ever forgive me?” Ronald took my hands and started to cry. He said, “Jennifer, I’m not angry at you. I’m not mad at you. I forgave you years ago. The reality is, we were both hurt by a criminal justice system failure, and we were both hurt by Bobby Poole.”

It was from that place that Ronald and I began to recover. Together, we began to heal from this common place of harm. We both knew that the system had failed us. We both knew the system had failed our families, and we both knew the system had failed the community. Because in the months that Bobby Poole was left to be free, he committed twenty-four other violent crimes, six of which were first-degree rapes—one in which he raped a woman and months later came back and raped her again.

What we learned from that experience is that when the system gets it wrong, we must talk about this from a larger context. We must talk about all the people that get harmed in the wake of a criminal justice system failure. Ronald and I became best friends. He is literally one of my “loves.” He danced with me at my wedding. Our song is “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers. We’re both grandparents; our children know each other. We co-authored the book *Picking Cotton* together, which was a wonderful experience. And from there, I’ve been doing my work. I’ve been doing this work for twenty years, telling the story of concentric circles of harm. If we’re going to talk about wrongful

convictions, we also have to be talking about wrongful liberty. And in those two, there are a lot of people who get hurt. Jurors get hurt. Crime survivors get hurt. Innocent people get hurt. Our families are hurt. The community gets hurt. District attorneys get hurt. Police officers get hurt. Public defenders get hurt. Judges get hurt. Everybody gets hurt. Everybody is failed—everybody except the perpetrator, who lives to be free.

Since that time, I've launched Healing Justice. It's a national nonprofit, the only one of its kind in the country that seeks to address the total harm after exonerations have played out. We work with crime survivors and their families, and exonerees and their families. How do we restore people? How do we rebuild people? How do we use restorative justice principles in the wake of these train wrecks and heal from the harm that this system created? That's what I do. It has been a long journey. I often think to myself, "Not sure I'd do it again." But I'm not sure! It has taken a big toll on my life. It has taken a toll on me physically. It has taken a toll on me emotionally and spiritually, because what I have learned, and it has been the hardest thing for me, is that we are a culture of blame. We need to blame somebody. And in these wrongful convictions, almost always, the crime survivors get blamed for the wrongful conviction. I'm trying to change that narrative. It is not okay to blame the survivors and victims from these cases. We must realize that if we're going to assign blame, we have to assign it directly at the feet of the perpetrator who created the harm.