Shipwrecked in L.A.: Finding Meaning and Purpose When Your Dreams Crash

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Abstract
Most young adults encounter at least one "shipwreck" during their twenties. Everything you think you know about yourself, your life, your future, and even your faith suddenly breaks apart. You’re left scrambling to construct a lifeboat that will take you back to the shore.

Christin Taylor knew how her life was going to turn out. She was going to be a missionary to the Hollywood film industry. But just eight weeks after moving to L.A., her hopes and dreams were shattered. The next four years found Christin circling around, into, and back out of the film industry, until she finally found her way home.

As Christin shares a compelling story about her life and work in Burbank, Hollywood, and Beverly Hills, she interacts with the best research on young-adult formation and development, guiding young adults through this tumultuous time as they try to pick up the pieces and find hope for the future. [From the Publisher]

Keywords
nonfiction, identity, success, young adult, Los Angeles

Disciplines
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Comments
This is the prologue of Professor Christin Taylor’s book Shipwrecked in L.A.
Shipwrecked in L.A.

finding hope and purpose when your dreams crash

CHRISTIN N. TAYLOR
Lindy’s hands are elegant. With long fingers that curve gently at the tips, they are the hands of an artist, finely trained to bring beauty into the world.

During the three years I lived with Lindy during college, I watched her disappear into the art building each night, handing over countless hours to canvas and dreams. As I walked through the gallery at Lindy’s senior show, I was breathless, astounded again by the work of this woman I had come to know like a sister over the course of our college years. Somehow, seeing her paintings was like seeing her in a new way. Her works of art were full of light, fluidity, and movement. The lines defied crisp clean edges and erupted into a chaotic symphony like a field of wildflowers.

Lindy graduated college with a degree in illustration with dreams to be a wife, mother, and missionary. She wanted to get married, have children, and work with children in Third-World countries by bringing beauty into their worlds through her art. Though she wasn’t sure how it would all come together, she had hope and trust that she would find her way into a career and life that united all her dreams, talents, and loves.

“Emerging adulthood” is the name Dr. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett has given these bumpy, shifting, optimistic years. He characterizes it as “the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the
self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, and the age of possibilities." Emerging adulthood occurs between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, the age and phase Lindy and I were in when we left college.

Lindy graduated with a degree and a sense of possibilities. But with no direct route into the mission field, she went back to her home state, Colorado. Lindy and our other roommate, Abby, found an apartment in the basement of a young family’s home in Colorado Springs. A curly haired redhead full of life, Abby had studied the endlessly practical subject of social work, and immediately found a job in her field at an agency working with troubled teenage boys. Lindy, still waiting for that overseas opportunity to use her degree in art, took jobs washing gas station windows and working as a temp at what she described as a “dingy pipe-laying company, full of crusty men.” She stayed at those jobs for ten months before landing a much better prospect—answering phones at a well-known Christian organization.

Shortly after starting her new job, Lindy’s life took another promising turn—she began dating Casey. Casey had a lot of things going for him from the start. First, he had gone to school with us, so we all knew and liked him. Second, he too had been an art major, so Lindy and Casey had been casual friends during college. Third, Casey and his family were well-respected at our university and known to be genuine and kind. There was so much going for this guy, and all of us who lived with Lindy during college watched their budding relationship with anticipation.

The only thing not going for Casey was that he lived in Indiana, hundreds of miles and a fistful of states away from Lindy. But not to worry. Casey proposed to Lindy and, in a heroic display
of his commitment to their relationship, uprooted his life in Indiana and moved to Colorado Springs to be with her. It seemed to all of us watching that the first part of Lindy’s dream to be a wife and mother was starting to come true.

But things frayed rather quickly. Within a matter of months, the engagement crumbled, Casey went back to his family, and Lindy was left reeling. Later she told me that she was actually relieved when the relationship ended. So much of her relationship with Casey had been hasty and miscalculated. These realizations hit both of them as they drew closer to their wedding date.

But the real devastation came in the aftermath of the breakup. What Lindy had initially dreamed for her life and future had slipped out of her reach: dreams of being a mother and wife. Lindy felt disillusioned and confused. Above all, she struggled with the guilt that somehow she had disobeyed God, that perhaps she had seized control of her life and treasured her ideas for her life instead of waiting on God’s plan and timing.

Sharon Daloz Parks offers a term describing this moment of struggle and confusion in the lives of many young adults: shipwreck. Shipwreck is the metaphorical coming apart, the crash that rips through the very fabric of our identities. Everything we have thought about ourselves, our lives, our futures, even our faith, suddenly comes apart beneath us, and we are left scrambling, trying to put together any type of lifeboat to make it to shore. These shipwreck experiences can be large or small, and we can hit more than one shipwreck during college and beyond.

Parks lists several ways one’s sense of identity can be upended during his or her twenties: “The loss of a relationship, violence to one’s property, collapse of a career venture, physical illness or
injury, defeat of a cause, a fateful choice that irrevocably reorders one’s life, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate.” In other words, shipwreck can come about due to major life traumas or can be triggered by something seemingly inconsequential.

If you’re reading this book as a young adult or the parent of a young adult, you probably know what I’m talking about. Even if you haven’t hit your shipwreck yet, you’ve seen your friends hit theirs, and perhaps you’re filled with anxiety, waiting and wondering what will wreck your boat.

I started writing this book with nothing more than a story. My first seven years out of college had been so full of twists and turns, joys and sorrows, and defeats and victories that I had to share my story. But even as I started this book, I wondered, “Who on earth cares? What is my story in a sea of stories?” And then I discovered a whole community of researchers and scholars who put words and names to what I had experienced after college. Shipwreck. Emerging adulthood.

There’s power in a name. I began to realize that my story was not just my own, but everyone’s story. Once I learned the vocabulary, I could look at each of my friends and say, “This was her shipwreck. This was his shipwreck. This was their shipwreck.” But this academic conversation, along with its vocabulary, hasn’t quite hit the mainstream . . . yet. These scholars, researchers, professors, and authors are describing what twentysomethings are going through, but the young adults who are experiencing it don’t have a clue.

For the last four years, both my husband and I have been involved in higher education, I as a professor and he as a student
development professional. We live on a college campus, and I have had countless conversations with students and graduates about the strange new landscape of adulthood looming before them. It feels like uncharted territory. These young adults don’t have the words to name and describe their experiences.

That’s why I’m writing this book. That’s why I’ve compiled this research, brought it together, and lined my story with it. Because though my own dreams and goals may be different than yours, though my story took its own unique twists and turns, it’s your story too. Read on and see yourself, your brother, your sister, your son or daughter, and your boyfriend or girlfriend. I wanted to be a missionary to Hollywood. You may want to be a molecular engineer or a stay-at-home mom. In some way, Lindy’s story is my story and mine is hers. And we have to share our stories. We have to know that what we’re experiencing is real for everyone and not unique to our own lives.

This past fall, I had the privilege of being a bridesmaid in Lindy’s wedding. Five years after she and Casey broke up, Lindy met and married Nathan, a modest, thoughtful banker with an easy smile. On one of the afternoons leading up to the wedding, I asked Lindy what she considered to have been her shipwreck during the past ten years since college.

She looked at me quietly, thought for a bit, and said, “My breakup with Casey.” I nodded, remembering the darkness that heartbreak sent her into. “I collapsed,” she said. “I think I really wondered at that point what had become of my life. What was I doing with myself?”

Shortly after the breakup, Lindy left her job to spend a year in Cambodia, working with girls rescued from the sex-trafficking
trade. She created art with the girls. She helped them paint a mural on one of the walls of the safe house where they stayed. She also wrote and illustrated an allegory for the girls to help them process their experiences. Cambodia was a culmination of all Lindy wanted and still wants to do: using her art to help children create, express, and heal.

At the wedding, the pastor said during his speech, “Lindy, we have seen you bring beauty wherever you go. You brought beauty into the lives of those girls in Cambodia, and you bring beauty into the lives of everyone you meet.” I still cry over this statement, even a month after hearing it, because I can attest to its truth. This beautiful woman, who has known heartbreak in more ways than what I’ve described here, has come out of her shipwreck with beauty.

In the end, the hope that Lindy left college with did not fail her. Nor did my hope fail me. This book is the story of the crashes and crinkles that lead to the fulfillment of that hope. After all, we could not have gotten to the hope and beauty without the shipwreck.