

Foreword by  
**David Trotter**

AN  
**UNCONVENTIONAL**



Where Messes and Magic Collide

**STACEY ROBBINS**

author of *You're Not Crazy and You're Not Alone*

AN  
UNCONVENTIONAL  
**LIFE**

Where Messes and Magic Collide

By Stacey Robbins

## Also by STACEY ROBBINS

You're Not Crazy and You're Not Alone: Losing the Victim, Finding Your Sense of Humor, and Learning to Love Yourself through Hashimoto's  
Bloom Beautiful (book and iPhone app)

And coming January 2018

God Loves Me, I Think: Stories from Hell, Heaven, and the Other Side of Texas

## An Unconventional Life: Where Messes and Magic Collide

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Disclaimer: This book is intended to be an inspiring companion to your inner healing journey, offering encouragement and empowerment to the reader. This book is not intended as a substitute for psychological treatment or the medical advice of physicians and other health professionals. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

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There are people who come into your world and turn it upside down and inside out. They call you on your sh\*t and kiss your boo-boos, until you feel so distracted by the love that the pain starts to go away.

Those people are my three amazing guys -- and this book is dedicated to you:

**Rock, Caleb, and Seth**

*Thank you for healing my soul in places I didn't even know I needed it  
And thank you for bringing that healing to the world.*

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# Gratitudes

There are the usual cast of suspects of amazing friends who love me through life:

Ken and Lynette Tamplin, David Trotter, Angela Ippolito, Dave Cottam, Mary Alvarado, Laurie and Ralph Umbriaco, August and Hal Brice, Irene and Kent Dunlap, Beth and Michael Prizer, Tracy Panzarella, Susannah Parrish, Carissa Boles, Silvana Balsimelli, Nigel Skeet, Lance and Lyndia Leonard, and Linda Masterson.

A girl would be absolutely giddy to have just one of you in her midst. To have all of you makes me feel exactly what I am: Tremendously rich in friendship and love. Thank you!

I'm grateful for the amazing support of the *Girlfriends Guide to Hashimoto's* team who cheered me on and those who stepped in to read and edit: Lindsey Donhauser, Karen Giacalone, and Courtney Meehan -- as well as my virtual support team of Anne-Maree Moore, and Jessi and Stephen Bass who help bring what I do, to life.

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Irene Dunlap, good Lord, woman, we've done a LOT of life together the last 20 years! Thank you for bringing all that *Chicken Soup* experience and your big heart and belief to the editing process. You rock!

Josh Reeves for being the unicorn of playful, honest, authentic spirituality. It's nice to know that people like you are in the world. How honored am I to call you a new and treasured friend.

*And saving the best for last...*

I'm especially grateful for this man who has not only endured, but savored my particular brand of crazy for nearly 30 years: Rock, thank you for loving me inside and out, through emotional, financial, and physical "thick and thin," -- through bitchy and kind, through book-writing and not book-writing (which is pretty much the same as bitchy and kind). I love you, sweetheart. Thanks for riding the Not-Boring Rollercoaster by my side.

Please make sure your seatbelt is fastened and that the handle bars are securely in place -- we have many more rides to go.

And our two brave children: Caleb and Seth -- you chose an Unconventional Mom and Dad and signed up for living an Unconventional Life -- probably because you are Unconventional Souls. Thank you for being adventurous, in the just right kind of ways that allow us to do off-the-beaten track kind of living. And thank you for being settled and stable enough, internally, to know where your True North is, no matter where we are and what we do. I learn from you constantly and I'm eternally grateful to be your mom and for you to be my sons and my teachers. I love you both, "forever and heaven."

## Foreword

I don't remember meeting Stacey Robbins...*ever*.

There *was* that time in 2008 when my family and I were walking up to a fall festival at a church as Stacey and her family were pulling away. She stopped the car and warmly greeted my wife as if they knew each other. It turns out that Stacey had been cheering us on from a distance as we were recovering from a major marital tailspin.

And, then...*poof!*  
She was in my life.

That's how she works. You don't remember *when* she comes into your life, but you just know that your life is different because of her presence.

*Bump into her at the farmer's market?*

There she is with a radiant smile - welcoming all who come along her path.

*Struggling with a health condition?*

Her research is extensive, and she generously shares with those in need.

*Trying to make a relationship work?*

Her insight and fresh perspective allow hearts to reconnect.

*Wrestling with meaning, spirituality, or faith?*

Her journey is an open book, and her wisdom flows from a source called Love.

*Dreaming about exploring the world with your family?*

Her ability to dream adventures into fruition has propelled her family around the globe.

What does all this add up to?

**Stacey lives an unconventional life that inspires people to dream what's possible - rather than settle for what's probable.**

As I've wrestled with my faith, my marriage, and the direction of my work as a filmmaker, she always asks, "What's possible?"

Yes, we know what's probable. The status quo, the norm, and whatever our culture is willing to accept.

BUT...what is possible? *"If you could dream about your health or relationship or finances or spirituality, what would you long to experience?"* She has asked me some variation of this question with both her words and her life.

Stacey doesn't settle for what's probable. Instead, she challenges me (and you) to open our minds and hearts to options we might not otherwise consider. It's not an in-your-face kind of challenge. She's more like a 'loving tour guide for the soul' who shows up just when you need her and hands out compasses and binoculars and water and organic snacks. She seems to have run out of one-way maps years ago, but she *is* more than willing to share her wisdom about the paths she has travelled and the paths she has learned about from others.

It's up to you what you do with the wisdom.

She doesn't get all judgy about what path you take.

(Case in point. While we talk on the phone, she's usually munching on gluten-free, wheat-free, taste-free chips while rubbing an ancient health potion all over herself right before starting yoga. Meanwhile,

I'm microwaving a leftover burrito covered in cheese as I gulp down a Diet Dr. Pepper.)

She genuinely believes we all find different paths toward health, wholeness, and fulfillment - in our own timing. Her focus is on Love, and that's how she makes me feel...*loved*.

In our friendship (and through this book), she creates space for me to know that I am loved just the way I am. I'm not loved *if* I say or do the right thing. I'm loved right now in the midst of me trying to love my wife, invest in my kids, live out my own dreams, and eat that yummy carb-loaded burrito.

In our friendship (and in this book), she is incredibly generous with her knowledge, wisdom, and heart. If she knows something, she'll share it without expectation that I'll implement it in my life. If she has experienced something, she'll offer it as one perspective on life. And, if she senses something below the surface, she's willing to ask the tough questions and create moments of vulnerability if I'm open to it.

She will do the same for you thing through the stories and insights in this book. The words are personal – from Stacey to you. If it were possible, she would share each of these stories with you face to face – heart to heart. That's the type of person she is. So...please know...this book is a gift of stories and insights from the heart of Stacey Robbins – filled with love as she asks you the question, "What's possible in your life?"

**David Trotter**  
Filmmaker

## INTRODUCTION: A Magical, Healing Adventure

So, what do you do when...

Your 12 year-old pulls himself out of school in the middle of the year because of a bullying issue...

Your husband comes home and announces his division is sold and that everyone's job (including his) is ending...

Your 10 year-old gets his foot stuck under a kid during a soccer game and your little athlete who loves to run, jump, and play ends up in a wheelchair for 2 ½ months...

Your landlord comes to tell you that he's raising the rent by 30% now that the construction is done on his place...

And the business launch you all were planning on, to replenish the bank account and carry you through for a while, ends up a bust and clearing out what's left of your resources?

You do what any other red-blooded, perimenopausal, on-the-verge-of-a-nervous-breakdown woman in her late 40's would do...

*You go to Italy.*

---

Okay, it wasn't quite that smooth a transition.

First, I was pissed. I mean really, really, uber-gooper, dropped the f-bomb (like, a lot) while doing Italian Therapy (a.k.a "cleaning

baseboards” like, a lot) to get my “Holy crap, what is going on with my life???” frustrations out,

*Pissed.*

Like, a lot.

(I know. I already said that.)

It was intense and I was having a middle-age meltdown when, honestly...I just got tired of it. I don't do anger well -- I'm just not super comfortable with that emotion. And so, because it takes a lot of energy to be that mad at this thing called “Life”, I decided to take a different tack...

I laid in my bed, stared at the ceiling (where I'm pretty sure God lives) and I asked one question, in three parts:

*What would I do if time, money, and opportunity were no object?*

I'd close my eyes, take a deep breath, and then, I'd just start to dream. In the space of “Nothing is wrong and anything is possible” -- this is what I came up with...

I want to get rid of a lot of stuff -- sell it, give it away, throw it out -- and then, I want to pack up what's left, put it in storage and put my kids in the car for an epic road trip.

I want to do a book tour, connecting with my readers, who have become friends on social media, from all around the country. I just want to spend time with them -- doing workshops and coaching sessions and have a real “together” time.

Then, I want to buy one-way tickets to Europe and take off -- just go and explore -- especially Italy -- and console myself with gelato, music, and art and some more gelato.

I want us all to heal from the pain we've gone through and I want us

to feel connected to our souls, our purpose, and each other again. We will do all this and more -- and we'll call it our “Magical, Healing Adventure.”

*That was my dream.*

---

I guess that's what I've done a lot in life: Taken a super weird, mundane, painful, or unexpected circumstance and either dug out the treasure or turned it into magic, and healing, and an adventure.

Whether it was turning off almost all of the breakers in our house.

Taking the TV out of our home 20 years ago.

Or

Traveling across the country or across “The Pond.”

*We have lived a very Unconventional Life.*

Taking chances that the average bear wouldn't take for some very good, sound, and sane reasons.

*But we did it anyway.*

I remember the wonderful Jewish philosopher, Edwin Friedman, who said that our brain can only imagine so far -- at some point we need to get up and risk adventure.

To hop on the plane -- or jump out of it --

To skinny dip in the pond,

To put all your money on “21 black”

To love again after we have been hurt.

“Risking adventure” has taken on various forms in our lives.

You should know right now: it never goes as planned.

Like Italy: no one told me that gelato and wine would become the drugs of choice when I was going through our family identity crisis. And that, no matter how lost I felt on the streets in Florence, it would be nothing compared to my deep wish for a roadmap to help my youngest son find his way back to his soul.

But like no one could ever prepare you for the challenges, no one could ever prepare you for the unexpected gifts that come from getting lost and ending up where you never really knew you needed to be, in order to find yourself again.

These pages are filled with 21 chapters (because it’s my favorite number), filled with vignettes of where messes and magic collide. Where the divine spark happens in the middle of the madness and instead of jumping off the ledge you’re standing on, you find yourself awake to your inspiration and intuition again --

And able to fly.

There are some things you should know before you read on.

These are in no particular time or location sequence (except for a couple where it made the most sense) so, if in one chapter my children are teenagers in California and the next chapter they are toddlers in New York, just reset yourself into the new time and locale. I purposely left their ages in the text so that you could understand why I was exhausted, hiding under the covers, or drinking copious amounts of Sauvignon Blanc.

Most of these adventures were done with no savings in the bank, no promise of a certain income, and both of us driving cars that averaged 18 years-old. There is no silver spoon or massive amount of money required to dream. My method was: Dream first and dream

strong, commit yourself to your vision and (eventually) everything you need will appear. Usually in some mind-boggling, miraculous way that becomes your oxygen. Breathing in miracles with a mindset that says “anything is possible” will become your new atmosphere.

There are several spiritual and religious beliefs and vernacular in some of the chapters. Personally, my spiritual journey has been some of the biggest grist for my mill and trust me, I have wanted to hide the off-putting, pain-in-the-ass, judgmental parts that I have gone through so that I could just seem as enlightened and awake as I am now (cough, cough).

But instead of hiding it or shading it in a way that makes it all sound the same, I’ve decided to let the colors be as bold or dark, or neutral as they were for that time because the process matters. I’ve gone from Catholicism to Born-Again-Christianity, down the roads of Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Gnosticism, Humanism, and Veganism (made you look) to where I landed today at my current beliefs:

God is Love and so are we, and I eat bacon.

I call God many names: Love, Spirit, The Divine, and “Words with No Voice” (because I mostly hear words with no voice as a part of my spiritual communication). I also call God “He” for the sake of ease and flow in the sentences -- if I start writing He/She/It every time I want to mention the Divine, at some point you will grow weary and it will run together and sound like “He Shit” in your head and that’s not really the vibe I was going for.

And, by the way: I swear. Not a lot, but enough to either make you feel a little more understood or a little uncomfortable. Either way, don’t miss the stories. They’re worth their weight in gold.

I love the people in these vignettes. They are all real but, in some cases, their names aren’t. That was to protect the innocent: namely, me.

The ones whose names and lives matter the most are my husband, Rock, and our two sons, Caleb and Seth - whom I affectionately refer to as “Thing 1” and “Thing 2” (we didn’t call them that until after they saw Dr. Seuss and loved it.) They are my biggest teachers and the reason for me writing these stories out in full: because I wanted them to have records of the life that they’ve lived, the lessons we’ve learned, and the lineage of the miracles they are part of -- and I wanted you to meet these two hilarious sages who have taught me so much more than I could have imagined when I was walking into Costco and buying diapers...*again*.

Enjoy the journey and the imperfections -- my hope is that the heart and spirit will grab you in a way that reminds you of the greatness that is alive in you and in life -- that you can find treasures in unexpected places, and that your power is alive and well to be the Alchemist: to take whatever isn’t as you wish it were, and turn it into gold.

I’m so glad we get to share these pages together.

Welcome to my Unconventional Life.

It wouldn’t be the same without you.

- Stacey Robbins

Seal Beach, CA June 2017

# 1

## Tales from an MRI Tube

Dizzy, when you’re 40, isn’t as much fun as it sounds.

No one really knew why I was getting this stumbling, drunk-feeling brain that wasn’t really spinning but mostly just lost in space. My face would turn the color of school glue and my eyes would shimmy back and forth. The doctors told me the official word for the eye-thing was “nystagmus.”

The kids were young and I was scared.

After trips to the ER, the doctors, and a scillion different expensive tests to rule out the easier things, my doctor looked at me and said, “It’s time for an MRI. We need to rule out some other possibilities...”

I knew the “possibilities” she was talking about and it made me lose my breath.

Rock’s job was new and he felt he couldn’t leave for a few hours to take me to the test. Part of me understood and part of me hated him. I kissed my boys good-bye that morning, feeling alone inside myself and wondering which version of mommy they were going to see when I came home: The relieved mommy, the waiting-for-news mommy, or the mommy who just had a faithquake -- whose life would never be the same.

I don’t know how I drove myself, between what was going on in my brain and the turmoil in my head, but I did.

Halfway there, I pulled over on the side of the 73 Toll Road to take a pause. I got out of the car and leaned my hands onto my

knees -- closed my eyes and breathed in. When I opened them, I was struck by the rolling green hills in a new way. January was always full of vibrant color in Southern California after our winter rains had started. I sent up a prayer for some strength and it was at that moment that my friend, Brad, called. He was one of the publishers I was working with on a possible new venture and he just happened to reach out at the perfect moment to talk me through the rest of my drive. I was so grateful for the timing.

Brad and I hung up just as I was about to walk in the door to my appointment. I smiled weakly as I handed my paperwork to the woman at the front desk who smiled warmly at me.

I'm sure it wasn't the first time that someone had looked to her seeking comfort in exchange for paperwork.

A girl who was at least a decade younger than me, with a natural, blonde ponytail came out in scrubs and holding a chart, "Mrs. Robbins?" I nodded, "My name is Sarah and I'll be doing your MRI today."

At the risk of being the oddest duck she'd ever met, I followed her to the changing area and started in with my questions: "Hi, Sarah. Can you do me a big favor when I go into the room with the MRI?"

She turned and smiled and nodded in a "Go ahead and tell me, but I can't promise you anything" kind of way.

"Well, could you walk me in backwards with my eyes closed?"

I know it sounds crazy but I had read that it's best to not see how big the machine is and how small the tube is, when you're dealing with claustrophobia -- which I was -- on top of the dizziness.

She thought for a second and said, "I'm not sure I can do that, Mrs. Robbins. I think you have to walk in with your eyes open for liability purposes." I sighed, trying to think of something...

"Well, what would you do if I were blind?" (My husband would be giving himself brain damage from rolling his eyes if he were here, listening to me ask these questions.)

Sarah paused again, "Well, we'd have to roll you in a wheelchair."

I considered that for a second, "Okay then, Can you roll me into the room backwards?"

She stared at me to see if I was joking.

I wasn't.

"Ummm... well, no, Mrs. Robbins. But I can roll you in forward -- and you can close your eyes."

Rocky would have had to turn away and bite his tongue at this point of my ridiculousness.

I didn't even get to ask her my other questions like, "What happens if there's an earthquake while I'm in the middle of the test?" and "Have you ever had a power outage while someone's in the tube?" and my favorite one that I don't dare to ask but really, really want to, "Has the machine ever collapsed on someone while they're inside?"

*It's probably better he didn't come...*

I didn't need someone else witnessing my default behavior in life, "If it's scary, close your eyes and pretend it's not there."

And all my scrillions of examples:

*I'm sure if you don't open that piece of scary IRS tax mail on the counter, it will just go away.*

*I'm sure if you avoid your blood test, your health will improve.*

*I'm sure if you don't look at the scale after the three-week cheese and chocolate-palooza, you won't have gained weight.*

Yeah, only one problem: Life doesn't actually work that way. Even when you want to convince yourself it could.

Sarah got the wheelchair and rolled me in (with my eyes closed, thank you very much) and helped me get situated on the table. She asked me all the identifying questions to make sure I was who I said I was, which kind of makes me laugh. Is there really someone who would actually WANT to pretend to be me right now? Is there really someone out there who gets such a thrill from removing all of their metal items so that they could spend what feels like a lifetime, in a small, hollow, metal tube that I didn't even want to see -- let alone be in?

Movies have stunt doubles. I'd actually welcome an MRI double -- but I'm pretty sure there's not a category for that in the yellow pages.

Sarah laid me down on the metal conveyor belt that would eventually slide me inside the chamber -- but first, had to put my head into a device that's sort of an umpire's mask meets Hannibal Lecter meets batting cage -- kind of apparatus.

My claustrophobia was escalating and I wasn't even in the tube yet.

"I don't think I can do this, Sarah." I said feeling short of breath.

She patted my arm, "You can do this Mrs. Robbins."

I had a feeling this wasn't going to be the last time we had that little exchange.

But she didn't understand:

I was dizzy.

And scared.

I had kids and I wanted to dance with them at their weddings. I had a husband I wanted to bitch at for not coming with me today, and then, make up and share a bottle of red wine together, tonight... and then, hopefully, at some point, in Italy.

It all felt so strange and impersonal...

"Please, Sarah, call me, 'Stacey'"

She smiled, "Okay, Stacey."

I took a deep breath and started meditating:

*I breathe in holy peace, I breathe out fear.*

I closed my eyes as Sarah gave me the instructions:

"Now, Mrs. Robbins, I mean, *Stacey*... we're doing two MRI's today -- one of your brain and one of your neck."

*I breathe in holy peace, I breathe out fear.*

"So, it's kind of an extra long test today. The first portion will take about an hour and then, we'll roll you out, inject you with the contrast dye and the last part will be 45 minutes."

*I breathe in, Holy shit - I breathe out there is no freakin' way...*

I felt myself starting to hyperventilate.

My meditation practice definitely needed some more work.

---

"Get me out of here, Sarah!" I desperately called out toward the speaker above my face, after the first test started. Yeah. My relatively new meditation practice wasn't cutting it.

I swear to Hermes: The MRI machine was filled with jackhammers instead of magnets because that's what it sounded like. A ton of jackhammers, banging straight into my head.