



Episode 31: Beautiful Detours

This is the *Become an Unstoppable Woman* podcast with Lindsay Preston Episode 31, Beautiful Detours.

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Welcome to the *Become an Unstoppable Woman* podcast, the show for goal-getting, fear-facing women for kicking ass by creating change. I'm your host, Lindsay Preston. I'm a wife, mom of two, and a multi-certified life coach to women all over the world. I've lived through enough in life to know that easier doesn't always equate to better. We can't fear the fire, we must learn to become it. On this show, I'll teach you how to do just that. Join me as I challenge you to become even more of the strong, resilient, and powerful woman you were meant to be. Let's do this.

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Hi there, Miss unstoppable. Welcome to a very special episode of the show. Today, I'm talking about beautiful detours with the incredible Amy Oestreicher and she is going to be sharing her beautiful detour. This story will blow your mind. What she has been through, oh my gosh. I can't even tell you, it's just so much. She is going to talk about how she has gone from gutless, literally, to grateful in her life and all the things she's been through and what she used to get her through all of these hardships. Goodness, it is just so inspiring to listen to her story.

I brought her on specifically for a couple of reasons. First off, for you to just hear her story and for you to understand that you can overcome so many things in your life and you can always find gratitude, even in really, really hard things. Two, for you to feel grateful for some of the things in your life that you may not even realize some people don't have. Two, Amy has a really interesting perspective on creativity and how she uses that for her healing that I think can be really beneficial for a lot of you out there. Finally, I brought her on because Amy didn't quite wake up to some of her hardships directly.

She had to listen to certain messages that were coming her way in order for her to really wake up and realize, "Oh my goodness, this was not normal. This was traumatic and I needed to heal from it." I think a lot of times, we view trauma as these huge, big things



that have happened to us or other people and it doesn't have to be. It can be little things or anytime you felt unsafe.

So many of us are just walking around numbing the pain and Amy's body would not allow her to do that. Many times she was just guided toward things that she didn't know why she was guided that way, but it was her body's way of saying, "I need you to listen to me because this has happened to you, even though you may not realize it." Just a very, very powerful story.

A little bit of background on Amy is that she's an Audie award-nominated playwright, performer and multidisciplinary creator. She's a singer, a visual artist. She dedicates her work to celebrating untold stories and the details in life that can spark connection and transform communities. Amy overcame a lot of trauma in her life. Now, she has become a sought after PTSD specialist, life coach, author, writer for the Huffington Post. She's an international keynote speaker, she's an RAINN representative. She's given three TEDx talks about trauma and creativity. She's been on NBC's *Today* and many, many outlets in the news. She has recently written a book called *My Beautiful Detour: An Unthinkable Journey from Gutless to Grateful*. We'll talk about the book a couple of times in this interview and I really, really hope that if you resonate with her story and you want more, that you will buy her book and support this incredible woman.

I won't talk anymore because her story is amazing and I don't want to put it off anymore. Here is my incredible, incredible interview with Amy. Amy, thank you so much for joining me and all the listeners out there for the Become An Unstoppable Woman podcast. I mentioned in the intro that you, to me define what an unstoppable woman is to a whole new level. I'm thrilled to have you on today to share your story. I thought we would start with your story in high school. Who was Amy approaching the graduation years of high school? What was she like and what was she looking forward to?

Amy: Well, I was really driven as a teen. Musical theater was my world and I was so determined to pursue that through college and beyond. I always remember thinking, "Wow, I'm so lucky that I'm really confident in knowing exactly what I wanted to do." I was your typical type A teenager, applying to 17 colleges and really having a set plan in my head and loving it. That was really my life as I thought it would go until I had a voice teacher who really took me under his wing and really I felt, was giving me a path forward further in theater. Then, studying for two years with him.

After two years, I was sexually abused and this lasted for a period of months, almost a year. This really knocked me out of the water. I didn't even know those things could



happen. I was very naive as a high schooler. I just froze. I became very numb and couldn't even recognize that that was what was happening to me. This was in my senior year of high school just when I thought my life was just going forward from here. That really just put me in a static place where I didn't even recognize myself and what was happening to me. I suddenly felt stuck in place.

Then months later, I could finally figure out what was going on. In April of my senior year, I finally told my mother what had been going on just when I was realizing it. It was overwhelming for her and for me and we were going to heal. We were going to find a way forward and out of this. Then two weeks later, I just had a very bad stomachache that wasn't going away. My father ended up rushing me to the emergency room because the pain was just getting worse and worse. It turned out to be a blood clot that was sitting on the mesenteric artery.

For someone that really never had any health problems her entire life, I was being taken to the emergency room and apparently when surgeons cut into me, there was so much internal pressure building up inside my abdomen that my stomach literally exploded and I'd gotten sepsis. I was in a coma for months. This was the April of my senior year. I woke up from a coma months later, really having no idea of what had just happened. I woke up and have pretty foggy memories of coming in and out, but then eventually I remember the surgeon finally telling me what was going on.

That now I had no stomach anymore and I couldn't eat or drink and doctors didn't know when or if that would ever happen again. I was 18. Hearing this for the first time and thinking, "Well, I thought I was going to the University of Michigan to study musical theater."

It turned out to be a very alternate route than I had anticipated. When I woke up, there was not even a roadmap for me or even a prediction of the next step. It was just a lot of day-to-day, and just grappling with what is this new world I'm in? It really felt like I was waking up in the twilight zone.

Lindsay: So much there, Amy. I've heard many interviews of you now as I was prepping for this interview. When you talked about the abuse, and you said you were a naive high school girl. I think so many of us can relate to that because if I were in those shoes, I would feel the same way of like, "Okay, I know there's something wrong here, but I don't really know what this is." You had said in those moments, you would just go out of body, right?



Amy: Right.

Lindsay: It wasn't until later that you saw a book on a shelf and thought-- What was it, a trauma book? What book was it?

Amy: Right. It was a book, *The Courage to Heal*. You have to understand too, that this was not just me being sexually abused by someone that just attacked me on the street. This was someone who I'd really developed a mentorship with, and he had actually asked to be my godfather, and now was close with my family, and I was going every week for voice lessons. When he started sexually abusing me, I learned what PTSD was many, many years later, but I disassociated.

I just imagined myself as a dot on the ceiling. Once I realized what PTSD was, I realized, "Oh, that's why." I knew I had a body, but I felt myself like a dot somewhere and I just felt very numb. As a kid, I always really felt my heart. I knew what I was feeling and that's why I loved acting. How I discovered that book was, I was in Barnes & Nobles and I had just gotten used to pacing around in circles, just to block out any kind of feeling. I didn't know why I was so into that mechanical movement, but I realized it was a way to just not think and not feel.

I happened to see this bright yellow book in Barnes & Noble. I guess in my gut, I must've known I needed some kind of healing or something, because I kept pacing around the healing and spirituality section. I looked at the heal book and it said the *courage to heal* and that was the name of the book, which is actually a very known book for survivors of assault.

I took the book out of the shelf and it said, "For survivors of sexual abuse." That was the first time I'd ever really seen those words in writing as a book that I was even considering. I laughed and freaked out and put it back. It was as if I was picking up a book by accident that said like, "For heroin addicts," or something. I was like, "What? That's not me," and so I just put it back.

I ended up going back for it, so something must've rang out, curiosity that, "Okay, this sexual abuse thing, maybe I need to look at this more." I happened to open the page of symptoms and it was right there, that I feel numb, I feel out of body, I don't trust myself anymore. It was like I was staring at exactly what I had been sensing was wrong with me. I was like, "Oh, my God. That's me."



That's really when it sank in that, "Oh, crap." Like, "this has happened to me." It's so interesting that being so out of body, in denial really, I couldn't put two and two together until I saw it in words in front of me.

Lindsay: Yes, I think so many people out there can relate to that, even if it's not sexual abuse. I know for me, I was always drawn to things like toxic parents, or things of that sort. I was like, "Why am I'm drawn to those things." My dad was like, "Your childhood wasn't quite normal, Lindsay. Some of those would be considered abuse." I was like, "Oh, my gosh." I see that with my clients, that they're just drawn to something and they don't know why, because we're just so used to numbing that out, and thinking, "Let's avoid that. We have out of body experiences."

I just love that about your story, that you were drawn to that and you took that. Now, I do want to fast forward to the stomach. You're waking up from that coma and you're realizing, "Oh, my gosh. I've been in a coma and I'm not going to the University of Michigan." It sounds like you were still fighting for your life then, Amy? Is that what I understand?

Amy: Oh, yes. When I was in a coma, I always think of that was the easy part for me. My family who stayed with me, had a difficult part with the surgeon saying, first, I wouldn't make it through the night. Then, it was minute to minute. Then, there was a chance when they had to take some of my vocal chords, I might never be able to talk again. Then, I'd never be able to walk again.

When I was waking up, it was getting to that point, I might never be able to walk again, I might never be able to eat again. Being on bed rest, I didn't know what it was like getting up for the first time. I couldn't even stand because in my head, I was just in dance class. I felt like a teenager who was suddenly grounded. I was angry. I felt like these surgeons were putting me in this prison and I didn't understand why can't I eat, why can't I just--

I couldn't see why I couldn't leave the ICU. I'm like, "I just want to go outside for a walk." That's when they send the psychiatrist in and everyone thinks you're crazy, but for me, I didn't understand why I couldn't just go right to college, when everyone around me was like, "We are still trying to make sure that you're medically stable." I wasn't medically stable because when my stomach burst, all these toxic fluids really threatened to go into all of my other organs and so things were still leaking and opening.

Doctors really couldn't let me leave the ICU floor until they had found a way to get me off tubes, and wires and stuff, to get all the leaking to stop. That's why even a sip of water would kill me, because the water would have no place to go. I had nothing in-- My torso



area was just an empty abdominal cavity. It was a very dangerous way to live and then when I was discharged from the hospital, I was so excited.

We all have that in our head that, "Oh, when I do this, I'll be happy. When I get a job, I'll be happy." For me it was like, "Everything will be normal when I'm out of the hospital." I'll just be back to normal, but that was actually harder because in the hospital, you're kind of in a protected nest so it's okay to feel weak or sick. You're not around as much food, so you can deal with that.

At home, I realized I didn't really have a role and more than that, everything around me was lethal. I was right by a kitchen sink where I couldn't have a sip of water. I was in a house with a kitchen. That was the really difficult part where my mom was always so afraid that I would forget and eat a pretzel or something, but no, I didn't forget. I was just tortured by it through every step.

The worst part is, it's easier when you're like, "Okay, they say I have go a few weeks, or a few months." There was just this wide expanse of, "You can't eat. Just keep checking in with us and we'll just make sure you're still stable and maybe one day we'll start putting a plan together to see if it's possible." I'd really come home to this life of, "All of my friends are in college, I'm just learning to walk again. I don't know what I'm doing and I'm starving."

I can't eat and I don't know whether it's stupid to hope for this, or just to pretend it will never happen again. Thankfully theater, which has always been my first love, theater really saved me as soon as I got out of the hospital because I happened to see that there were auditions for a local musical of *Oliver!* This is when I'd just gotten out of the ICU, I was still shaking. I could hardly walk, but somehow I convinced my parents to let me audition.

I ended up getting the lead role. As crazy as that sounds, doing-- It was Nancy and Oliver, even though I couldn't eat or drink and I was dying while the cast was having water breaks, being in that group setting of a supportive community, because that's what theater is and having a role and feeling I was good at something besides being a patient, that really saved me.

I really credit that for getting me through the first few months, transitioning at home. Because by the time I performed on opening night, I felt like I had made something for myself and I could get through just a few more months, without thinking of the ultimate, like, "When is this over?" That's how I really did. All those years I couldn't eat or drink, just a day at a time, or is it a month at a time?



Lindsay: I can only imagine that feeling, Amy, of, "What do I do now? What do I hope for?" Yet you knew in your heart of hearts, "This is where I need to go," and that was theater. What happened next? Tell us, because I know eventually you were able to start to drink and eat. Take us to that point.

Amy: Right. Well, doing *Oliver!* got me through the first few months. Then by the end of that, the surgeons actually found a way where they couldn't divert enough fluid out of my neck. It was a very weird operation where they diverted half my oesophagus, so now I had this bag on my neck so I could finally drink. I actually didn't absorb anything, it just came right out the bag. It wasn't anything nutritional, but I could actually keep fluids as long as they came out of this bag. Considering I'd gone this whole time without having anything, I was thrilled.

They told me to start with two ounces of water a day. I did that for a while and then I started to experiment a little and slowly increased it. Then like a year later, somehow I figured out a way to have milkshakes and strange soups and all that stuff like that as long as it could come out the bag and it didn't kill me. That's really gotten me through another two years. Then as I was being shopped around to surgeons to see who could figure out a plan to get me to eat, because at that point it wasn't that, we have to wait until it's safe enough to eat, we really had to find a surgeon who could think of a way to do this.

Nothing like this had ever happened before in terms of a stomach exploding. Really my dad is putting calls to surgeons all over the country to see if anyone had an idea. That's what took all those years afterwards. We finally found a surgeon at Yale who proposed a two-part reconstructive surgery. The first part was 19 hours. That didn't exactly go as planned, but to get through all that time until then, I knew I was getting hungry and hungrier by the day. I was starting to feel really good and healthy and strong, and I was doing karate, I was weight lifting, I was tap dancing.

The worst part was feeling great, but knowing that you could never really be independent at this point, because I was still on intravenous IVs. I couldn't eat, I had a breakdown every time I saw someone eating lunch. I wanted to be in the world so bad, but it's very hard when you couldn't have food, food is such a social part of life. I actually ended up starting a chocolate business purely, by accident, but I realized I loved playing with food when I couldn't eat. Somehow that turned into me melting chocolate and painting with it and creating cookies and peanut butter cups.

I made a thing of that. Every day I needed to do that for myself for an hour. I ended up shipping out my chocolate to states all over the country. That got me through. Again, I



think of it as another creative way that I could be with whatever feelings were torturing me and make something creative out of it. Creativity, in all its various forms is really what saved me throughout. That was the creativity that got me through until that reconstructive surgery. That surgery worked for a very short time where I could eat maybe for a week and then my wound exploded and I was air dashed back to Yale medical hospital.

This was really, I felt like I'd hit rock bottom because you climb and climb to the top and you think you're finally there. Then you have this thing taken away from you that you worked all these years to get back and suddenly you're back in that place. It was really hard to just not want to lose hope all together. This was really the creativity that really saved me from a really terrible place. I discovered visual arts and how I still paint to this day and I would have never painted had I not picked up a paintbrush in Yale that my mom had just brought to the hospital because I was so angry.

I just didn't want to do anything. I remember picking up that paintbrush out of total desperation because I was just so aggravated and frustrated and just putting every feeling of anger and fear and uncertainty I had into that paintbrush, when I really just wanted to punch a wall. I ended up painting that's now on the cover of my book, which is *Singing Tree* and what I love about that now is today it just feels like this very happy dancing tree, but it was creative at a time of so much aggravation and worry. It really showed me that, wow, when I put whatever I'm feeling into this canvas and get it out through there, whatever circumstances in my life, somehow it's transformed by the time I paint.

I still pick that with me each day. Not just with art, but with any kind of creativity. That's really how it saved me. Whatever we're feeling, it really does not serve us well to repress or ignore what we're feeling, but if we can be in it and really soak in it and even create with it, we can move it around and our circumstances may not change right this second, but we somehow feel like we're beyond this new massive feeling that we're in.

Lindsay: Yes. That's so true. I just love your story, Amy. Oh my God. I have no words. It's just beautiful, the way that you naturally leaned into the pain to create. So many other people could give up, so many other people would want to just completely numb out. You just kept going and you kept listening and kept following that. What was your drive to do that, to keep trying and keep on?

Amy: It's interesting. I feel I get that a lot. Why didn't it faze me that giving up wasn't an option. I'm thinking maybe it was my life before that I always felt connected to the world, I always had a love for life and I just didn't think of it as an option. Even though the worst of it waking up, I always thought to myself, "Okay, this is what it is and this is where I am, but



I don't really have an alternative." I think it's also because I've always been very productive and I loved doing things. I was never the person that wanted to just hide in bed and cry and watch movies. I would have a pity party for a second, and then I would get really frustrated that, 'Okay, this isn't very fun."

I would think like, "Okay, how can I get myself out of this?" I remember my mom when we tried to have a game night when I couldn't eat or drink. I just got so frustrated because I was so excited, but then everyone wanted food and I was starving. I went upstairs and I just cried my eyes out and just felt terrible. Then my mom was like, "It's going to be 10 minutes unless you're going to get sick of this," and then she was right, I had something else to do. I think I've always known that life is here and life is fleeting and we have it. We can really complain about a lot of circumstances but either way, whatever we have is going to pass us by.

If we have this life now, why don't we make something of it, whatever it is because who are we to say, what is the life we should be having? Make something of it. I think I've always had that mindset growing up and maybe it helps that I always loved being creative as a kid because I've had that skill of, "Okay, things are good, let me create an alternative," but that's why in the work I do now, I try to show people that, "Listen, you don't have to be an artist to be creative. Creativity is the best mindset that you're ever going to have because it's the way it is, take whatever you've got and figure out a way to see it differently. I think that's really, what's been my superpower.

Lindsay: Sure. Well, what year was it that you had those elective surgeries, Amy?

Amy: Everything is going well. I eventually made a one-woman musical about my life because I had conquered and persevered through everything and I called it *Gutless & Grateful* in 2012. By this point, I've already been eating for years. I was feeling good and strong and I'd just performed a one-woman musical in New York about my story. A week after that happened to be an election day, November 2012, I got my first elective surgery and this was my 27th surgery. The reason why it was elective is because I was all healed, but I still had an ostomy bag and I had a tiny fistula. A fistula is an opening from a surgery that happened that shouldn't be there. I could live a functional life with it, but I was singing and dancing in a red dress, feeling great and I'm like, "What if I found a surgeon that medically can really reverse those things, why not?"

I had my family behind me and a lot of people saying, if I don't get this surgery, I'm going to spend the rest of my life wondering, what if I had gotten it? I think I went from that. Sometimes I'm better off just wondering what it would have been like if you didn't get it



because that surgery really turned into a total disaster. It was three surgeries in eight days. Since 2012, it's really not been good medically. Now I only absorb 20% of what I eat. The surgery caused more holes in whatever intestine I had and we're still trying to find answers for it. That part really hasn't been fun.

If I could call it anything like I want a redo, I probably would have not gotten that surgery. Again, I had food and drink taken away from me for many more months. Three things happened because of that. One is, I rewrote my musical and performed it a year later and realized through that that wow, there are so many mental health themes and sexual assault themes. I ended up taking the show to colleges and conferences as a mental health and PTSD program. The biggest discovery was, I realized that even though I'm 25, I decided college was too late, then I realized, I'm still bigger than my medical circumstances and so I reapplied to college.

I started at Hampshire college, which really changed my life in so many different ways. I graduated when I was 30, I'm actually starting grad school. I started this year and I also ended up starting online dating and got divorced, but it was the first time after all of this that I learned how to use something else besides surviving and accomplishing. I learned how to relax, I learned how to be a person and just have fun. I don't think if that extra surgery had happened to me, that I would've been really forced to evaluate where I was going. I'm not saying you need to disaster to really decide to get a wake-up call, but it didn't go how I planned and I wanted to use something with it. That led me to where I am now.

Lindsay: Tell me where you are now, Amy?

Amy: Where I am now. Well, two years, my first surgery, unrelated to anything gastrointestinal, I was run over by a car in-- [crosstalk]

Lindsay: Oh my God.

Amy: I don't know if I included that, because that happened right after my book was done, but it ran over both my legs and I was in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber for four months. A funny thing about that is, the nurses were like, I was on a walker for a really long time. They were even going to have to amputate my leg before this hyperbaric oxygen chamber and a nurse said to me, "Wow, you're taking this so well," but for me, I'm like, "This is one of the first surgery I've had when there were actually very clear steps of what you do with the broken leg, how you heal it, and how you recover."



That was so new to me because I'm so used to every surgery I've had being like, "Okay, go to this surgeon, maybe he'll come up with something and this guy will come up with an idea," but no, there are set guidelines for how broken legs heal. I realized that when you break something, it eventually builds back stronger. I realized that's been the metaphor for my whole life. Breaking things, if you do the work can build yourself back up and keep your eyes open, it can make you stronger." I've done a lot since then. I published my memoir. I've still been touring *Gutless & grateful*, but I've actually taken my original songs, over 200 pieces of my artwork and I created a new multimedia one-woman musical called *Passageways*, which really combines everything, which I just premiered.

As you can tell by all this, creativity has really been my guiding force. Over the past few years, I've given three Ted Talks on various ways of how creativity can help transform trauma or what is it you're going through. My first Ted Talk, which I know you saw was all about finding the flower on your detour. That really spoke to a lot of people. I wanted to use that detour idea because I frankly was tired of people coming to me and saying, "Oh my God I haven't been through anything like you've been through, but I still been through like a little of something." There's no comparing in terms of what happened to me is worse or you had it easier when we all have something unexpected in our lives.

I say that not to minimize what we all go through, but swapping horror stories and comparing doesn't really help anyone because I realized firsthand, I finally started to heal when I could find commonalities with other people. You can't really find many other people whose stomach exploded, but you can find other people that have gone through a breakup or have moved to another place and been forced to start life over or had a different job or had just anything surprise them. When I just started categorizing all this as a detour, then all of us just became detourists and we could all help each other just by sharing our stories.

I started Love My Detour movement, which turned into, first, it was the hashtag #lovemydetour, but then that turned into workshops and more folks and we began a program and I have more plans for that. Really, it was just a way to bring everyone together because I think it's great that we're talking about mental health a lot more. It's not so great when we let certain labels define us, because I feel like some of those things can separate us more than draw us together. I feel like I've dealt with every mental health and physical health thing in the book. I didn't really know what category I belonged in, but really making this a universal thing I think, is a way to create empathy and understanding.



Lindsay: You've written a book you've mentioned, which I have been reading and it's so good called *My Beautiful Detour* and you mentioned many other things you're working on Amy, but tell us where we can find you and reach out.

Amy: Yes. Well, I just published my book over this summer and I'm so excited because it's my full story. It also has extras for my family, when they were in ICU with me and they're whole thoughts. You can find the book, which is *My Beautiful Detour: An Unthinkable Journey from Gutless to Grateful*. You can find it on my website, on Amazon, at any major retailer, you can even order it in your library. I'm also doing, speaking on that and I'm still touring my one-woman musical. I'm booking myself anywhere so I really can come to people who have just sent me a note and just interested in learning more.

I also started doing Zoom book discussions or book clubs where I come right into your living room, but that's really the best place you can find me by sending me a note about my book or I'm on Facebook, I'm on Twitter, Instagram, but pretty well responsive on Facebook and my website. I'm sure you'll give the link, but it's A-M-Y-O-E-S.com

Lindsay: Yes, I'm on it now. A-M-Y-O-E-S .com is where you can find Amy. Amy, I have to know, how are you feeling today in your recent life?

Amy: I've been feeling good. I left this out, but last week I started a new job. I am the official behavioral and mental health coordinator for 14 regions in Connecticut for young adults and teens. I'm feeling like I've shared my story, and now it's great to use the skills I learned to survive my own story, and now really pay it forward, and to help people that are in the position I was in in high school. That feels really good. I think I'm in the stage of my life where I've felt the positive effects of hearing my story and now I really want to help other people. Physically, medically, I'm feeling good. I can eat or drink, but I still have aftermaths on that 27th surgery that I'm still trying to figure out, so I'm still shopping myself around to surgeons all over the country. I learned too long ago that if I wait for everything to be my version of normal, 40 years will pass and I'll still be wondering what happened. Those are the circumstances, but who doesn't have circumstances? Onward we go.

Lindsay: Oh my gosh, Amy, there's so many amazing nuggets in this interview. Thank you for taking the time to share your story with us. I know you share your story often, and it's a beautiful one, so thank you for coming on the show today. I appreciate you.



Amy: Thank you. I really appreciate it, and I'm glad you're doing a podcast on resilience. I think it's a skill that we all need to just at least be exposed to and learn more about. Even me, I still have a lot to learn, so thank you.

[music]

Hey there, Miss Unstoppable. Thanks so much for tuning into this episode. If you enjoyed it, share it with a friend. Send them a picture of this episode via text, via email, share it on social media, I'm sure they would be so appreciative to know these strategies and tips on how to accomplish your dreams. If you are ready to guarantee you're going to accomplish your goals and dreams, then it's time to start coaching with me.

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