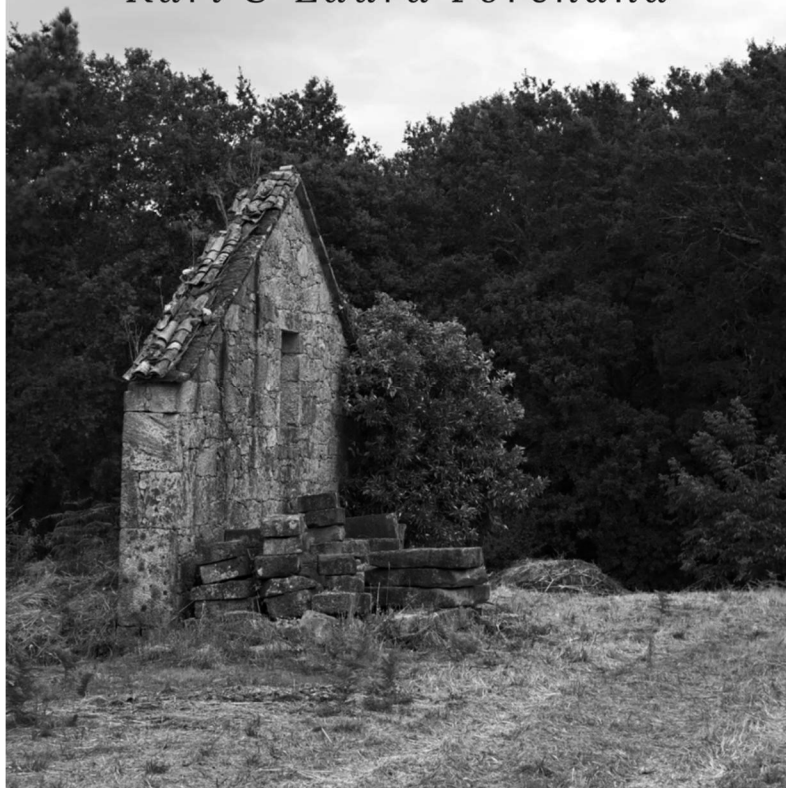


Evolving from
Welcome to
**RELIGIOUS
TRAUMA**

Karl & Laura Forehand



All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

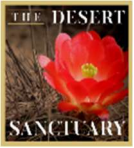
Permission for wider usage of this material can be obtained through Karl Forehand at karl4hand@gmail.com

Copyright © 2024 by Karl and Laura Forehand

First Edition

Cover design and layout by Karl Forehand (thedesertsanctuary.org)
Desert Sanctuary logo by Rafael Polendo (Polendo.net)

ISBN _____



Published by:
The Desert Sanctuary
Rock Port, MO
www.thedesertsanctuary.org

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. It's Going to be Okay	3
2. The Four Existential Concerns	13
3. Listening	23
4. A Plan for Us.....	25
5. Being and Becoming	31
6. Going Inside & Trusting Myself	49
7. Darkness and Shadow	63
8. Thriving Outside	75
9. Parenting	87
10. Somatic Therapies	103
Afterword	113
Resources	115

Introduction

Hello! We are Karl and Laura Forehand!

For the last 8-10 years, we have found our way outside organized religion. We were in ministry for about 20 years, serving upstart and struggling churches and helping them get on their feet. When we realized our beliefs were evolving, we stepped down from our Evangelical church assignment and started on an adventure.

At first, we tried to harbor at a “better” church, but after a couple of years, we realized something else—our trauma!

Because organized religion was triggering to us, we couldn't heal effectively without taking a break from it all and pursuing truth, healing, and authenticity.

Here we are about five years after leaving organized religion with the good news that we are getting better! We have experienced effective healing, and we have been able to establish and explore what it means to be where we are (presence) and who we are (authenticity). We have listened to over 300 stories from experts and survivors of religious abuse.

Who is this book for? It is for all of you who stepped out on your own journey and realized there is some work involved and there isn't much of a well-worn path. Sometimes people want to argue theology instead of appropriating mind/body healing, which is simple, but not easy.

As we have continued to record our journey into this uncharted territory, certain things have become distilled and more straightforward than before. This book attempts to present this information in a readable, understandable format.

So, whether you are a broken-hearted ex-pastor who feels some guilt and shame about the past or a single mother who lost relationships and support when you shared your changing beliefs, this book can be a roadmap to addressing the trauma

Karl and Laura Forehand

you carry in your body. Whether you consider yourself an atheist, agnostic, struggling Christian, or a spiritual nomad, you are all welcome to explore here and find your own way.

You don't need to organize anything, start something new, or contribute any money. Just sit back and consider the information we have gathered to make your journey more compelling. It won't give you an iron-clad manifesto or creed to follow, but it may save you some time as your path reveals itself to you.

Before we start, please accept the challenge of trusting yourself more, even if it's only a little initially. Your developing intuition is as essential as trusted guides that will be there when you need them.

Be where you are, be who you are, and be at peace,

Karl and Laura Forehand 2024

1. It's Going to be Okay

So, here we are, out in the Desert!

That's what we call it when people start asking questions, challenging their long-held beliefs, and evaluating the worldview they inherited. We call it *The Desert* because that's what it feels like. It can be lonely and discouraging, reclaiming your autonomy, healing from past hurts, and permitting yourself to play the game you want to play the way you think you should.

Your experience may involve:

- Rediscovering your intuition
- Clarifying your purpose
- Healing your past trauma
- Examining your current beliefs
- Exploring other beliefs and worldviews
- Rediscovering your authentic self
- Establishing new relationships with power structures
- Advocating for the marginalized
- Finding your agency

We can't tell you exactly what to do. No super drug or magic prayer will make all your dreams come true. Anything worth doing takes determination, imagination, and persistence (otherwise known as work).

Even though we can't give you a formula, we have been interviewing people since we got here and recording our thoughts about what we learned along the way. It's not a prescription for success—It is a transcript and description of our journey and the road before you. It is not a well-worn path because every journey is different. It is, as they say, the road less traveled.

We acknowledge and understand that you now have many feelings. Because of your inherited beliefs, you may be experiencing fear, anger, anxiety, sadness, or various combinations of feelings besides happiness, which religion prescribes.

Your emotions are valid! Not only are they legitimate, but they are necessary, and they will help you get better and process your grief and pain that you only now realize you have. As you hear people's stories around the campfires of the desert, you will find language for your journey, and eventually, you will tell your own story.

The one thing we hope you understand: **It's Okay!**

You are just now reconvening with your emotions and your intuition. For me, that felt like a toddler learning to walk. Remember, you are just getting started, and you will get better. You will find new friends and trusted guides when you need them. But you will also learn the beauty and perfectness of solitude. You will become comfortable with uncertainty,

mystery, and nuance and be okay. Your journey will be yours; you will play the game you want to play and find peace!

You are not alone.

Feeling alone when you step outside your established patterns is perfectly normal. Religions like Christianity design themselves to make you feel safe because they require that you think, act, and respond together as one. Churches calm our immediate anxiety, but they will not help us answer life's more significant questions, which are systematically ignored.

There are thousands, if not millions, of us in the desert. Our commonality is that we are all on a journey of discovery. We won't be chanting a creed or reciting the same prayer. Still, we will acknowledge and encourage each other to stay on the journey instead of establishing a venue and defending what we already know.

When we are ready to tell our stories to others, we will hear whispers of affirmation. It is not necessary for all of us to agree, but it will be helpful when people hear our stories, affirm our suffering, share their stories, and make space for us. Then, we will be able to experience what is necessary and helpful.

You may have moved out of the group but are not alone. From this point forward, you will find what you need when you need it. Let me be the first to tell you, "I know what that is like. I hear what you are saying. I felt that way too. I hear you. You are not alone."

You will soon realize that being a part of the larger group brings temporary relief and bypasses our real issues. In the desert, you won't need multitudes of lemmings who speak, act, and believe the same. You will find a few authentic relationships that are perfect for you when you need them.

The things they warned you about.

If you are in the desert, you are probably unraveling the fear-based beliefs you were indoctrinated with. Most of the fear-based assumptions of organized religion, like eternal conscious torment (hell), were developed over time and scaled up to scare people into joining the movement. Jesus' reference was to Gehenna, which was a garbage dump that was continually burning. People like Dante Alighieri influenced Current views of hell more than anything else.

But my denomination also warned me of other dangers if I stepped outside its groupthink. They told me of slippery slopes that I would slide down and of spiritual forces that would attack me—almost like a virus. All I can say now, after almost eight years, is that it is not true!

I also know of very few that return because of these things. We will have to face our personal darkness, but it's not like in the movies or the imaginative sermons. In many cases, our "demons" were created by high-control families and religions. We will have to be with and make space for the wounded parts of us, but we don't need a sword or armor—it's not that kind of battle!

Facing Our Fears and Addressing Trauma

As we continue on the journey of discovery, we discover many beautiful things that we never knew existed. Just as we crest the first vista and find new adventures, when we venture into the next valley of authenticity, we will discover things we previously did not understand.

A trauma-informed therapist can be helpful at this time. We also need people to make space for us and hear our stories. We have to be present with the parts of us that are wounded and are trying to heal. Our trauma is stored in our body, and it takes body awareness in time to help those parts of us reintegrate and move forward.

Later in the book, we get way more specific about this point. Most of these thoughts are extracted from our previous book, [*Leaning Forward*](#). Please don't ignore this necessary work. To heal it, we have to feel it, and there are no shortcuts or magic solutions.

Don't Start Something New

The battle cry and ongoing mantra of my previous denomination was to always start *something new*. As churches crumbled and ministers escaped from ministry, they continually formed new churches and organizations that would hopefully solve the problem. Over time, we found that this was a very temporary solution. It never addressed the root causes of its dysfunction.

I see people making the same kinds of mistakes in the desert. I made some of those mistakes, too. Before I had a chance to heal or deeply examine myself, I began seeking out ways to form a group or find a church experience where I could help revitalize the old systems.

Especially when white males almost immediately form groups out here in the desert, without healing or deeply examining themselves, they replicate their DNA from the previous life and cause some of the same problems as before. Before we start a new group and settle on new belief systems, we need to heal what was wounded and discover who we are. Then, we will know what we should do or if we even need to do anything.

We can't afford to fall into the same trap as before. If we criticize our previous group and bypass all our feelings and woundedness, then we're just wasting time creating the same problems we escaped from.

Consider the fact that if you were in ministry before, there is a high chance that you are somewhat of a *narcissist*. You may not have intended to be that or ever saw yourself as that, but there is a high probability that you have those tendencies. Consider that the worst thing for a narcissist to do is to be on stage. It only fosters bad decisions and often harms the most vulnerable who listen to you.

Consider different options, like starting a podcast to listen to people's stories. Spend some time encouraging others, elevating marginalized voices, or advocating for them.

It might also be helpful to reject the possibility of making a living at this. Very few do, and the ones that do are pretty territorial. It's a journey of discovery, and you may need to find other ways to finance it and keep the lights on. If it helps you to write, then keep a blog or at least a journal. But the only people who make money writing are the ones who already have a following.

Don't sell your soul again to be popular. It's not what you or anyone else really needs.

Bypassing

Early on in my journey, I read two books by Robert Augustus Masters: [*Bringing Your Shadow Out of the Dark*](#) and [*Spiritual Bypassing*](#).

According to Masters, "Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual beliefs to avoid dealing with painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs. It is so pervasive that it goes largely unnoticed."

This idea was transformational to me. When I read the book, it opened my eyes to how I had covered up my need for healing with platitudes, religious ceremonies, and the group thinking and creeds of my denomination. When I learned to stop bypassing my emotions and feelings, I found myself reading the second book and finding a way to heal my inner child and become more whole.

In [*Bringing Your Shadow out of the Dark*](#), Masters explains, "Our shadow is our internal storehouse for the parts of us that

we've disowned or rejected or are otherwise keeping in the dark." When I read this book, I was in a Hermitage in Kansas, having a dark night of the soul. The principles from this book, which I attempt to distill later in this manuscript, helped me emerge from this situation and better understand how I could heal myself by being with those wounded parts and acknowledging what I felt.

As always, I suggest enlisting trauma-informed counselors and spiritual directors who understand trauma and who are trusted guides for us as we develop our intuition. But we also have to realize the trauma is stored in our bodies, and by becoming body aware and paying attention, we can do some of the hard work ourselves.

Is it worth it?

I haven't interviewed everybody in the desert, but we have listened to over 300 stories on our podcast. We have many good friends out here in the desert, and I've watched the successes and failures of former pastors and ministry workers since they started their deconstruction, which I would call an *evolution*.

Some of them ducked back into a different form of organized religion, some became atheists, and most embraced a non-religious spirituality. Although they all admit there was work involved, they unanimously confess, "It was worth it!"

What they found wasn't always what they expected because they usually awakened to the understanding that they didn't know what they didn't know. Once they discovered what they

didn't know, they not only discovered those things but also discovered who they had always been. Intuition, scientific understanding, and enlightenment work together to evolve us to new levels.

The only mistake one could make is to believe they have found the solution and begin defending it to the masses, which stops their journey of discovery!

This is the endless loop of theology!

2. The Four Existential Concerns

Healing religious trauma and embarking on a journey of discovery can be terrifying! Many assumptions about the dangers of setting out on our own exist, but there are also the very real fears that all of us have. For simplicity's sake, let us just call them existential concerns.

For more information on these topics, see Yalom (1980)¹, Heidegger (1957)², and [the National Library of Medicine](#).

There are some things we should be concerned about. If we conduct our lives without concern, we may find ourselves at the mercy of the more dangerous aspects of our world. Conversely, if we exaggerate those concerns, we may find ourselves immobilized and unable to function, which also makes us vulnerable to high-control religion and manipulative people who promise to keep us safe. At the same time, they take advantage of our fears.

When we enter a new territory, like trying to heal from trauma or discovering new things, we will inevitably face these existential concerns. Since religion and our families of origin are usually unequipped to deal with these concerns, they opt for easy, manufactured answers that cause us to bypass the real

¹ Yalom I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. 1980. New York, NY: Basic Books

² Heidegger M. (1957). *Zein und Zeit [Being and Time]*. Tübingen: Niemeier.

issues and adopt solutions that help us survive instead of indeed evolving forward. We wait for something or someone to rescue us from life's difficulties instead of exploring the question more thoroughly.

Bypassing or ignoring big questions doesn't make them smaller or resolve them for us.

1. Death

In the 1970's, Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Denial of Death*. In this work, he postulated that non-human animals know nothing about dying by stating, "The knowledge of death is reflective and conceptual, and animals are spared it." Others, such as psychologist James Anderson of Scotland, now assert, "I believe we are now justified in thinking that chimpanzees have some kind of awareness of death."³ Until animals grow a more developed cortex or learn to speak, we may have to assume they are concerned with more fundamental concerns like food and inherent dangers.

Even though we are unsure whether other animals have this concern, we know that humans do! The only reason the fear of death is below the fear of public speaking is because most

³ <https://www.nwf.org/Magazines/National-wildlife/2013/DecJan/Animals/Animal-Mourning>

phobias and fears are connected to the fear of dying, so much so that we subdivide it into multiple other categories.⁴

Most of us generally focus on minor concerns and treat them like life and death. This gives us the false assumption that we control our environment and make our world safer. In some ways, this makes sense and is a practical approach to life, but we still haven't addressed fear and its more significant issues.

We join religious groups because they promise the antidote to death. Once we accept their creed and promises, it becomes very uncomfortable to question the obvious flaws and inconsistencies in their suppositions. At least they keep us entertained and distracted so that we don't think about existential questions too often.

We are forevermore searching for the latest snake oil that the salesman promises will answer all of our concerns about our health and well-being, only to replace it with something else the following year. If possible, we hope to avoid hard work, like dealing with mental and physical health, while we continue our search for the magic elixir.

Since leaving organized religion, one of the biggest revelations for me was to accept the fact that I would die, and I don't know what would happen after that. Obsession with the afterlife and theories of what happens next sometimes caused me to avoid living the life that is before me. The "One day, it will

⁴ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2016/11/16/fear-of-death-underlies-most-of-our-phobias.html>

all be better” mantra is another form of bypassing that causes me to miss experiences of genuine existence.

In the movie *Big Fish*, Albert Finney’s character can live carefree because he believes in his own stories, which are about a witch telling him how he would die. He thought that he didn’t have to worry because “This is not the way I’m going to die.” His son helps him untangle reality from his “big fish” stories, and in the end, they grow closer. I love the movie more every time I watch it, but in the end, it’s just a story about the stories we tell ourselves.

We don’t know when we’ll die or how, but we can live better by learning and growing. We can decide to live authentically instead of in service to our fears. In the movie, Ed Bloom’s son seemed to grasp this balance to living authentically, even though he went to the other extreme.

To live authentically, we must answer the question, “Who am I?” To do this, we must disassociate with all our other identities that life has assigned us. We may very well be a Baptist, a Methodist, an American, or a plumber. But those are just labels and groups that we have associated with. They are not who we are.

” I am” statements are compelling. Apparently, Jesus and Yahweh both said, “I am,” in a very declarative and universal way. But attaching things like “Plummer” and “Baptist” to “I am” is inauthentic because not all plumbers and Baptists are the same, and those are not our core identities—they are only the things we do.

We must remember our true and authentic selves. When we disassociate all our labels and false identities, we can live more authentically in the present. We are then able to accept realities like death without needing to manipulate them. We make better decisions about everything by being with reality rather than creating a fish story to tell us how we are going to die and where we are going to go.

Knowing *who* we are makes it easier to be *where* we are.

2. Freedom

There is a lot of talk these days about freedom. The reality is that most of these discussions are really about being free from one group as they conform and attach to a new belief system and group. These people may be releasing their attachment to fundamentalist or conservative groups only to become connected to another dogmatic system. In this way, they spend time disproving and condemning the old while celebrating the new.

There are inherent problems with this approach. First, it avoids the necessary work of finding healing, identity, and purpose for us. We never address our personal needs because we assume that attaching to the right group will solve our problems. However, we never improve without focused attention because organizations focus on the group's survival over the individual, and it doesn't seem to trickle down.

Along with avoiding individual work, we bypass our fear of being free. It's the feeling that we had when we left home,

started our first job, or started escaping from toxic religion. It's why, in the story of Moses, the Israelites begged to return to captivity. The Desert was new, unpredictable, and difficult. Many of us have a cloak of privilege even in our captivity. But when we step into freedom and autonomy, it can make us feel very vulnerable.

We must fully own ourselves, our beliefs, our feelings, and even our suffering. We have to understand that some of these are things we caused. There are also things we can't control. When we own up to reality, we can begin to respond to these things instead of reacting.

There very well may be people who help us along the way, but until we accept the responsibility to accept, reject, or change those things, we will never be free. The group is universally not going to take responsibility for us because it is focused on the larger group. In my experience, they rarely get around to the "least of these"⁵.

Most religions claim to free us from whatever they disagree with. But most of that freedom comes from realizing we are personally responsible. It's scary to face freedom from whatever enslaves us, and groups can be helpful if they truly support, encourage, and listen to us. However, groups can also become new prisons requiring regular attendance, money, and volunteer labor. People with an addiction tend to trade one

⁵ Matthew 25:40

addiction for another, and addiction to religion is one of the main substitutes.

Freedom is scary, but surrendering our freedom to a religious group, a political party, or even a family can be devastating. Not taking responsibility is a decision to let others decide for us.

3. Isolation

Humans seem to live in a contradiction. Quantum Mechanics shows that “the Universe is made up of space filled with fields of vibration, interconnected, unified and in constant communication.”⁶ With theories like Six Degrees of Separation, we propose that “everyone in the world is connected through six or fewer social connections.” Social connection has benefitted much, such as how trees interact with fungi through the “Wood Wide Web,” called the Mycorrhizal Network.

But why do most people experience such loneliness, even in a crowded room? Why do we feel separated even in groups supposed to be “like-minded?” Why are we alone in such a connected universe?

Our fear of isolation leads us away from helpful solitude. When we can clear the distractions and commune with our true selves, we will connect with nature and develop authentic,

⁶ <https://www.unimedliving.com/science/everything-is-energy/quantum-mechanics-the-science-of-absolute-connection.html>

mutual relationships that satisfy our deep need for connection. Brené Brown explained it this way in an interview with Lewis Howes:

“I feel I belong everywhere I go, no matter where it is or who I’m with as long as I never betray myself. And the minute I become who you want me to be in order to fit in and make sure people like me is the moment I no longer belong anywhere.”

Group conformity often debilitates our natural ability to connect. Religious institutions foster faux communities that force us to abandon or betray ourselves to fit into the group. As Brown suggests, when we become what the group insists that we should be, we “no longer belong anywhere.”

Groups do a great job of introducing people, but unless authenticity is a top priority, they generally suck at genuine connection. People find themselves isolated in church just as often as at home alone. The only reason they don’t leave is their fear of the unknown and the existential dread of further isolation. The myth of hell is even propagated in some churches to stoke this fear of separation and keep them from leaving.

We even create groups on social media where we get likes, loves, and cares, which also don’t truly fulfill the communal need for connection. Again, it’s about authenticity, vulnerability, and belonging. All these things are difficult.

Healthy community stresses, “I want the best for you even if it’s not here or even if it’s not with our group.” If it’s unhealthy, we can be alone in the same room with thousands of other

people. We have to be able to strengthen bonds with others without losing ourselves.

Healthy language can sound like, “For me...” or “This is how I see it.” If we can only celebrate the areas where we think the same, what exactly are we celebrating?

A healthy community stresses time for solitude, and we must become comfortable with solitude long enough to find ourselves. Once we know who we are, we will know what to do and who to connect with.

4. Meaninglessness

Philosophers have long postulated theories of nihilism to assert that the universe contains no universal sense of meaning. Many people who inherited their belief systems eventually conclude that at least most of what they were indoctrinated with is void of real meaning.

Because meaning is helpful to humans, we create new meanings through our culture, language, and religion. Religion is very good at providing simple, sometimes naïve, statements of meaning. But they do not allow for the questions that remain. “Which is more accurate than all the others, and what about this other thing?” are the questions that keep narcissistic theologians employed. “We will tell you what meaning to extract if you put us on a stage and pay us for the performance.”

Meaning and purpose are hard to achieve when aimed at directly. We find them better by living authentically and staying

curious. We must remove the exploration obstacles and be aware of packaged solutions.

When I worked in the software industry, there were always versions of our products. With other products, there is always a model number. Why? Because we could never account for possible improvements or mistakes in our evaluation. We just wanted to be better than the other company and meet the customer demands, so we gave up on an ultimate solution and gave them our best.

Isn't it fair to say this about organized religion and our creeds and belief systems? Declining that 1.0, or even 5.0, in any religion, is absolute meaning is naïve and misguided and not the supreme essence of meaning, especially since none of them agree.

We can find meaning without idolatry. Even though it may be frightening to approach nihilism, atheism, or something else we were taught to be afraid of, unraveling everything may be necessary to find the truth. Otherwise, the meaninglessness may be the religious practices we thought would save us.

We will address these concerns in more detail later in this manuscript. As always, when navigating deep waters, it's appropriate to find seasoned guides to help as long as they let you find meaning from your own experience instead of forcing you to adopt theirs.

3. Listening

Several years ago, we started a group called *The Desert Sanctuary*. We wanted it to be a home for spiritual nomads questioning their faith, struggling with their spirituality, or taking a break from organized religion. Eventually, it also included a blog and a podcast, and we started writing books. Being in the desert does not mean we are desperate, but it refers to how it sometimes feels.

Currently, there are 315 blogs and over 330 episodes of our podcast. Our *following* is modest by some standards, but we enjoy every minute of it. One reason is that we get to listen to people's sacred stories about their experiences in religion and their stories of trauma.

Some people seem surprised when we tell them it is common to experience intimacy when listening to someone's story for 45 minutes. Often, we start a conversation as acquaintances and end it as friends. I shared this insight with Seth Price, the host of the *Can I Say This at Church* podcast. I asked him, "Do you experience intimacy on your podcast when you listen to people's stories?"

He said, "If you're doing it right."

Last year, I commented on my Facebook page.

*"Instead of listening to so many sermons,
we should have been listening to each other."*

The response was great, and the reactions were varied. Some people could not understand that I criticized one of their practices. Others seemed to realize that one of our greatest struggles is genuinely listening to each other. I blame part of this on how we do religion and faith, but we will discuss this later.

Many ask what we should do to right this ship of Western religion, which is on a direct course to ineffectiveness and irrelevance. Please understand that most days, I have doubts that it needs rescue. It has systemic issues that hinder transformation.

But humans can still improve and make a difference in our world, even without the church. Listening is a beautiful place to start. As you will see, deep listening is part of growth, understanding, and healing in this manuscript. After learning to listen better, I noticed one day that I was genuinely listening to Laura, and she realized it at about the same time. I have never felt better in 34 years of being married than I did at that moment.

Sometimes, on the podcast or when we are doing a focusing session with someone, we will start to feel what they are feeling. These kinds of things can be emotionally draining and uncomfortable, but when we are present with someone and when they are present with themselves, the chance for healing goes up exponentially.

4. A Plan for Us

Karl

As a former pastor, I remember the faces of people visiting for the first time. They were always more attentive than the other members. They were more hesitant to be demonstrative, but they looked hopeful in a cautious way. This always made me optimistic that they would be a new addition to the *fold*. They would be the right mix of maturity and hopeful optimism needed at this place. I did not want to look at them as *prospects*, but that was what I did. Most of the energy, especially in small churches, is about surviving, and that means that we always need new members.

Eventually, the newness would wear off, the individual or family would gain the courage to speak to us honestly, and they would reveal their woundedness. Oddly enough, it was usually from another church or a family situation that did not go well. Sometimes, the trauma happens internally as a teenager or young adult. As an adult, they would gain the courage to ask tough questions and reveal their struggles and hurts. This made us uncomfortable, but we knew they would not see a professional counselor or therapist. So, we did our best to try to help them.

Because we were uncomfortable and we knew they were desperate, we did what religious people often do. We bypassed the significant issues with quick, religious-sounding fixes that did not address the root problems. In our hearts, we knew we were not solving anything, but we hoped God would do something miraculous eventually. We told them we would pray

for them, we cared about them, and we understood. But often, we told them something a little too familiar—God had a purpose and a plan for their lives.

Jeremiah 29:11 was where God promised Israel (broadly) that he had plans for them while they were in captivity. Eventually, the Babylonians released them from their bondage, but the passage is not addressed to anyone else, even though the multitudes have used and abused it to imagine God having a specific plan and purpose for each of us. It gives us temporary comfort, but I now understand it to have some negative repercussions.

If I told one of my children, “I have a plan for you,” their first question would be, “What is it?” But therein lies the problem. As a pastor for 20 years, the most common issue is that the congregation is still searching for this illusive plan and purpose. They believe they have one (because God gave it to them), so they go to conferences and read books and listen intently every Sunday, hoping they will uncover the details of this *plan and purpose*. This lostness keeps them in perpetual shame and makes them vulnerable.

Eventually, church members become swept up in the purpose and plan of the pastor and church organization. Subtly, they will come to understand that at least part of their purpose and plan could and should be to:

- Adopt a congruent belief system with the church.
- Attend a good church (this one, since God led you here).
- Give some of your money to the church (at least 10%).
- Get involved and help us reach our plan and purposes.
(They are ordained by God).
- Do not cause trouble or ask too many questions, and

help the organization flourish.

- Read your Bible, pray, and attend sanctioned activities.

Even though we told people God had an individual purpose and plan for them, they were eventually swept up into the purpose and plans of the larger group—it even seems noble, and sometimes it might be. But don't we have the right and even the responsibility to find our way? What if we pursued the plans and purposes that we know to be right for us? Because those questions cause us to fear, we often jumped back on the organized religion train instead of pursuing what we thought was right for us—it was just more accessible and better funded.

I do not believe God has an individual purpose and plan for each of us. Humans devised this to bring an immediate sense of comfort even though it bypasses root issues. Exploring what we desire and what is most appropriate to pursue takes genuine reflection and deep inner work. It is worth it, and I have seen some fruits of my labor.

Basic principles like love, compassion, and kindness are common and helpful to each of our plans and are OF God, but I am coming to understand a deeper knowing inside each of us that can determine the right path for each of us. We know the deep longings of our hearts and what fulfills us deep within. We know the plans we have for ourselves—and they are specific, not general!

I hope you discover *your* plans and purposes for *yourself*.

When we quit searching for the elusive *God Plan*, we can find our life's real plan and purpose. Oddly enough, it is where Jesus said the Kingdom of God is—inside us!

God's involvement is more like a question we ask a child when we have an open schedule, "What do you want to do today—let's go do that together!"⁷

Laura

Karl and I were married when we were both twenty-three. We were mere babies but decided to start our own family when we were both twenty-six. Once our family began to grow, my purpose and plan were what my children needed. At about age 40, I decided to go back to school and get my Master's in Elementary Education. With a growing family, I took only online courses to obtain my degree. Karl was in ministry and had a job, our children were busy with school activities, and I was trying to substitute as often as possible to help make ends meet, so online courses made the most sense. I could work at my own pace and be at home to take care of things there as needed. I loved online classes because I could look at the requirements each week, and when those were due, I would plan out each day to not feel overwhelmed.

When I got my first teaching job, I realized how big of a planner I was! I wanted to prepare for each student and whatever I teach. I learned to develop my lesson plans. I would spend evenings planning, imagining, and practicing what my lessons would look like for the next day. Planning gave me a sense of security and trust that I could accomplish remarkable things.

⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/594710-every-day-god-invites-us-on-the-same-kind-of>

However, when we entered the ministry, trusting myself became minimized. The church and Karl led my purpose and plans. Some see this as good, and I did not question it. It is just what you do when you are in it! However, it is so easy to lose yourself, which I eventually did.

When I deconstructed, I could reclaim so many parts of myself. I realized that I could know what is best for the situations in my life. The undoing of religious programming can make this problematic some days, but that is where I go inside and search for what I can do in challenging situations and plan my response to them.

I do not recall much direct intervention from God, which left me at the mercy of other people, many of whom were in positions of authority. Many times, when this happens, abuse can occur, and emotional and mental trauma is what I experienced. The church takes advantage by using spiritual bypassing, telling people in trauma that “God has a plan,” but then that plan is kept secret. God might let us in on his plan if we can show enough faith. If God does not speak to us and tell us the plans, we can only assume God is speaking through the pastor or the church, so we rely on them to tell us God’s purpose and plan. The truth is the pastor’s plan is usually the church’s plan. We must buy into the organization’s plan for it to survive. Once again, our plan is not our own.

It has been over six years since I started my deconstruction journey, but in that time, I have realized I can determine what is best for me. At times, I still seek trusted advice from people I trust with my story; however, nobody knows me like I do.

5. Being and Becoming

Karl

I started recycling about three years ago. It always seemed like a promising idea. One company I worked for recycles about 95% of its material. They have obviously done it for years and have become very proficient at it. Various containers are strategically placed up and down our assembly line. They are emptied routinely, and adherence to the program is expected and normal.

We all want to get better. We want to heal our planet—at least, most people do. We want to somehow deal with our trauma. Most of us want to get in shape and get healthy. But the problem with getting better is that most often when we try to do better, we experience it as pain. It may or may not be painful, but it seems hard because it requires something of us. I quit recycling at home because I became interested in other projects, and recycling just seemed like arduous work.

We do not do challenging work because it feels like pain. Psychologists tell us that humans seek pleasure and avoid pain. This root sense of what to avoid and what to pursue is a logical way to stay alive. Eating the right foods and avoiding dangerous animals might be wise and valuable choices. But, if we are going to improve our lives, pain is most often involved.

I accidentally wrote about pain twice in my book, [*Being: A Journey Toward Presence and Authenticity*](#). It is that important. Every day, advertisements tell us about a more pain-free way to make all our dreams come true. Even religion offers us a better way by promising miracles and inviting us to bypass our

suffering with superficial platitudes. But history teaches that all change is painful. It may not be as bad as we thought and will usually be worth it, but there will be some pain when we decide to change for the better.

The best example of this for me was *two-a-day* practices in high school. My friend and I were employed locally but still had to go before and after work to get in shape. We were in shape, but our coach knew we needed to be at a higher fitness level if we ever wanted to compete against other teams.

Changing our bodies from mere high-school students to athletes was going to require some pain. It hurt at first—a lot! In fact, after the first day, I could barely move. One of my brothers used to try to quit after the first day of football practice, but my dad would not let him. The coaches and my dad knew that the pain would decrease in intensity after a few days, and we would be stronger, faster, and able to leap bigger toadstools in a single bound.

There are only about three options for pain. Pain (or discomfort, at least) is always necessary for growth. We do not always have to make great strides in our lives, but when we want to do something new or heal our trauma, it will involve pain. Once we begin, there are about three categories of options.

Quitting

Quitting could have many voices. It might sound like this:

- “I give up. I do not want to do this. I shouldn’t have tried!”
- “Maybe I will just naturally get in shape...maybe it will get better or just go away...”

- “Maybe God will... I am sure God wants... The Universe surely will deliver...”
- “I can always start...tomorrow...when I’m not as busy...”

Everything gets better with action toward the desired outcome. I authored this poem in one of the painful chapters in the Being book.

*The first step may seem like it’s daunting,
To take it seems almost too massive.
But then we lean in, and then and again,
We learn there’s no progress that’s passive.*

Exercise hurts a little at first, but walking up a flight of stairs eventually hurts if we do not exercise. Dealing with our trauma may seem daunting at first, but we persist, little by little, and it makes our lives much better. Avoiding the unfinished business of our lives guarantees we will see it again when it surfaces at the worst time.

Numbing

Most of us opt for *numbing* the pain in some way. We have lots of options for this. Hobbies, church activities, drugs, alcohol, food, and work can all be productive, but they can also keep us from doing the necessary things for growth. Usually, numbing agents do not make the pain go away. They just keep us from feeling it for a little while. Most often, it comes back stronger later.

Leaning in

The only practical option for dealing with pain is *leaning into* it. As some would say, “To heal it, we have to feel it.” We still feel the pain, but when we are present with it, it has a chance to get better. When we lean into the discomfort of exercise, we allow ourselves to get in better shape. When we are present with our trauma, we find healing and transformation. When we sit with our questions and the uneasiness, we give ourselves the chance to have purer spiritual experiences and to grow in awareness.

Leaning into our pain moves us from reacting to responding. Before we know it, things get more accessible instead of harder. It does not mean that everything is perfect or without struggle, but it does mean that we are engaged with our struggles either. As hard as this sounds, some parts of our journey can be even more challenging.

Early in life, I learned the value of working hard. I believed people could do anything they wanted by setting goals, staying committed, and striving for personal excellence. I was good at pursuing what excited me and built a good life for myself and my family.

Eventually, I found that this way of doing it was not enough. I had to face the reality that, along the way, I had accumulated some residual trauma. My way of life accomplished things but avoided things I did not have time to address. Twenty years in small-town ministries meant that I experienced some fantastic stuff. Still, unfortunately, it also meant that I spent over two decades avoiding and bypassing what I felt deep inside.

I learned that I needed some deep healing, and I discovered that it would not go away naturally. I also realized the necessary

process of *being* instead of just doing. I was about to learn that being was not passive, like I had imagined, and it was the only way to find the true self that I heard others talk about. I had sometimes touched that part of me, but I was about to discover a new journey of Presence and Authenticity more incredible than I could have imagined.

Presence and Authenticity seem kind of passive because of my background. I imagine them as something weird that people talk about as they bypass real life. I discovered that, in my religion, I was the one bypassing the tough and necessary work of healing by engaging in religious platitudes and avoiding challenging work. The journey toward Presence and Authenticity would be learning that moved me closer to wholeness.

In my mind, the process works something like this.

In my book, [*Being: A Journey Toward Presence and Authenticity*](#), I described this experience in more detail. But this summary should provide a framework for what I experienced. Your experience may differ slightly, but these three steps help us learn to live a life of being and becoming. I know it will be beneficial for you.

Step 1 - Facing My Woundedness

The weekend was different than the times before. Often, things that seemed unusual triggered me. Laura and I would just be talking or doing everyday things, and something would cause us to argue or experience tension. We never really resolved these things; we just stuffed them down. This weekend was different; I repeatedly reacted to everything that happened in the wrong way.

My usual pattern was to bypass the issue, stuff it down, and go back to doing my life. But this weekend was different. Eventually, I found myself wandering around a track, not sure how I got there. I felt like my thoughts were crashing into each other, and everything I had ever pushed down was coming up at once. I knew what this felt like, but I had never felt it so severe. It was too big and intense, and I did not know what to do.

I came back to the house and fell asleep. Laura and I talked, but we were not getting anywhere, and the experience had me exhausted, so I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I liked work because it often was not very nuanced. You are rewarded when you show up for work and do the job. If you work a little harder and plan better, making a mark and moving past the competition does not take long. At my first real job after college, I completed a self-paced study course in under half the time of others. I overcame my shyness and moved up through the ranks. My only shortcoming was my adventurous nature, which made me look for the next important thing. I started over several times but could always bounce back and land on my feet.

But this time, going to work did not solve any problems. By the time I got there, I was a mess. I could not attend the meeting outside my office, so I made an excuse and started trying to figure out what to do. Eventually, my plans led to a hermitage at the place, where I would attend spiritual direction training later that week.

I talked to two spiritual directors that first day via text. I sat in a chair and texted Laura, then started blaming people. My friend encouraged me to “do some shadow work” and told me to investigate several books. I fell asleep exhausted that night without a plan or idea of what to do. I thought I should pray for

a miracle. I believed that God could intervene, but I also realized how seldom that happened and that I often used this idea to bypass *leaning into* the issues I faced. I call it bypassing, which may be one of our most significant spiritual pitfalls.

The next day, I began reading [Robert Augustus Masters's *Bringing Your Shadow Out of the Dark*](#). I read every word, underlining, highlighting, and writing notes on my laptop. I wanted to get this right, and if I could not go to work, I would work as hard as I could in this process.

Eventually, the book told me to place my hand where I feel what I am feeling. I knew my heart had been knotted up for two days. I eventually said to the part of me that felt rejected and abused, "I see you; I understand why you are feeling this way. I've got your back."

As I was present with the felt sense of a younger me, my life flashed before my eyes. Then I kept seeing my kids and grandkids, muttering, "I've got your back," and weeping in a way that I never had. This went on for what seemed like hours.

Afterward, I was exhausted, but I also felt reborn. I know now what I experienced was a form of *focusing*. I had learned something similar earlier that year, but I did not in any way know what I was doing. I was very simply just *leaning into* my pain. When I did this, my trauma began to shift, and I started to experience a being and becoming that I could not have imagined.

About 18 months later, I wrote down my experience, and to some degree, I relived all the emotions. Just like the initial examination, it was painful, but it was also worth it. Every time I encounter my woundedness, I get the opportunity to move toward wholeness and Authenticity. I shared it with my friend, Mark Karris, who encouraged me to go deeper.

Step 2 - Going Deeper

My first reaction was to resist. But by the time I wrote down my story, I understood this leaning in and how it might be beneficial, so I agreed to send him what I wrote. I dove into each subject, which later became Part 2 of the book.

I learned about my fear and how it caused me to freeze and not face certain things. I realized it was beneath other things like anger, and I sometimes pretended to be brave when I was afraid. I also started understanding how fear made me vulnerable to things like religion or anyone who was selling a solution to what I feared.

Speaking of anger, I learned that not all anger is destructive. My parents encouraged me not to be loud or obnoxious and to keep my emotions in check. But sometimes, we need to get angry; in that situation, anger is the best thing to feel. We cannot exist there forever, but it was essential to consider why I felt that way and what it was trying to tell me.

As you may have already noticed, bypassing was a huge discovery for me. I never remember this being discussed in my 20 years of ministry, but looking back, I could see how it was deeply embedded in the way we did church and our spiritual lives. Instead of *leaning into* issues, we would spiritually and emotionally bypass them with platitudes and practices that pacified us while we went about our lives.

I always thought I had a voice as a pastor. I got to speak several times a week, and I was always the one they asked to pray for. But when Laura and I wrote about her finding her voice after ministry, I realized much of my experience was saying what people wanted me to say. It seemed like I was challenging them at the time, but it was always within certain boundaries.

I also examined my inner critic's role in my dysfunction. Because of its original intent, some call the inner critic the protector. It was extremely helpful to take a closer look at the part of me that sabotaged me and led me down frustrating paths. When I went deeper and examined the origins of this part of me, I could heal even further and move to a more responsive way of being.

Step 3 - Learning to Be

When I discovered that a better life was about being and becoming and not so much about doing, many things opened up. As I wrote the last section of my book, I titled each "Being with..." and felt like I was discovering the truth of each one as I was writing. For example, in the chapter "Being with the Divine," I thought I was coming to understand it even more while writing. In other words, I was also becoming even as I attempted to explain *being*.

I hope to break that down in the following words.

Being WHERE we are (Presence)

One of my favorite teachers was Ms. Beaty. In those days, teachers would take the roll. They would say your name and then instruct you to say "here" or "present." Both words meant the same thing at that time, but we understand they can have different meanings. When my teacher asked, "Are you present?" she meant, "Are you here?" When Laura asks me "Are you here?" she means, "Are you present?"

I have been working at physical jobs for the past couple of years. Previously, I was in an office with a management

position. It is a long story, but I am in transition, and I do not have a long-term plan currently. So, people often ask me, "What is the plan?" or "What will you do next?"

My best answer for now is, "Today, I am loading things," or "Right now, I am working on an assembly line." I must tell myself the same thing every day, "This is where I am, and this is what I'm doing."

There is a time to visit the past, just like I explained in my story. Sometimes, we at least need to have a felt sense of our past self, and we can do some genuine healing there. We also occasionally need to make some plans, but future trips often lead us on unnecessary adventures to unproductive living. The best place to be is where we are!

The best part about being present is that it not only makes us more productive but can also heal us!

Being WHO we are (Authenticity)

Integrity is one of the most important things to me. I have many people who are not my best friends, but I hardly tolerate people I do not respect. Integrity is not just telling the truth; it is being truthful about who we are to ourselves. It is not lying to ourselves.

Many of us who went through religious deconstruction experienced a sort of PTSD. We asked ourselves, "Who am I?" and "What do I like to do?" and "What do I now believe?" For so long, someone determined for us. Job one in evolving after deconstructing old beliefs is deeply examining and discovering who we are. Before we start chanting mantras about what we want to do and accomplish, we should set an intention to start becoming who we really are.

Understanding and living from a place of Authenticity is my first intention for the second half of my life. I used to be determined to *fit in* because it made me successful, but now I want to be real because it helps me become more of who I have always been.

Becoming

The same year I had the experience I described above; I also discovered some critical aspects of myself. It is a descriptive phrase that my friends at *Heart Connexion* call a “contract.” It is just a description of my true self and how I want to live. It goes like this:

I am Playful, Adventurous, and Mystical.

Someone at work was trying to describe me the other day. I was joking around and making light of something while working hard. They described me in their way, but I said, “You mean that I am playful?”

They said, “Yes, that’s it!”

I said, “Good, because that’s who I am!”

I am becoming more of who I am. In a way, I am becoming fully human. Each of us has an *isness* that is unique to us. Removing the layers of trauma and leaning into the pain of growing can shift us away from the trauma and into a life of Presence and Authenticity. It is a being and becoming that I am learning to embrace more fully.

This is where I experience crisis and pain and learn to grow by *stepping into* them. This is where I experience a connection

with nature and learn more about the universe and the Divine. I understand that I am OF God more than I am separate. I experience the presence of presence in every cell of my body when I am with my dog, when I experience my body, and even when I am uncertain. I enjoy solitude because I am never really alone, and even when I am with difficult people, I exist with them in Presence and Authenticity.

I discuss bravery and vulnerability in the last chapter of the *Being* book. More than anything else, people praise me for being vulnerable. Authors like Brené Brown realize that there is no bravery without vulnerability. Just like moving forward involves pain, it also makes us vulnerable. I do not think I can challenge you to play it safe and encourage you.

I want to encourage you to take the next courageous step. I realize that the next step will make you vulnerable and cause you some pain. But the pain subsides, and you will start being and becoming who you always were. It will not be easy—but it will be worth it.

Be where you are, be who you are, be at peace.

Laura

IMPOSTER SYNDROME!! Sitting down to write this chapter seems to be more challenging than the rest. Karl and I have been going back and forth discussing my feelings on “being and becoming.” I think my writer’s block is due to imposter syndrome. I struggle to see that anything I say on this topic, let alone this book, is of value. I come by this naturally. I have always been a *behind-the-scenes* sort of person. As a small

child, I struggled with ear infections so severely that it affected my hearing, so it just became easy for me to pretend I heard or understood rather than ask someone to repeat themselves for the millionth time. I just learned to be quiet and fade into the background, seeing what I had to say or contribute as “less than.” I was in no way feeling sorry for myself; this was just a safer way of being.

This served me well in our church ministries. When Karl was called into the ministry, I honestly had no feelings one way or another. I was not a typical pastor’s wife wannabe who jumped for joy when he broke the news to me. I was like, “ok...sounds good.” I also did not put up much resistance. I only told him I would not be THAT pastor’s wife who played the piano or the organ or led all the women’s ministries. In other words, let me just fade into the background, and this could be a sweet gig. It is incredible to me now, looking back, that this only reinforced my feelings of not belonging, not being heard, and not having a voice. In a way, I brought it on myself, but on the other hand, our church denomination was more than happy to let me assume the role of *less than*.

In Karl’s portion of this chapter, he discussed two elements that can inhibit belonging and one that can enhance it: quitting, numbing, and facing pain.

I have never been a quitter in the physical sense of the word. I have not just thrown my hands up and audibly said, “I quit!” while stomping off and cussing up a blue streak. The way quitting shows up for me is very subtle. It is more of an emotional quitting. It is extremely easy for me to become noticeably quiet and emotionally check out when things get complicated. You might not know it because I am physically still

present, but emotionally, I am done. This happened in church for me.

In our book, [Out into the Desert: Thriving Outside of Organized Religion](#), I spoke at length about the harm I experienced in the church. It became pretty easy for me to simply go through the motions. I would show up, sing in the worship band, pray, and even sit in the front row and make eye contact, nodding my head in affirmation of whatever Karl was preaching that week. However, inside, I was hollow and void of any emotion. It was as if I was back in my younger days, unable to hear but did not care to ask anyone to repeat or explain what was happening. Emotionally, I had quit. I could not give any more of myself.

Typically, when someone quits something, they physically stop doing it. If you leave your job, you will no longer be there. If you quit a sport, you stop playing it. The thing about emotionally quitting is that I was still attending these things and going through the motions. It was excruciatingly painful, and honestly, it still is as I write about it. No matter how much I would try to distance myself emotionally, the fact that I was still a part of it only created deeper wounds. Sometimes quitting is a healthy choice, but I realized there needs to be a clean break where deep work can happen. Otherwise, it is an exercise in futility.

When you cannot quit your environment, which for me was attending church, the next best thing is to numb. I have had to take a hard look at this. Numbing is the act of not feeling or not dealing with your given situation. While it can take many forms, I do not numb with the typical things you might associate with numbing: alcohol, drugs, food, etc. Instead, for me, the way I numb or emotionally take myself out of a situation that is causing anxiety is to stay busy.

Whenever we feel stuck, trying to find a way out of that situation is human nature. However, what if we cannot? What if we feel as if we are entirely responsible for someone else's success and that we cannot express our truth? That is how church felt to me. I felt very responsible for Karl's ministry. I was the pastor's wife, and while I always said aloud that I would not be the "typical pastor's wife," it was a slow fade into that life. I started to feel very much responsible for making or breaking his ministry. There were unspoken rules that changed all the time. I could not keep up with them.

So, I kept myself busy to make sure I did not accidentally break these unwritten, unspoken, vague, at best, rules. Nothing was off limits, but my doing centered around keeping the house organized, raising three children, being active in their various schools, and participating at church. Doing things kept my mind occupied, so I did not have to experience the very real feeling of not being in control. Honestly, I still struggle with this today. Life is good at throwing stuff at you that you were not expecting.

In 2022, it was Karl's stroke and one of our daughters and her child coming to live with us. Do you know that meme that says, "It's fine... I'm fine...Everything is fine!"? That is me! On the outside, if I stay busy, no one knows the complete disarray of my emotional well-being! It is quite an elaborate front, and I play the part well.

Work is my way of numbing. I can quickly shove those emotionally broken parts into a metaphorical drawer if I am busy doing it. The problem with that is these drawers cannot hold any more! Something must go. Numbing keeps my mind busy, so I do not have to deal with the overcrowding emotions; however, I have learned that I can choose to make space or something inside me that will break. The latter never works out

well for me. So, I am still learning. While there is nothing wrong with being busy, it cannot be a substitute for dealing with my emotional well-being.

I must come to a place where I can face and deal with my pain. I hate even saying that. When Karl started deconstructing, he always told me and others, "You have to lean into the pain." Why would I want to do that? Isn't life all about avoiding pain? Seriously, who goes looking for pain? If I do not face my pain, like the drawer analogy above, that pain is going to get stronger and do some damage when it breaks free! I have experienced this firsthand in my deconstruction. I still struggle with quitting and numbing. I suppose I always will, but I am learning to recognize when I get caught in those loops, or Karl helps me realize it.

Facing the pain—leaning into it, if you will—allows me to unpack who I am and what is important to me. It is allowing me to be a more authentic version of myself. While I sometimes get frustrated with the process, I realize I am also ok with continuing to unpack those essential aspects of myself for however long it takes. If I never arrive, I am ok with that. There is freedom in going through the pain and continually learning about the many facets that make up me.

Imposter's syndrome is something with which I will always struggle. In those very real moments of anxiety, I am learning to trust myself. We must believe each other's stories, even if they do not look like ours. I feel I can do that for you. The problem lies in doing it for myself. I must realize I do not have to be an expert at anything to tell my story. Part of my growth is giving myself that same level of compassion for where I have been in my story and where my story is taking me. Today, I still struggle with my hearing. I am almost positive that I need hearing aids.

The difference today is I want to be part of the conversation. I want to hear what you have to say, and I want to be heard!

6. Going Inside & Trusting Myself

Karl

For most of my life, religion told me not to trust myself, especially my feelings. We were taught what to believe based on the accepted belief systems and encouraged to trust that even when it did not feel right, we were correct. The reason for this was the base reasoning that the body and our feelings were inherently bad because of sin.

This ignorance led to several unhealthy results, including shame and other toxic beliefs. We prayed for miracles to happen to our bodies instead of tending to them. We missed all the messages our bodies were trying to give us, hoping for supernatural intervention. We thought the answers were out there somewhere, and we did not know how to look inside. Even though we knew our bodies healed themselves, we did not trust anything inside because we were convinced that all of it was bad.

This toxicity affects every area of our life. When we believe that “there is nothing good in us,” we miss the good things we could experience, and we heap more shame onto our already traumatized existence. We carry the wounds from ourselves and others and feel the only answer is to beg God to “take it away.” In this type of belief system, how could we ever imagine that we could be a part of the solution?

Recently, I have been discovering that my old belief system was misguided. By addressing my trauma and going within, I find healing not from a magical, external source but from somewhere inside me. My body gave me clues and tried to tell

me what was wrong and how to improve. But, because I ignored it, looking for an easy solution, it only worsened because the remedy was ineffective. The shadow got bigger, the trauma dove deeper, and it caused more significant issues, including more physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms.

Jesus hinted at this when he said, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” The passage emphasizes that we do not need to look for it elsewhere if the Kingdom of God is as close as the cells of our body. The Divine is present in our brain cells, heart cells, and every blood and oxygen molecule that flows through our body. That is what Jesus was trying to tell us. It is one of the reasons I am investigating the thought that we are OF God.

Since divinity is in every cell of our bodies (the Kingdom is *within us—entos Gr.*), some even say we are Divine. I still feel separated from God because of the references where God and Jesus say, “I am.” We also portray a certain identity, but part of our identity is that divinity that exists. I love that we can be individual and collective. We can be fully human and divine.

When considering God as Source, I think humans are proceeding from the Divine. Just like my son is a Forehand and OF me, I am OF God because even at the cellular level, I proceed (come forth) from God. This does not mean I am perfect because things get muddied or happen to me. But, at the core—at the deepest levels, I am not only connected to the Divine—I am OF the Divine. For me, it is a little better to say we are OF God than to say *God creates us*.

Because I have Christian roots, it helps to think about what Paul said when he talked about Christ filling up everything. We get confusing messages about God in Christianity because we want to classify things so that we can manage them. If God resides somewhere, we imagine we can better manage

everything. But, even in the Bible, there is adequate messaging about God always being with us and the promises never to leave or forsake us.

In whatever ways that we imagine God, it is prudent to understand that the Divine is present in all things. The more we learn from science and physics, the more we know that every cell has intelligence and may even communicate in ways we could previously have only imagined. We find space in every cell and even at the subatomic levels, and we see every living organism working for the preservation and thriving of itself. We do not find evil and destruction there; we only find a steady hum of energy that we struggle to identify.

I still love my example of sprouts. When I sprout seeds in my kitchen, I get the seeds wet, and they quickly grow into miniature versions of a plant in about three days. I am told that the nutrition for these little plants is concentrated in the tiny little sprouts. I like the Broccoli and Friends version, which has broccoli, alfalfa, clover, and radishes. It is delicious! And it is packed with nutrition!

But the amazing thing to me is that everything the plant needs to know to grow into a large broccoli plant is inside that tiny seed. The informational plans on how to build a broccoli plant are in that seed. The food to grow it to a certain point is all contained in the seed, and later, it even knows to draw in sunlight and minerals from the soil until it becomes a full-grown plant. Eventually, it returns to the ground, where it will be reborn as nutrients for other things.

The challenge I have for everyone is this. Let us assume there is a divinity somewhere. Is it somewhere out there orchestrating the several hundred seeds in my sprouting jar, or is it more likely that the Divine is in every single cell of every

living being and everything like those seeds in my kitchen? Could it be that creation is also evolving and that we are OF God more than we are from God? I know I just jumped across a lot of boundaries, but the old man in the sky makes little sense to me anymore. My garden and my sprouting jars teach me much more than my theology classes ever did.

Even the animals I observe in nature teach me about this inner knowing present in all living things. Animals trust their instincts as if they are responding to a drumbeat or hum in the universe that we still do not fully understand. They follow ancient patterns without understanding them. They have not been to church, so they do not yet know to distrust themselves.

I know I am different from my dog and my sprouts. Humans are more complex and have distinct instincts, intuition, and information to work with. But this, even more, convinces me that I am OF God and that the Divine is within me. My intuition, feelings, and inner knowing are present and flow through me like the hum reverberating through the Universe.

The fantastic thing about all of this is that I have discovered that we can heal ourselves from trauma that has plagued us for most of our lives. Those feelings that I was told to ignore are indicators trying to tell me something about how to heal from past experiences. I described this in my book, [*Being: A Journey Toward Presence and Authenticity*](#). I was able to recover from past trauma, but it required me to feel it so that I could heal it. I tried to bypass the pain and pray for miracles for 20 years as a pastor, and the trauma remained. But when I trusted myself and went inside, the trauma got better, and the shadow became integrated with me.

Listen to what Eugene Gendlin says.

“What is split off, not felt, remains the same. When it is felt, it changes. Most people don’t know this! They think that by not permitting the feeling of their negative ways they make themselves good. On the contrary, that keeps these negatives static, the same from year to year. A few moments of feeling it in your body allows it to change. If there is in you something bad, sick, or unsound, let it inwardly be and breathe. That’s the only way it can evolve and change to the form it needs.”⁸

In other words, when we ignore the feelings trying to help us heal, we guarantee they will stay the same and not get better. But, when we are present with the parts of us that are stuck, we experience the real possibility of them shifting, and, as Gendlin says, “it can evolve and change into the form it needs.” This is where I have found healing in recent years. It has not been from connecting with something out there—it has been from trusting my feelings and being present with those wounded parts long enough for them to heal.

I also believe all of us are connected and that it matters. Carl Jung thought that we have instincts and that there is a collective unconscious that we have access to more. I will not pretend to understand this fully, but it fascinates me to think about it.

“The collective unconscious consists of the sum of the instincts and their correlates, the archetypes. Just as everybody

⁸ <https://www.eugenegendlin.com/quotations>

possesses instincts, so he also possesses a stock of archetypal images”⁹

I spent the first half of my life trying to connect with something vague that is out there instead of looking inside. However, I also searched for connections only through physical groups where I could touch, see, and feel people. But now, I envision it slightly differently.

These days, I can do focusing sessions with someone across the world, and Laura and I can feel what they are feeling. We observe our instincts as leading in the same direction. We cry together. We are connected! I feel this occasionally when I feel my grandfather and sense that something about him is near me. It used to frighten me to think like this. I was warned, inside religion, that this would expose me to dangerous things. But the opposite is true!

When I am open to this broader world, I feel empowered and like I am evolving into a way of thriving and being that leads me forward in a positive and enlightening way. We are learning how trees in a forest are connected, and I realize that most communication only happens when I am open to it.

Religion and belief systems teach us to be closed. Our dogma shuts off communication so that only one voice tells us what we should think. I now see my life with “all communication lines open.” I still get to choose what to pursue, listen to, or learn from, but I trust myself increasingly every day to interpret these messages.

If God ever did speak directly to people, then He/She/It still does. If the Divine spoke through a donkey, then it can speak through my ancestors and the collective unconscious. If the

⁹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/carl_jung_717966

writers of the Bible were inspired during the 1800-year period when their words were penned, then we can also be moved to capture new and empowering truths today!

At some point, we decided everything would be easier to control if we gathered in a building and limited the stream of information to one guy reminding us of what to think. We selected a portion of men's writings and decided to focus on just those communications. Of course, all of this was influenced by our culture, but we chose to ignore that and keep trudging along in our certainty. All the while, mystics of all faiths tried to encourage us that there is more out there, and we mostly did not listen.

These days, I am encouraged by people of all faiths starting to open to the communication portals that open when we go inside and trust ourselves. Sometimes, those things are challenging to describe, but we find ourselves knowing that we can access something more profound and more ancient than before.

Over the past few years, I have been discovering something inside that some call *invincible preciousness*. I described it in my book, [*The Tea Shop*](#). Others, like James Finley from the Center for Action and Contemplation, tell us that we can go *within and beyond* to touch the hurting parts with love. Others might describe this *untouched* part of ourselves as where our authentic self exists. Personally, what I find inside is something simple, yet limitless that connects me to everything good and perfect.

My wife, Laura, likes to talk about self-actualization. Maslow identified it at the top of his hierarchy of needs. It is a realization of our potential. We will never be fully human until we discover these missing pieces. Society and religion taught us a form of

selflessness even though Jesus was very self-actualized and self-aware.

Instead of connecting to the collective unconscious, we decided to adopt collective dogma, which kept us static and stagnant with creeds and belief statements and ways of believing and behaving instead of channels of discovery. We limited our holy books to one period and only a few authors. We developed liturgies and practices that were acceptable and cultural, ignored the imagination, and settled for the manageable. We traded mystery, nuance, and wonder for certainty, order, and control.

The conference we hosted recently was subtitled, *Becoming Fully Human*. This is a goal that I am willing to pursue. My friend Kyle Butler says, "I don't want to let anything take away my self-worth and my divinity."

Sometimes, I feel like an archaeologist, removing centuries of debris and discovering things that highlight the magnificent things about humanity and the universality of divinity in all of us.

May we all find this self-worth and self-actualization that leads us to eternal and universal things. May I once again learn to trust myself and my own invincible preciousness?

As I see friends of mine begin to live more beautiful lives, I also notice a presence and authenticity in my life that I did not embody before. I have tapped into things that are eternal and divine, and I see this expressed in the way I treat others. Living into the reality that I am OF God changes the model of fear and control to a life of being and becoming what I have always been.

A disclaimer. Sometimes, when we go inside, we discover the trauma left oddly enough by ignoring what was there. Either

we did not understand, or we could not handle it at the time it was inflicted, and our systems taught us to bypass and ignore it. Exploring the catacombs of our inner self reveals the eternal and life-giving truths, and we also encounter the reality of our trauma.

As I mentioned earlier, facing this trauma is necessary but often painful. It requires our focus, and usually, it helps to have a companion along to help us process. Even though facing these things is not what we expected and is harder than we hoped it would be, it is most definitely worth the effort. Shifting or healing these stuck places releases even deeper understanding and self-trust.

Laura

There are two reasons that my portion of this chapter may not be exceptionally long: 1) I said most of what I wanted to say on the topic of this chapter in the last chapter, and 2) Karl did a respectable job of explaining our approach to this part of the journey. I genuinely hope I conveyed the importance of going inside and trusting yourself. It is a concept that is easier said than done; it requires us to be incredibly intentional, and it requires us to find those practices that speak to us in a very personal way.

I wish I could give each reader ten effortless steps to trust yourself, but I can only share what works for me. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and I continue to look for ways to grow in this area of my life. Thank you for letting me share with you. I hope this can start a conversation of authenticity and sharing where we can each learn from the other.

So, how can we practically go inside?

As a mom, the last thing I wanted my children to experience was emotional pain. For me, it was very triggering to think they were experiencing shame, or they were somehow not feeling like *enough*. I knew those feelings, and I wanted to be the one to save my children from those experiences. In all honesty, however, this is a fundamental part of growing up.

When my children came to me with issues of feeling *less than*, I sat with them and listened to their experiences. I would validate their feelings, even if they triggered me. I learned to do this same thing with my students. Sometimes, students come into my classroom with tremendous trauma. They believe things about themselves that are not true, but they have heard someone significant tell them they are *stupid* or *not good enough*. No amount of convincing on my part will change that very real message in their life. However, when those heart-wrenching situations come up, it is important to treat their feelings as precious. It is essential to give validation and believe them without judgment.

This is how we can also treat our inner child. If you are anything like me, you have learned very well how to stuff those feelings, to tell those emotions they are *ridiculous*, *stupid*, or better yet, that we need to *get over it already!* I do not know about you, but those coping strategies have never worked for me. Ignoring feelings adds to my shame and overall feelings of unworthiness. The very things we would never say to children, friends, or family members in our lives, we scream to our inner child to make them behave. If we know it will not work for others, why do we think it will work for us? Taking a better approach is essential; treating our feelings like precious children is essential. Just as we would sit and listen to those we

love, we need to sit, listen, validate, and believe in our inner selves without judgment and fixing.

One thing that I have found to be incredibly important when listening to stories of people on our podcast, The Desert Sanctuary, is to believe them. That may sound simple, but it is amazingly easy to dismiss someone's story when it does not match our reality. When we do not believe people and their stories just because it does not match ours, we halt conversation, create trauma, and project shame. Several times, as I started sharing my story, people in church would tell me, "I'm sorry that happened to you, but that wasn't my experience." Immediately, I stopped talking. That person in no way validated my trauma and, in a very condescending way, let me know that they did not believe me because their experience did not match mine.

This was a practice I had to learn not only to give to people sharing their sacred stories with me but also to believe and validate my own sacred story. When we are experiencing trauma or anxiety, even after we have left a traumatic situation, that is our body's way of communicating with us. So many times, our anxiety is trying to warn us or tell us something. Let us sit quietly with those feelings, breathe, and listen. Just as we need to believe the stories of others, let us start believing the stories our body is telling us, even if it is anxiety. Be with it and have compassion for it to discover why it is feeling this way.

I like to think of these "steps" as a slow progression. First, I had to learn to sit with my anxious feelings without judgment. Next, I had to listen, validate, and learn. I still feel like I must intentionally do these things because my *go-to* is to stuff those feelings or shame them away with words like, "What is your

deal? Why are you freaking out about this?" I am having this conversation with myself right now.

Tomorrow is my birthday, and it has become a tradition for me to have my granddaughters on my birthday. Since my birthday falls on New Year's Eve, I see it as a beautiful way to bring in the new year! However, I start to feel incredibly anxious whenever I am going to have my granddaughters after not having them spend the night in a while. My first thought is, "What is wrong with me? This should be a happy moment! Why are you anxious?" This can shift my anxiety into a shame spiral if I do not purposefully speak to my anxiety, listen rather than judge, and see what it is trying to tell me.

Just doing that helps reduce those anxious feelings. However, my next step is to trust myself to interpret my intuition and understanding. This sometimes happens, but sometimes it does not. I am learning to be okay with the fact that sometimes it does not. I can still thank my body for feeling so deeply about this time I will spend with my granddaughters. I am learning to trust myself even when the answers do not come.

This is just a way for me to experience my inner knowing. My experience with church was to deny myself. I could not trust myself because I was *wicked*, and my heart could not be trusted. Instead, I was programmed to leave critical thinking behind and believe what others told me about myself, even if they did not know me.

Let us be real about who knows us the best. We do! However, we were told that we could not trust ourselves. I hope what I have shared on these pages encourages you to change the way you think about yourself. You are enough. You can trust who you are. You know!

In those moments when you feel like you do not, I hope you reach out to someone who has earned the right to hear your sacred story. I hope you find someone who will listen without judgment and believe you. For me, this has been the path to true healing.

7. Darkness and Shadow

Karl

In 2021, I worked on an assembly line. To get Saturday off, I had to take ½ of Friday off to ensure they didn't schedule me for Saturday. It is a clever way to have an extended weekend without using more Personal Time Off (PTO). I was often excited to start a long weekend, but I did not feel much like working those few hours to earn the right to leave.

We cannot avoid challenging work. Whether it is addressing trauma, getting healthy, or building lawn mower engines, there are a necessary number of difficult things. We assume things can be avoided, but they do not go away. The outside wall of my house, where the paint is peeling, will only worsen over time. If I do not address it, it will eventually cause further damage.

A great revelation for me was *spiritual bypassing*. Religion often searches for magical answers and avoids doing the necessary work to heal. Dealing with trauma is uncomfortable, so we use religious phrases and platitudes to avoid the messy but necessary work that could heal us.

One reason we avoid challenging work is our obsession with light. In our dualistic mindsets, we categorized everything difficult and not easily understood as *darkness*. We focused on what we considered light and trusted it would extinguish the darkness.

There are things to be frightened of, but we cannot avoid everything we do not understand. Often, the things that trouble us most are unresolved issues that we have been avoiding. They may seem like darkness and something to be avoided, but

they could be the key to our future well-being. I described this process in my book, [*Being: A Journey Toward Presence and Authenticity*](#). Because I avoided these dark places within me, they all surfaced simultaneously. When they emerged, it was much more traumatic to encounter them.

When I finally faced this part of me that was wounded, I discovered that it was much more like a traumatized younger version of myself than a giant, horrible monster. I am not even sure that Satan and Demons and such even exist. I now wonder if much of that imagery was created in our minds when we tried to describe what it felt like inside. It is perfectly plausible that our internal demons are little more than internalized shame and unresolved trauma.

Many times, this surfaces as reactivity. Someone would say or do something that caused a reaction in me. I would react like something was controlling me, and in a sense, it was. A part of me was trying to resolve past hurts and unresolved feelings. Because I was reacting, my responses were not rational, and often, what I did only made it worse. The encounters usually ended with me pushing the emotions down and returning to my life, where I ignored what seemed like darkness and searched for new beacons of light and hope.

Eventually, I could not push it down anymore. I had to face the *darkness* and bring it out. To make a long story short, because I made space for this traumatized little boy, that part of me was able to heal, and I could move forward. I did not eradicate that part of me. I had *compassion* for it and was present with it until the stuck part could shift to something more *integrated* with my existence rather than being a part of me that was trying to get my attention. We call this process *focusing*.

A Focusing Method

I have mixed feelings about prescribing steps to people. Life is messy, nuanced, and hard to describe with a formula. Sometimes, it is more helpful to describe our lives as journeys so that we can keep perspective on the many twists and turns. But sometimes, we find useful things and share them with each other. The trick is not to fall in love with methods, beliefs, techniques, or even practices.

I learned about focusing from several people and Eugene Gendlin's [book](#) of the same name. Dr. Paul Fitzgerald has been instrumental in my life and shared many ideas about focusing that have been revolutionary in my healing. Focusing can happen alone or with a companion. I recommend the latter if possible because an empathetic listener helps to improve the effectiveness of the focusing method. The method originates from Eugene Gendlin, the founder of Focusing, and has been utilized by many.

1. Preparation

Make sure that you are breathing deeply. If you have ever done a body scan in your meditation practice, use that method to let go of any felt tension and let it fall off. Some find it helpful to place their thoughts into a container. I imagine a box where I can put all my thoughts away, much like picking up toys at night. In addition to thoughts, I may notice feelings vying for my attention. I try not to judge them. I notice what I feel and where I feel it. The room should be quiet and free of distractions.

At this point, the companion might ask the focuser to identify a word that describes the feeling.

2. A part of me feels

It is helpful to state clearly, “A part of me feels...” and insert the tag that best describes your feelings. The critical part of this description is that it describes what you are feeling in your terms. It is also helpful to note that this feeling is not all of you, but a *part* of you trying to teach you something and hopefully resolve itself.

The companion might respond, “So, a part of you feels...” and insert whatever you said. Many times, the person will continue with more detail about the feeling. Continual focus should be on what the person is responsible for. Other people who contributed to the feeling are essential, but now it is most helpful to stay with what you are feeling.

The companion may ask several times if this is still the correct handle to place on the feeling. It is okay if it changes several times. When the feeling or emotion is identified, we can move forward.

It is also helpful to identify where we feel the emotion in our body and place a hand where we feel it. This may be in the throat, heart, gut, or other places throughout our body. Again, this may change places throughout the session. This is okay if we track it. Be present, and refrain from judging what is there or where it is.

3. Be with that feeling or emotion

The companion might ask, “What is it like to be with that part of you that feels? Some people use the phrase, “Say hello.” Acknowledging this felt sense of a part of yourself may let it know that you are paying attention.

Often, being present does not mean that we are doing anything. I noticed this with my children. Sometimes, my offspring were hurt, and there was nothing I could say or do to help them. In those times, the best thing I could say or do was just be there and be with them. In a sense, focusing is being with the part of us trying to share what we may not be able to describe with words.

Again, this step is not a judgment in determining whether this feeling is good or bad. We are not trying to categorize it as darkness or light. In a way, we are building a relationship with something that needs our attention.

4. Invite interaction with inner characters

Sometimes I ask, "Talk about the most recent time you felt this," then "Talk about the first time you felt this."

Often, this opens the root cause of the trauma or wounding. Another helpful question might be, "What is this part of you trying to tell you?" Allowing the person to interact with the felt sense in them helps them build stronger bonds with the inner child and the inner critic. At this point, we might ask, "What would you do for that part of you if that was an actual child in front of you?"

It is common for them to see this felt sense as an inner child that needs nurturing that it did not get. It is helpful for them to talk about what they could do, such as holding, telling, or feeling with them. The first time I focused alone, I kept telling my inner child, "I got your back."

Along with the inner child, I know that most will also encounter the inner critic. Some call this the *protector* because that is what the original person might have been trying to do. I

sometimes say, “Most of us have an inner critic—what is that voice saying right now?” This is easy for most people because they are familiar with this voice that helps submerge the shadow. I invite them to step between the inner critic and inner child—sometimes they need to say something—sometimes not.

5. Connecting Dots

We often help people connect the dots by saying, “It’s no wonder...” In other words, we want to let them know the connection between that past trauma and their current reactions. We don’t want to excuse anything but to let them relax and realize that the part of them trying to tell them something has been successful now, the relationship with that part of them has changed.

It is also possible that what happens when a person focuses is hard to explain, and we do not have to feel compelled to understand any of it intellectually. Sometimes, I feel like I have heard what the focuser is saying sincerely, and it makes me cry. Empathetic listening is essential to the process, but explaining what occurred may be more of a matter of future contemplation than a present-day explanation.

We sometimes invite them to thank that part of them that revealed itself and come back into the room with us. Laura helps me when I am a companion, and she often has a few insights. She waits until the end to share them, but they are extremely helpful. It is important to be empathetic and authentic.

The Next Courageous Step

Facing the shadow/darkness inside us can be terrifying. It can stop us in our tracks, especially if we try to consider all the steps required to get from point A to point Z. If we are fortunate, we can see the next step in front of us and take that step courageously. If it takes courage, then it makes us vulnerable. We can run, hide, or fight (take the next step).

Last night, we left the hotel where we were staying to celebrate my birthday. There was an awkward last step, so I took a roll on the concrete. Being in athletics as a child kicked in, and I rolled pretty successfully. Weeks earlier, Laura stumbled on our porch, and she had bruises and painful side effects for weeks. I cannot predict how painful your next step will be, but it helps to take it soberly. It will take courage. It will make you vulnerable. It might even hurt a little, but it will be worth it!

Understanding that I am OF God opens me to the understanding that everything in nature and the cosmos seems to work toward a greater good. When I observe nature, I see that every cell, molecule, and sub-atomic particle is working toward reproduction, survival, and thriving. Through focusing, I deeply understand that my body is trying to heal itself from the trauma, like how it constantly fights against disease. Automatically, my body keeps me alive, removes waste, and reproduces itself to thrive, adapt, and survive in my environment.

I do not need to pray to God to fix me miraculously. The mechanisms are already in place. I need to pay attention. When my body communicates with me through emotion, pain, or pleasure, I can be present, learn from, and respond to it. I am learning to trust my body more; it informs and transforms me!

Laura

Leaving organized religion has opened many opportunities to heal that were not encouraged inside the church. Do not get me wrong, when I was hurting inside the church, people offered some ideas to help relieve my suffering, such as praying more, reading my Bible more, fasting, or seeking Christian counseling. I tried all the above. The thing about trauma, however, is that your nervous system holds onto those things that are triggering and traumatizing. Therefore, everything the church offered me as a “fix” to my trauma caused more trauma. For me, the very thing that was causing my trauma was also trying to tell me how to fix it with so many messages of shame, blame, and unworthiness weaved in. If I was not finding healing, it was because I was not doing something “right” or “enough” when it came to the church’s prescribed healing methods.

As Karl explored his *dark night* of the soul, he found the practice of focusing. He was all too happy to share his findings with me. I was reluctant at first. It seemed kind of “woo woo,” and it scared me, but not for the reasons you might think. It is incredibly uncomfortable to sit in your pain and acknowledge it! The body’s response to trauma is fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

If you are anything like me, when pain or trauma rears its ugly head, I get busy! If I am busy, I do not have to think about or deal with the pain. However, the nervous system does not forget.

The activities may keep my mind on something else, but my nervous system is waiting until I lay my head on my pillow at night when it decides to reactivate with vengeance! It got so bad that going inside, focusing, and reacquainting myself with my wounded inner child was a final effort.

Things I Learned from Focusing

I learned to be still.

Focusing forced me to sit. To focus correctly, you must be still. The idea is to focus on what is happening inside of you, so during those times of stillness, I could not be doing anything else that would cause my brain to once again stuff down the pain I needed to deal with.

I learned to breathe.

That sounds silly, right? Doesn't our autonomic nervous system take care of that without us having to do anything? Sure, that is true. However, when focusing, I tune into and regulate my breath—breathing in through the nose, holding it at the top, and breathing out through my mouth. It is very intentional. That is the point. Our breathing becomes erratic when we are in a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode. This keeps us in a state of dysregulation. Intentional, focused breathing brings you back to a state of regulation.

It is here that the healing work begins.

I learned to listen.

When we are still and control our breathing, we begin to listen to our body and hear what it has been trying to communicate with us. For the first time, I could hear my inner child, that wounded part of me. I also listened to my inner critic. Focusing, however, helps you shift from ignoring those parts of you to actively listening to what they are saying.

I learned to *thank* those parts of me.

This was tricky for me. For so long, I had scolded my inner child for being weak and my inner critic for being such a source of pain. Focusing helped me learn to thank both of those parts of myself. I thanked my inner child for telling me how she had felt incredibly rejected all these years. I could “hold” her and promise I would no longer abandon her for my inner critic.

I learned to thank my inner critic for trying to protect me. By doing this, I could also regain the power I had given over to this critical voice—a power I could now use to make decisions in my healing journey. By softening the voice of my inner critic, I began to bring healing to my inner child.

I learned to see the part and not the whole.

What I mean by this is a massive part of my healing was realizing that what was hurting or feeling was only a part of me, not all of me. Let me clarify.

In the depths of my church trauma, the message I would constantly send myself was, “I’m hurt!” “I’m scared!” “I’m invisible!” It is incredibly overwhelming when we think this way because we say the whole person feels hurt, scared, or invisible. Trying to fix that feels impossible.

With focusing, the language shifts to “A part of me feels hurt!” “A part of me feels scared!” or “A part of me feels invisible!” When we see these things as a part, there is less shame. That part of us feels seen and heard. We can speak to where we feel it in our body.

This was huge for me. I no longer felt like all of me was somehow *defective*. Focusing on one part of me makes the

healing process less like an *all-or-nothing* paradigm. It allows me to shift that tsunami of shame that typically washed over me to a part of me that was holding onto shame in my body.

Nothing inside me can offer comfort when “all of me” surrenders to shame. When a *part of me* is feeling shame or hurt, there is room for those other parts of me to rush in and sit with and comfort that hurting part of me.

I learned I am worth it.

Focusing is a practice for me. We experienced a religious culture where it was acceptable to put ourselves last and everything and everyone ahead of us. Focusing has taught me that I cannot give others what I am unwilling to give myself. When you fly, they tell you that if there is a loss of cabin pressure and the oxygen masks fall, to put yours on first and THEN help your child. There is a reason they are adamant about that. You cannot help someone else if you are unconscious from a lack of oxygen. Dear reader, YOU are worth putting the oxygen mask on FIRST! It is not selfish. It is self-care!

8. Thriving Outside

Karl

I went to church for most of my life. Much of that was in conservative, evangelical congregations. There were some positive aspects of being in a community with loving people. But I also understand that there are deep, systemic problems with religious organizations. In addition to trauma-related issues, organizations struggle with exclusion, othering, fear, and control. The trouble with reform is that organizations prefer to stay the same. It is impossible to change them in any significant way once they have any level of success.

However, surviving spiritually and even thriving outside the organization is also possible. We meet new people each day who are surviving and thriving and have been doing so for years. They still have their spirituality even though they might have given up their religion. Without self-promoting this OF God theory, I think it is because they realize that much of what they were searching for is inside them.

Refer to our book, [*Out into the Desert*](#), for more detail on this subject. We based much of the second half of that book on the Beatitudes of the Bible. A shorter version follows. Laura reminded me again yesterday how happy and thriving she is outside of organized religion. But it is not just that we are surviving; we are growing and thriving in the “desert.” We have everything you need to succeed.

Finding community

When I try to discuss the issues of thriving in the *desert*, the most prominent pushback I get from those attending church is in the community area. They will say to me, “But we need community!” And I will say, “I couldn’t agree more.” But, if we all agree that community is essential, it would be worth our time to go through an assessment and make sure we are all talking about the same thing and understand what a good community looks like.

There are moments I remember quite vividly from over two decades of church work. There was a time, early in my ministry, when I reached out to a family in need and found myself performing the ceremony for a 16-year-old boy who perished in a car wreck. We got even closer that year when his cousin also died in a car wreck. I was instantly a part of their community, not by choice but because of our circumstances. When you step back and analyze those experiences, you only make one assessment, “That was extremely difficult, but it was also vibrant and good and beautiful.”

In 20 years, I have attended at least 20 graduations. I officiated 20 to 30 weddings and at least that many funerals. Especially in my first church, I was there for everything: the fish fries, the community Christmas parties, and the street dance that got me in trouble. At the second church, we cooked breakfast for the campers nearby and experienced a different transient community, but it was community, nonetheless. Our last church was in Nebraska City, where the Applejack Festival was important. So, being a part of that community meant being in parades with the Christian motorcycle group, going to their meetings, and trying to help meth addicts and homeless people

get back on their feet. But more than anything, in all the churches, community meant responding to the needs of those who came across the church's threshold. It is easier in the smaller church, but I do not suppose the mission changes no matter how big the church is.

As I mentioned before, humans are hard-wired for connection. We long for a community that supports and advocates for us. Being a part of something bigger gives us the confidence to face challenges, knowing that someone will be there to help us through struggles. Laura and I are discovering that we are both introverted. Today, I am thrilled to write this manuscript and watch football by myself. But eventually, I need the community to support me in one way or another.

We need connections but do not have to get them through organized religion. While there may be a few advantages to organized religion for a community, such as leveraging resources and group dynamics, these usually do not outweigh some of the dangers of community.

People often take advantage of the loyalty and trust in a group. This happens inside and outside of organized religion, but a typical church or parish is particularly vulnerable because people do not expect abuse there. Most abuse is not intentional, but hurt people sometimes hurt other people. Again, spiritual bypassing and misuse of spiritual terms like forgiveness and unconditional love promote further neglect and abuse.

Sometimes, we use the larger group to blend in and avoid responsibility. We can avoid the part of the community that struggles with people's inconsistencies. The real need is not community but connection. And connection can only effectively happen when we are present and authentic. People sometimes

hide in organizations while claiming to be in a community—I think that is a contradiction.

One of the unfortunate draws of the community is what Brené Brown calls “Common Enemy Intimacy.” She explains:

“Common Enemy Intimacy is a counterfeit connection and the opposite of true belonging. If the bond we share with others is simply that we hate the same people, the intimacy we experience is often intense, immediately gratifying, and a straightforward way to discharge outrage and pain. It is not, however, fuel for real connection.”¹⁰

The community becomes quite simple when we talk about who we do not like. American politics facilitates this “us versus them” mentality. But, as Brené stresses, “hating the same people” is a “counterfeit connection” and not really what we truly need from communities. It may make us feel good but is not a real community. It is easier to talk about what we are against, but it is much more noble to talk about what we are for. Real community is when we do the challenging work of understanding and celebrating our differences.

So, where do we find community? I find it in many places.

About eight years ago, we moved to a small town. For whatever reason, when we are here, we sit together on our porch and do not seek out local connections. But we are equal distances from our two daughters and our grandchildren. We

¹⁰ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9102243-common-enemy-intimacy-is-counterfeit-connection-and-the-opposite-of>

see them occasionally and consider them part of our community. Laura and I have grown to the point where we can speak honestly and vulnerably to each other, and she is the most essential part of my community. I also have fellow authors, podcasters, and online friends. We have people we counsel with and people who counsel with us. Often, I feel like I have too much community.

If we are honest with ourselves, most religious organizations do not provide genuine community. We may visit people superficially, but we do not share deep secrets or intimate details of our lives. The intent is there, but the programming is such that religion does not have time for our grief or trauma. It sometimes creates more issues because it does not have time or programming for our deepest needs.

One of the most common complaints of the church is that people are not genuine. We should find our community where we can be genuine and authentic, even if that place looks nothing like a church. We can even find community when we go inside. I do not have time to explain it here, but it is worth your time to investigate it further.

Finding My Voice

If the place where I do my religion has only one speaker and a select group of teachers, then my voice will always fall silent. I may be able to ask some questions, but from experience, I learned to accept the prescribed teaching. The organization may talk about diversity and openness, but it likes to keep its mind about beliefs and practices the same. Religion gives the illusion of equality, but the leadership keeps the group loyal to the group's mission.

I knew I got to speak the most as a pastor, so I assumed I had a voice. But, when Laura and I wrote about *finding your voice*, I realized even as a pastor, I only said things within a certain range of acceptability. It could seem challenging, but I could only go so far in challenging the accepted norm. It is like when we talk about re-inventing church and religion. I remember how hard it was to move a piece of furniture in the church, much less challenge doctrine or practices that people were accustomed to.

To find our voice, we must find a community that sees us with eyes of grace. The group always tends to protect the group, so allowing people to express their opinions is harder. If I am talking to a friend, I can tell them I can't entirely agree with them. But, if I disagree with the organization, that is a bigger problem.

Finding the Word

My tradition is Christianity. In this tradition, people attach varying degrees of emphasis to the Bible. Some deem this collection of letters, poetry, and other literature to be the "Word of God," even though the Bible gives that title to Jesus in the Gospel of John. Some would ignore the Bible completely, but I would agree with Paul (very simply) that the Bible is *useful*. It is "inspired," but no evidence suggests it is infallible. Some would suggest that Christianity is like a tree that grows out of the soil of Scripture. Pete Enns points to Walter Brueggemann's characterization of Scripture as compost for a new life.¹¹ The

¹¹ <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/the-bible-cookbook-or-compost-pile/>

soil and compost are important but only point to the life that grows from them.

I have an evolving relationship with what is the sacred text of my tradition. As of today, it is still helpful. However, there were forty authors during a specific period. Some truth is found there, but it is not everything God has to say. Today, there is one new book published on Amazon every five minutes. It is possible that God still speaks through what someone published a few minutes ago, just like in the first century.

The written word is only one way God speaks to us. Throughout history, we have been trying to understand our origins, the nature of the Divine, and our purpose in creation. The only way to evolve is to keep considering everything, not just one small part of what we consider revelation.

Being OF God means that part of the revelation is even inside us. Someone commented on a chapter in my book [*Being: A Journey Toward Presence and Authenticity*](#). Concerning the chapter, *Being with the Divine*, they remarked that it almost seemed like I was discovering what I believed about God while writing it.

They were exactly right.

Finding Uncertainty

One of the most challenging parts of thriving outside organized religion is our perceived need for certainty. Religion usually has a creed or a belief statement that prescribes what we should agree to. This gives a sense of security because we

do not have to search or strive to find the truth. After all, leaders prescribe the acceptable answer to our questions.

The intentions mean to make us feel secure, but they do not always have the desired effect. They make us feel comfortable but do not necessarily lead us to the truth. Once we become more comfortable with uncertainty, we free ourselves to become explorers in search of the truth.

Finding Comfort

The first funeral I remember was for my Grandpa Joe. He was a bridge builder for the county and a farmer of sorts. He had about ten cows, all of whom had names, even though he eventually ate most of them. We got to stay with him and Nanny every year on our birthdays, and we spent most holidays with them. After my grandma died, they put him in a nursing home, which he kept escaping from until he eventually passed away.

They let me recite a poem I wrote for him at the funeral. It was in a gymnasium because he was well-loved by his community. He coached baseball and talked to everyone he saw, no matter where he was. I miss both of my grandpas for distinct reasons.

I started attending funerals a lot more when I started doing them. My first funeral was for a high school kid killed in a tragic auto accident. I did not even know his parents, but when I contacted him, they asked me to officiate the funeral. Guess what? It was also in a gymnasium because of the circumstances of his death.

When I conduct a funeral, I tell the people, "This is not about you; it is about the person we are honoring." But I also tell them, "This is not for them; it is for you!"

Over the years, I have slowly been learning that we cannot heal things until we feel them. The beatitude stresses that when we mourn, we will find comfort.

I never understood the celebration type of funeral. It always seemed like we were bypassing the pain we felt from losing a friend. It is hard to find consolation until we feel the weight of the loss. The grief we are supposed to experience keeps resurfacing until we allow ourselves the opportunity to feel what is natural.

I also do not understand the narrative, “Be strong!” This also seems like avoiding what we naturally feel. I remember viewing the body of the young man at my first funeral. It surprised me when I cried over a boy I did not know. Why did I do that? Because it is the natural thing to do. Because I felt it, mourning comforted me, and I was able to console the family.

Being OF God means what we feel allows us to heal truly. Comfort will not come from avoiding the pain, and it will also not come when we deny what we feel. I found comfort outside of organized religion because, for the first time, no leader told me what to feel. Instead, I went inside and asked what I really felt. It was painful—I mourned—and then, I found comfort.

Finding Satisfaction

I know a lot of songs by their tunes, but I cannot tell you who sang them or anything like that. In other words, I never studied or paid attention to the music as much as I liked its rhythm and beauty. So, the only U2 lyrics I remember are, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” This resonates with me because I am adventurous by heart and always looking over the next horizon.

One of the main reasons I was frustrated was that I was always trying to fit in. I felt out of place early in life and tried to fit in through college and my early career. Becoming a pastor worked well for me to blend into the community and become like them. I did not necessarily have an excellent vision for them because they already knew who they were and what they wanted to accomplish. I was a player on their stage, quickly learning what they expected and delivering it. That was until year 20, when I finally told Laura, "I can't do this anymore."

When I finally started asking questions like, "What do I really believe?" and "What if I am wrong?" I discovered not only what I believed but also who I genuinely am. Now that I have a better idea of who I really am, I feel more satisfied because I am living more authentically. I do not always do what people expect me to do, but I know what I am looking for, and I am more able to find satisfaction.

It is a mistake to imagine we can be satisfied with every outcome in our lives. We may never get everything we imagine, but we can discover what we are looking for and, more often, find satisfaction.

By being OF God and looking inward, we discover our true selves and authenticity. Being who we are does not mean everyone will accept us, but it will clarify what we seek. When we know what we are looking for, we are more apt to find it and be satisfied.

Finding Mercy

I have talked about mercy since I became a pastor. I always understood mercy as "not getting what we deserve." When I saw God as retributive, I understood that God wanted to punish

us for sin, and we need mercy. Over time, I have learned to see God as restorative. The only reason we would need mercy is if the Divine is retributive. Retribution is a human characteristic that only makes God more immature, not more holy.

But we do need mercy in our dealing with humans. Because we are not perfect, we often tend to retaliate. They did something wrong and deserve what they have coming to them. We know how to get people back for offending us, whether it is actual aggression or passiveness.

Realizing that we are OF God helps us go inside and find the heart of restoration. Retribution only causes further division and does not accomplish anything noble. Hopefully, nations will move away from our retributive nature. It starts with mercy and ends with compassion. However, nations only change once individuals decide not to live with that mindset.

As the beatitude stresses, when we show mercy, we will receive mercy!

Finding Peace

Martin Luther King Jr., a peace advocate, once said, “True peace is not the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”¹²

I have always said *peace is the presence of God*. Peace emerges in the most unpeaceful situations. Throughout history, man has tried to build walls to create peace. If we could block out all the ugly, evil, or noise, we would have peace. History teaches us that often, it is the wall that brings hostility. The

¹² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/11/26/true-peace/>

most visible example in our time would be when Ronald Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and said, “The advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of peace.” He later exclaimed, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

We need to make peace with our past when we talk about peace. Often, this takes some arduous work, like encountering and being present with our shadow. These things are challenging work but worth it because they lead to peace.

We also make peace with ourselves. Marvin Gaye said, “If you cannot find peace within yourself, you will never find it anywhere else.”¹³ Sometimes, peace is a decision to stop manipulating situations. When we choose to be content, we are not saying we are against improvement but will be satisfied with where we are.

We also must make peace with our enemies. Brené Brown said, “People are hard to hate close up. Move in.”¹⁴ I want to be careful with my enemies, and sometimes I must set boundaries, but getting to know people often eliminates them as enemies.

Realizing we are OF God makes peace so much simpler. Peace is not about subduing the external. Peace is about connecting internally with the source of peace. Connecting with the Divine in us should be the most direct and pure source of peace. We can find it instantly and, in any situation, we find ourselves in.

¹³ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marvin_gaye_361092

¹⁴ <https://readthinkact.com/braving-wilderness-brene-brown/>

9. Parenting

Karl

Parenting is a daunting endeavor. I always felt like it was the most monumental task I ever attempted, yet I had the least training of anything else. There were classes and books available, but they were all over the place regarding theories and practices. To make it worse, I grew up during the Dr. Spock era, and we were rapidly discovering how what we initially thought was all wrong. My parents got some interesting advice from their religious peers, which only caused me more confusion when considering how I would tackle this challenging road ahead.

As I experimented with different approaches, I found something that worked with the firstborn but not nearly as well with the strong-willed middle child. My third child was magnificently different from either of them and then religion and being a pastor muddied the water even further. It was like an excursion with no map and bad travel guides. Everyone had a theory, but no coherent way forward emerged.

To add to the mix, I entered parenthood with a reasonable amount of unaddressed trauma that I did not even realize I had. During the early years of parenthood, there was not enough time to breathe, much less address shadow material or consider such things. Their lives depended on us, and we were doing our best to keep our heads above water.

Later, there were the challenges of middle school and watching our precious children turn into something we could not recognize, only to turn back shortly after that into

reasonable human beings, only to move out and begin to live their own lives. Sometimes, when I sit with them these days, I cannot believe that we survived all this, much less did it well by anyone's standard. I extract from my experiences not an extensive list of guaranteed parenting advice, but more reasonably, just a few things that I am glad I accidentally did well.

The following writings originate from things that Laura and I wrote and discussed. They were initially released in a parenting book called *Parenting Deconstructed*. Just in case you noticed some similarities, all of them originate from the same source—our personal musings.

Evolving out of a Fear-Based Paradigm

I kneeled over a flower bed when I noticed my daughter standing beside me. She stood like she wanted to talk, so I sat back on the grass. Lily faced me directly with her hands on her hips, and then, she let me have it!

For a few years during earlier parenting, I told people that I was paddling my man boat through the estrogen sea because I had two teenage daughters, and I had no idea what to do. Lily has been articulate since she was a toddler, and she retains information like a sponge. So, I would have to conclude that since I have known her (her whole life), I have never won an argument with her.

Shortly after she started informing me about a few things, I became agitated. You know, we have thoughts like, "Who does she think she is?" This type of incident happened again, and I had the same initial emotion. I am glad I did not say something silly like, "Just calm down, and we'll talk later." She needed to

express what she was thinking, and thankfully, I realized this shortly after she started talking.

I couldn't comprehend everything she was trying to teach me, but she did teach me that day. She taught me about what makes her tick, about what she felt, and about her heart. It was a deeply intimate moment when she became the teacher that I always wanted to be for her. I am glad that I was able to dodge my initial instincts and hear her emotions as well as her wisdom.

At this time, I started to understand some things that worked for us as parents. It would become clarified after I went through deconstruction and our children matured. But I imagine most of the years when our kids were growing, I had a bewildered look on my face most of the time. We received too much advice from many people who did not know what would work either.

Not only were we learning what was working, but we were also slowly discovering what never had a chance of maturing into anything viable. Some of these ideas were rooted in bad theology. Some of our decisions were conceived in ignorance. And many were just flawed assumptions and listening to the wrong people. The common denominator in most bad choices is that they all originated from fear.

Our worst decisions were rooted in fear.

I often state that every religion I have studied begins its theology with what we should be afraid of. It does not really matter what the other person is selling; if they can convince us to be afraid of hell, dying, or not being popular, they can sell us anything.

It happened that way often in parenting. We heard a news report that something was happening in *record* numbers. Other times, a pastor's message might warn us about something we had never considered, and then we became determined to *act* or *do something* about it. When I was a preacher, I did this subconsciously. Influencers know that fear is the most potent motivator, especially for parents.

But fear causes us to be reckless in our strategies. Because we fear what might happen, we over-emphasize the urgency to fix a problem we did not even know existed yesterday. I was that way with purity rings after I watched a video that first created fear, then made me feel guilty and prompted me to act as quickly as I could. I deeply regret giving them the rings—they never spoke of them after that day. The purity culture used our fears to market an agenda that was traumatizing to women and created more problems than it solved.

We were also often afraid of what people thought. In some ways, we realized it was happening and apologized to our children because we were in ministry and did not see another way out of it. Our children were incredibly gracious, but I always felt like I was sacrificing my integrity for some jackass that would turn on us a little later in the journey.

Today, I write about *being who we are* (authenticity), and I deeply understand how much better respect is than affinity. Even though my teenage children understood compromise, they respect me so much more for being now that they are older. I wish I had been more authentic for them and myself during their formative years. I do not even attend church now, so I regret much of that activity that I wasted trying to get the congregation to accept me.

I could write a book about how fear motivated me to make hasty and unwise decisions in my life and as a parent. Our children understood that we were not perfect, but mostly because we learned to apologize when we got it wrong. Fear is never a good starting place for any decision. When we are misinformed, our emotions cause us to venture outside reasonable logic and make dangerous decisions.

But we did get a few things right.

The Things We Got Right

Learning to be Brave

My dad never learned to swim. My grandpa is a person I relate to spiritually in a strange, metaphysical way. I can feel him sometimes. But I remember a time when he teased my dad about never learning to swim and about being lazy. It had a deep, powerful impact on me—not because it was Good Parenting 101, but because of the opposite of what I described above—I did not want to be afraid of anything.

As I described, I often succumbed to my fears, especially when people I admired told me I should be afraid. But, after listening to my grandpa and my father, I determined that I never wanted to regret missing an opportunity simply because I was scared. I made eleven skydiving jumps, took Karate, and did things like writing books. I had a crippling fear of speaking in public, and I overcame it to be an effective speaker and preacher. I traveled overseas and changed careers several times because I did not want to regret what I was afraid to

experience. It would be okay if I failed, but it would not be acceptable if I did not try.

I was determined to instill this type of bravery in my children. I wanted them to learn to be confident to answer the phone, speak in public, and make their own decisions. So, when our oldest daughter (Abbey) was young, I started whispering in her ear to “be brave.” Many years later, I saw a social media post from her that said, “I don’t need a man to slay the dragon—I am the dragon.” She has undoubtedly been courageous in achieving the goals she set out to accomplish, and she is thriving as an RN in the Kansas City area.

Occasionally, I overheard my children talking. Sometimes, it wasn’t comforting, and other times, it was life-giving. The latter occurred when I heard Abbey whispering to her sister to “be brave.”

You cannot imagine how inspiring and uplifting that was! It was one of the greatest moments in my life, and now I have witnessed her teaching bravery to her two daughters and her husband.

Children are sometimes naturally reckless, but bravery must be modeled and taught. Amidst the sea of machismo, crowd-following and foolish behavior can be genuine, character-building bravery. It is authentic, honest, and inspiring. I challenge you to experience true bravery in your journey and to share that challenge with those who look up to you.

Finding Our Voice

My parents told me stories of how I would hide under the coffee table when people came over. I played sports and participated in most activities but always found a way not to

talk. When I went to college, I had to take a speech class. I was doing okay in the class, which interested me because it was a new adventure. But I almost flunked the class because I left off over half of a 15-minute speech—I just forgot it!

Early in my career, a manager called me into her office and informed me of her issue with my performance. She told me I was a good worker but needed to learn to speak to others better, or “it is just not going to work out.”

She referred me to a group that met on that campus, and I started attending reluctantly after work. It was a little club for people like me. We mostly spoke extemporaneously, which felt like torture. When it was your turn, someone would hand you a topic, and you would have to talk for a minute or two. It felt like an eternity, and I almost vomited a few times. The experience challenged me and caused me to get better. Later, I would join a Toastmasters group while working for another employer. I won a couple of awards and later became president of that group.

I thought I had conquered my fear until I had to teach from the Bible for the first time. I was being licensed for ministry, and my pastor let me teach a lecture at our church, and again, I felt like I was going to be sick. It got easier over time until I preached my first sermon. With each new challenge came a new level of pain, adjustment, and proficiency (or as close as I could come to it).

So, one day, when Laura and I started writing about “Finding Our Voice,” I assumed I had already found my voice, especially since I was a pastor and got to say what I thought every Sunday. As I reflected on this after leaving the pastorate, I realized I did not authentically have a voice because I always had to answer the board, the deacons, or the congregation. I subconsciously

knew I could only go far with challenging long-held beliefs. No matter how smart, talented, or insightful I might be, the people wanted their pastor to talk about what they expected him to talk about.

After deconstructing and leaving the pulpit, I began to understand finding my voice and reflected on how I shared that with my children. I remember a painful conversation with my son, Jordan, when I needed him to tell me about something that happened to him at college. It was like he was experiencing the difficulty I experienced all those years trying to learn to communicate.

What was it that had to happen in those speeches and conversations? We have to be *vulnerable*—it is so important. Bravery and vulnerability go together. I did not know what he would say, and he did not know how I would receive it. Being vulnerable is essential in my writing, healing, and all aspects of my journey. But I also had to teach it to my children. It has something to do with being seen with eyes of grace. When we “spill the beans” and do not die, it heals the shame and creates new confidence.

We are so vulnerable with our children since we have deconstructed—much less judgmental.

But finding our voice also births in us a deeper root into *authenticity*. We can now speak to each other as ourselves without playing a role. Because we now realize how much every person needs their autonomy, we do not play roles or put expectations on them. We are learning to be *who we are*.

Figuring out *who we are* is difficult after deconstruction. So much of what we identified with before was what we did and what was expected of us. Now that much of that is stripped away, we must ask questions like, “What do we really like to do?”

“What do we really care about?” and “What is our truth that needs telling?” The wonderful thing we can now do is ask those questions honestly to our grown children and, for the first time, not have any expectations.

Knowing *who we are* and discovering who our children are may be one of the greatest gifts to give our family members.

Learning to Think for Ourselves

I always said that I wanted them to find their own faith, even when I was deep into ministry. But what I really wanted was for them to find MY faith. Eventually, they were all baptized into the faith I was participating in. What I did not see was, at the same time, I was teaching them to think for themselves. I remember seeing an essay Jordan wrote at college about the legalization of marijuana and realizing he honestly was thinking for himself.

All our kids moved away from our home, went to college, and established lives for themselves. They all have their own lives, beliefs, and political views. I am so thankful we fostered this passion in them to discover how they feel about various things in life. There were times when it worried me, but now it is the greatest gift we could have given them.

I remember when we told the girls that we were deconstructing. They just acknowledged that they had been waiting for us to evolve. They were accepting and gracious to us for our past and how we raised them. They took the good things from our experience and found the best of all their experiences. None of us are in the same place on any issue, but we are all thinking for ourselves and accepting each other.

Controlling our children into believing like us almost never works. Our energy might be better spent fostering mercy, love,

forgiveness, and compassion for others. It is better to give them analysis tools than to give them what we consider to be treasure.

My daughter, who stood over me and told me off, was at my house the other day. We sat on the porch with her son, and she composed some music on her guitar to one of my poems about my dog. It was a beautiful night, and I realized how much I respect her. She is brave—she thinks for herself—and she has found her authentic, vulnerable voice.

But our relationship would not have been the same if I had not evolved through deconstruction and the work I have done in my Shadow. Some of my beliefs were toxic, and I needed to be brave and rethink what was important to me. I have become a much more present and authentic Dad and Papa.

Laura and I joke that we want to be like our kids at various times. It is true. Most of the things we thought we cared about when we were young turned out to be unimportant, just desires of our ego and a fear of what others would think. The good things we are discovering now echo what our children are finding. We are on a brave, exciting journey that includes our children. We hardly ever agree totally, but we have tools of discovery that will lead us all to where we should go.

The only thing we are afraid of now is returning to where we came from.

Laura

Validating Our Child's Emotions

I started teaching later in life, but I have refined my classroom management skills, so I always feel like I am in control and moving towards valuable objectives. I teach second grade at a rural elementary school, and even though the challenges are varied, they are predictable. I can usually guess what children will say under most circumstances, and little surprises me anymore.

But, when the children were playing with Legos, one of my students blurted out, "I'm stupid."

I pulled him aside and quickly reassured him, "No, you are not!"

He argued that he was sure he was because someone in his family informed him of that. My heart broke, and I realized I had not responded appropriately to this young fellow. We often react to heart-breaking situations like this the best that we can.

We want to rescue them quickly. We see them in danger, and we need to save them even though their misunderstanding is deeply rooted in their own experience. However, we cannot always rescue them or even help them immediately. If the person they care about most thinks they are deficient, they will think less of themselves than they could.

While we do not want them to feel these negative emotions, the real problem may be our discomfort. If our child or student feels terrible about themselves, it reminds us of how we sometimes felt inside or were treated in earlier days.

But this young man in my classroom did not need me to rescue him or tell him the correct answer. He already believed

the lie propagated by the person he cared about. He may not have wanted it to be true, and he may not have been happy about it, but he believed it because of who told him. What did he need from me that I did not give him?

Before I said anything else, I could have validated his feelings. The simplest way to do that is to repeat what you hear. When he stated that he felt stupid, I could have said something like, "So, you feel stupid?"

There is no need to agree or disagree with him initially. We are discussing how he feels, not how I perceive the situation. We must acknowledge his feelings and realize where he is emotionally.

When my husband and I are doing a focusing session with someone, we often help them say how they are feeling. They will eventually say, "A part of me feels...." After they express how they feel and where they feel it, we do not tell them they should or should not feel that or whether we agree with how they feel—we repeat it back to them,

We say, "So, a part of you feels..."

We often tell them they have a right to feel how they feel. Usually, that gets the ball rolling so they can move forward toward healing; we must avoid the urge to respond from our trauma, which always comes out reactionary.

We can respond to our children in similar ways. We may have a more significant influence on them, but that makes what we say and how we say it even more relevant. The pause between our reaction and our response often makes all the difference in the world. In the brief time it takes to draw a breath, we can choose more effectively whether to speak and what would be best to say.

As I mentioned before, we do not want them to feel pain, and we desperately try to rescue them from it when we can. I remember when my children experienced physical pain, and I always went to them immediately and did what I could to alleviate it. It is much the same reaction when we see them emotionally hurting.

Our initial reaction may be to rescue them from feelings of unworthiness and find a quick fix to their problems, but often, it makes sense to do something a little more deliberate and pursue a more thoughtful approach.

Indeed, there are life-threatening situations, so we have the basic instinct to act quickly, but most things are not life or death, and they will benefit from a deliberate, thoughtful response.

My job initially was not to judge how they felt but to hear it clearly. The best way to acknowledge how someone feels is to ask them, "How do you feel?" and then repeat it to them. I was so surprised the first time I did this with someone. It meant so much more than me hurriedly trying to imagine a solution for them.

Most often, people and children respond with more information, beginning with, "Yeah, and..." where they dive deeper into the cause and reason they feel that way. Given enough time and care, they may even be able to devise their solution to how they feel without us having to imagine one for them.

Especially with younger children, we may have to help them recognize emotions they have trouble verbalizing. Often, we would say, "Does it feel more like this or more like that?" Even if the answer is "icky-like," go with the answer they determine is best, but keep trying to help them with the vocabulary.

It is essential not to presuppose what they are feeling. Many times, my children surprised me with their understanding. They may not have had the vocabulary, but they are experts at how they feel and think about that more than anything else.

We must take the role of an observer, and anything we can do to remind us to stay in that role is helpful. Breathing deeply helps us pause and listen long enough for them to form their next thoughts. We might ask, "How does that make you feel?" or "How do you describe your feelings?"

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to pause and make sure you are not advising until they have thoroughly explored the depths of what they feel and what they think that feeling is telling them. Listen, ask questions, and breathe.

We do not just get these negative messages from parents; they also come from other groups, including religion. Children gain clarity about their feelings and desires when we verbally reflect on them, but different messages, and even trauma, are introduced from the messages they are hearing from others.

The best way to penetrate the messaging we all received is to ask, "How do you feel about that?" This helps us understand how they have processed what they have heard and whether it had a positive or negative impact. With good caregiving, we may help them avoid the trauma they otherwise would have faced.

Our children have forgiven us for most of our mistakes, but it might have been better not to make them in the first place. I hope you learn to be proficient and pause after the initial shock long enough not to react and to respond with better questions."

Learning to understand and validate your child's feelings may be one of the superpowers parents have been searching for.

Karl

How Being OF God Matters to Parenting.

I try not to have regrets, but there are things I wish I could have done better. Like my parents, I did the best I could with the information I had. So, although I give myself grace, I do not want to defend those ineffective ways; I want to pursue and promote a better way, if possible.

Like when I was parented by fear, I often listened to the voices around me. If I listened to the prominent voices telling me how to do it, I could at least blame it on someone if it did not work right. Because I did not know for sure, I often trusted the consensus instead of my authentic inner voice.

But now that I realize I can trust myself, I learn more from my inner, authentic voice than the cacophony of voices around me. It takes more patience, and I must first tune out all the noise of my world. It is more disciplined and less mainstream but also more authentic and genuine. I sense that my grown children and my grandchildren do not want me to be anything other than what I am—they want me to be me—they want me to be authentic.

Being OF God means that I work from the inside out. I do not try to gain the approval of my religious system or an old God in the sky. I now look inward and trust the divine voice inside me. I rely on my true self more than those around me to tell me how to be and what to say. Being the playful, adventurous, and mystical person I am is freeing.

The challenge is that even my children and Laura have their expectations of me. They imagine things going a certain way and me doing certain things. Some of that is based on

their assumptions about life and their strengths and weaknesses. But my best move is to access the Divine inside me and proceed from my authentic self. It is best to be me and trust myself. It is best to be genuine.

Even though it makes me vulnerable, it not only is best for me, but it is also best for them as well. Our children have always been gracious about the mistakes we have made. Probably because we asked for forgiveness and told them we were sorry. They could forgive us and learn from our mistakes. But if we can avoid it, I hope we can pursue a better path in the future. Let us all be OF God more than trying to seek some mythical dogma or contrived way of being based on consensus. Let us go inside, find truth, and live authentically from that way of being and becoming.

10. Somatic Therapies

Amanda Baker, director of the Center for Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Disorders and a clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, says, “It’s a treatment focusing on the body and how emotions appear within the body. Somatic therapies posit that our body holds and expresses experiences and emotions, and traumatic events or unresolved emotional issues can become ‘trapped’ inside.”¹⁵

Talk therapies engage only the mind, which helps with the awareness that hopefully leads to changes in behavior. Somatic Therapy cultivates body awareness so that people can explore thoughts, emotions, and memories together to enable change, increase resilience, and improve symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Then, we are not just aware but more able to respond to the demands and triggers of life and improve our overall well-being.

The therapies listed below are ones that I am familiar with, have experienced, or have seen results in other people. None of them come to us magically, and most involve some dedicated effort over time. It is essential to do our homework and consult professionals.

Disclaimer: Although we have helped many people, we are not licensed clinicians. We rely and report only on our

¹⁵ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-somatic-therapy-202307072951>

experience and the experience of professionals. Always do your homework and consult a professional.

Focusing

Focusing is the tool we must use when dealing with our shadow and learning to be authentic and present.

Focusing is a body-oriented process of self-awareness that promotes emotional healing. It involves recognizing how you feel and where you feel it. We have led people through a simple session in person and online to help them begin to shift their stuck places and help them along in their journey toward wellness.

Our bodies are already trying to speak to us about past trauma and pain.

The International Focusing Institute clarifies: “Your body knows more about situations than you know. For example, your body picks up more about another person than you consciously know. With a little training, you can get a bodily feel for the “more” that is happening in any situation. From that bodily feel come small steps that lead toward resolution.”¹⁶

Focusing sessions are like counseling sessions, but a little more focused and contemplative. A companion or observer leads you through this simple process to help you along your journey to where you are and who you are.

This therapy helped me and can help you get out of those stuck places.

¹⁶ <https://focusing.org/felt-sense/what-focusing>

Chapter 7 details our method for this therapy, and a basic format can also be found at [The International Focusing Institute](#) and in Eugene Gendlin's book [Focusing](#).

It is relatively easy to learn this therapy but seek a seasoned companion to be with you first. For me, it was a group of Benedictine Sisters in Atchison, KS. I also have several friends who are great companions for these sessions, but currently, I most often experience focusing when I am triggered by taking a pause and going inside. This allows the trauma to experience a shift and integrate itself properly into my nervous system.

Dr. Aimee Apigian has a similar process called "[Parts Work](#)." We use similar language in focusing when we say, "A part of me feels angry or sad..." This makes it more manageable because we can focus on an angry part but can't effectively manage a statement like "I am angry." It's too much. It's overwhelming.

By focusing on the part that alerted us, we can speak to our inner child and our inner critic (protector) and improve that part of us.

Extra Reading: [The Body Keeps the Score](#).

Breathwork

Breathwork seems almost too simple. But I remember being fascinated by the interplay of the word spirit and breath when I studied scripture. Our first breath brings us to life and makes us a living being. Intentional breathing is an extremely helpful tool for self-regulation. Laura and I find ourselves doing that almost subconsciously now to deal with stress and with things that trigger us.

Colorado-based psychotherapist Charlotte Mulloy states, “Because breathwork involves the physical act of breathing and the mental act of focusing on the breath, it effectively links the mind and body, aiming to provide awareness and insights into your nervous system and emotions.”¹⁷

Yoga offers various breathwork (pranayama) that can be activating, energizing, relaxing, or calming. With practice, these techniques can achieve effective outcomes in our lives as regulating and healing practices.

Our breath has a profound influence on our emotional health and well-being.

Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR)

According to [Brainline.org](https://www.brainline.org), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) is a form of trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy specifically developed for reducing the power of traumatic memories. A trained therapist will guide you to think about trauma while moving your eyes back and forth, left to right. Over time, this will help your brain reprocess the memories so they no longer cause as much pain.”

Laura and I experienced this therapy directly, but our friends have shown us its effectiveness. EMDR requires a trained therapist, and unlike some other treatments, it requires you to be aware of the traumatic memory you are attempting to reprocess.

¹⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/somatic-therapy/>

Some helpful sources that recognize EMDR as effective:

- [American Psychiatric Association](#)
- [International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- [U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs/Dept. of Defense](#)
- [The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)

Find more information at:

- [EMDR Institute](#)
- [EMDR International Association](#)

As with all therapies, it is important to do your research and seek the professional opinion of a qualified professional.

Mindfulness

I hesitate to include mindfulness because, like most other things, it can be misused in some ways. I have a mindfulness practice similar to the ancient practice of centering prayer, where I dismiss my various thoughts without judgment and become intently aware of what the universe and my intuition are trying to tell me. It usually manifests as a simple statement, idea, or clarification. It's very helpful for me.

A mindfulness practice can also help us identify the emotions we are feeling, helping us focus on one thing at a time and clearly identify where in our body we feel what we feel. As you might realize, this coordinates and communicates naturally with other therapies.

In my opinion, one of the pitfalls of mindfulness is that mantras can be used to move toward what we want to accomplish while bypassing our woundedness and trauma. The trauma doesn't disappear because we manifest a new reality or direction. Trauma cannot be healed with positive thinking alone. It requires deep inner work.

With that said, a very purposeful mindfulness practice will enhance other effective therapies as long as we don't ignore what our bodies are trying to tell us.

Hypnotherapy

According to The Cleveland Clinic, hypnotherapy is “a heightened state of concentration and focused attention. Guided by a trained, certified hypnotist or hypnotherapist, hypnosis allows you to be more open to suggestions to making healthful changes in your perceptions, sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, or behaviors.”¹⁸

Hypnotherapy is moderately effective for me. I occasionally enlist my friend's help, a trained therapist. I found it helpful after other treatments and therapy sessions as a way to solidify what I was already implementing. For me, it has been a helpful tool for my recovery.

One of my revelations while I was a pastor was that most Christian services are at least mildly hypnotic. Michael Sherlock of ExChristian.net expresses this in his blog titled “Church and Hypnotic Manipulation.”

¹⁸ <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22676-hypnosis>

He first explains the five stages of hypnosis:

1. Introduction
2. Induction
3. Deepening
4. Suggestion
5. Awakening

Then he says, “It is the contention of this author that the same five stages can be found within most Christian church services. The hypnotic techniques employed during church sessions have served further to entrench Christian beliefs into the minds of Christian subjects, and so demonstrates the mentally manipulative religious package offered by the Christian religion.”¹⁹

It is generally understood that hypnosis requires these four things for it to work as expected:

- Belief
- Imagination
- Conviction
- Expectation

From this, he explains, “These elements are generally found in abundance in the mind of the true believing, church-going Christian. Generally, those who attend church believe that their pastor or preacher is speaking the word of God, which has very

¹⁹ <https://new.exchristian.net/2012/05/church-and-hypnotic-manipulation.html>

powerful psychological implications and satisfies the first criteria of the list above. Further, the churchgoer's imagination is engaged at almost all times throughout the service, during the singing, the sermon, the prayer, and it is probably the hardest working aspect of the four criteria set out above."¹⁹

He concludes, "Professional hypnotists say that the subject must have conviction, and the stronger, the better! Almost nothing in this world inspires conviction like one's religious beliefs. The attendee is convinced that the church service is permeated by the spirit of their God, which leads to the expectation that they will "feel the spirit." In truth, the elation one gets from "feeling the spirit" may be little more than the pleasure and catharsis of entering a trance."¹⁹

As a former pastor, I agree that Christian religious services work similarly to hypnotic trances. They are very effective but inauthentic in their admissions about the practices. They would never admit to hypnotizing their congregations, even though that is precisely what they do. These days, the cadence and key changes are almost scientific, and lighting, sound, and group energy all work together to affect change. It removes our filters and speaks directly to our subconscious.

Although I am opposed to using hypnosis in this way, I also know it is very effective. Each individual has to decide how to implement these types of therapies. Getting past the conscious mind for some healing is essential, but it's also important what suggestions are made when we get there.

Regulating

According to the Child Mind Institute, self-regulation is “the ability to manage your emotions and behavior following the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, calming yourself down when you get upset, adjusting to a change in expectations, and handling frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our feelings.”²⁰

Most humans begin life without much ability to regulate themselves, so they rely on caregivers to nurture and teach them about self-regulation. Sometimes, childhood trauma can affect our ability to regulate, so we need somatic therapies and regulating strategies to rewire our brains and help us survive difficult circumstances without creating more trauma.

Even though I’m not associated with organized religion anymore, I think there were some regulating aspects to religious communities. Unfortunately, some of the practices and beliefs are also traumatizing, abusive, and dysregulating. Our best move is extracting what worked well from that experience and leaving the rest behind. Sitting with a companion and focusing, we experience the same regulation as when we prayed together.

There is now a plethora of regulating techniques available on the internet. Again, do your homework and consult with professionals. Don’t search for answers that support your

²⁰ <https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>

already-held beliefs, or you may create new problems. The following are a few examples of helpful regulating strategies. You will find many more when you start your own research.

Regulating Strategies:

- Blow bubbles and take deep breaths.
- Play with clay or Play-Doh.
- Handle a fidget.
- Hug something soft.
- Sit with a weighted blanket.
- Color mindfully.
- Engage in a physical or mental game.
- Take a brain break.

One thing that has been very important to me is that I don't want to continue to bypass my emotions or feelings. For many years, I went to church, which triggered me, then they helped me regulate with hugs and prayer, and the root issues were left unresolved. To blame it on sin or the Devil is simply bypassing, in my opinion.

There are some very accessible somatic therapies, such as what I've mentioned above and others, that can help us get to the root of the problem and integrate our trauma effectively. It's not complicated work, but sometimes it's very hard.

As we experience this healing and learn to regulate when triggered, we live much more complete and vibrant lives. We are no longer controlled by the things that set us off. It's a process that is worth embodying.

Afterword

As we conclude this distillation of our journey out of religious trauma, I want to share the hope I shared at the beginning.

Whether you are a broken-hearted ex-pastor who feels some guilt and shame about the past or a single mother who lost relationships and support when you shared your changing beliefs, this book can be a roadmap to addressing the trauma you carry in your body. Whether you consider yourself an atheist, agnostic, struggling Christian, or a spiritual nomad, you are all welcome to explore here and find your way.

You don't need to organize anything, start something new, or contribute money. Just sit back and consider the information gathered to make your journey more compelling. It won't give you an iron-clad manifesto or creed to follow, but it may save you some time as your path reveals itself.

Please accept the challenge of trusting yourself more, even if it's only a little initially. Your developing intuition is as essential as trusted guides that will be there when you need them.

We are here to help, along with the resources listed. It's okay, and you are not alone. You can be brave and face your fears, and you will find the best path for you!

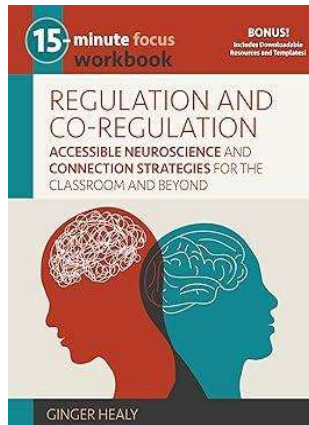
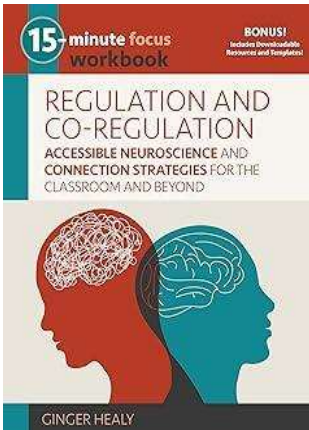
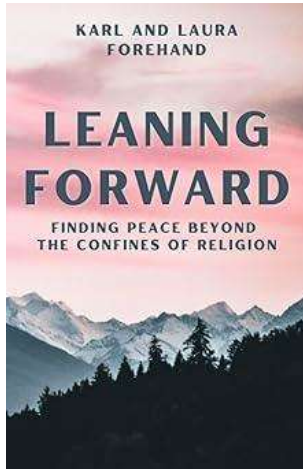
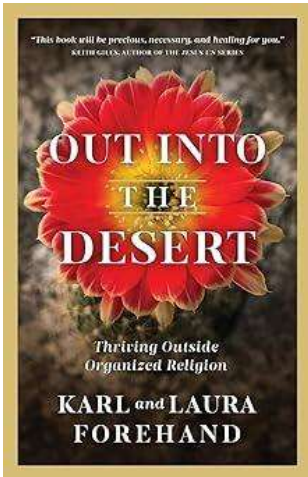
Be where you are, be who you are, and be at peace,

Karl and Laura Forehand 2024

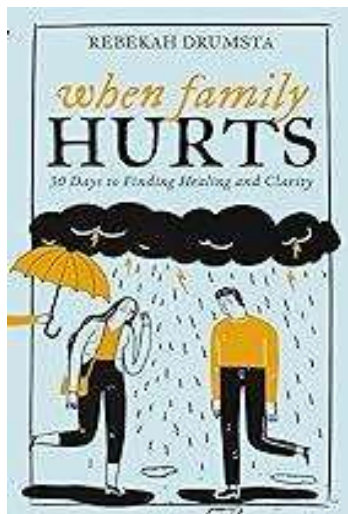
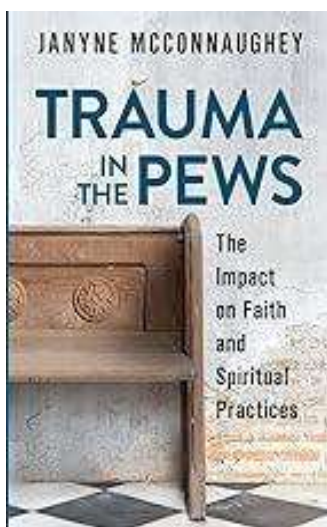
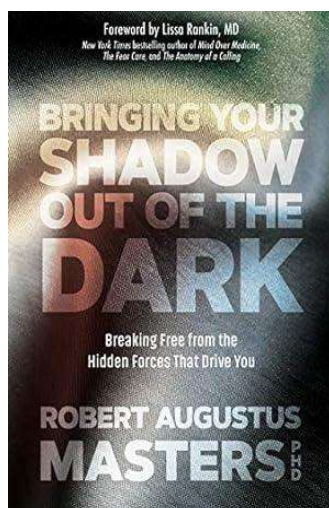
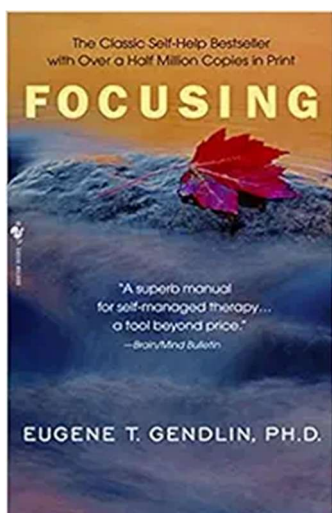
Resources

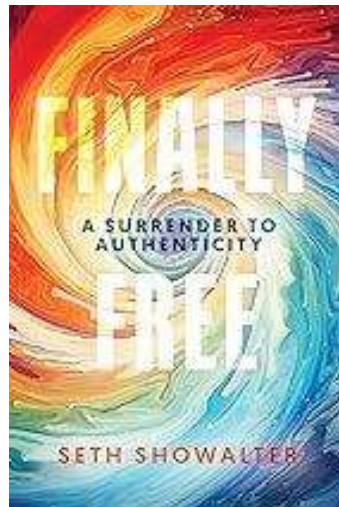
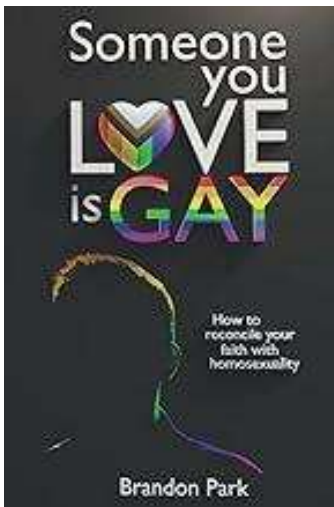
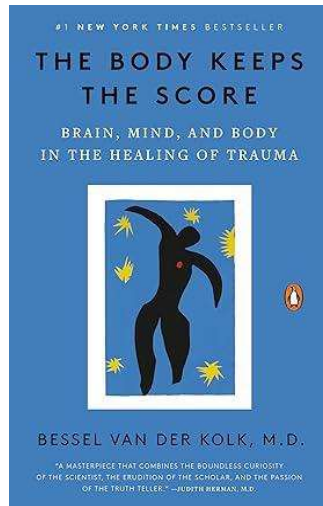
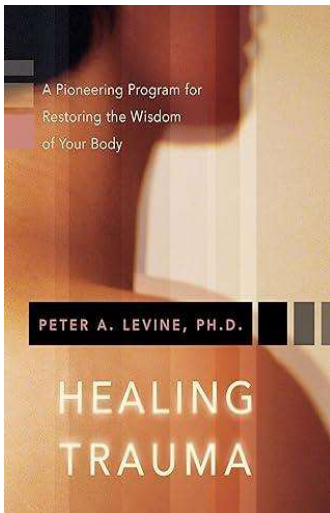


- [Treasure Trove of Trauma Resources & Leaning Forward](#) (The Desert Sanctuary)
- [Attachment and Trauma Network](#) (ATN)
- [Global Center for Religious Research](#) (GCRR)
- [The Biology of Trauma](#) (Dr. Aimee Apigian)
- [Trauma Research Foundation](#) (Bessel van der Kolk)
- [The Somatic Experiencing](#) (Dr. Peter Levine)
- [Baptist Accountability Database](#)
- [Black Religious Trauma Recovery Network](#)
- [Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#)
- [Courage 365 Resources](#) (Ashley Easter)
- [Janyne McConaughy Resources](#)
- [Reclaiming Married Sex from Purity Culture Resources](#) (Megan Benninger)
- [FreedHearts Resources](#) (Susan and Rob Cottrell)
- [Rebekah Drumsta Resources](#)
- [The Vashti Institute](#)



Evolving From Religious Trauma







- [The Desert Sanctuary](#) (Karl & Laura Forehand)
- [Surviving the Black Church Podcast](#) (NikkiG)
- [Preacher Boys Podcast](#) (Eric Skwarczynski)
- [Biology of Trauma Podcast](#) (Dr. Aimee Apigean)
- [FreedHearts Podcast](#) (Susan & Rob Cottrell)
- [Almost Awakened Podcast](#) (Brittney Hartley)
- [Regulated and Relational](#) (ATN)
- [The Biology of Trauma](#) (Dr. Aimee Apagian)