

MARY DEMUTH

**NOT**

**MARKED**

**FINDING HOPE & HEALING AFTER  
SEXUAL ABUSE**



**AUTHENTICITY**  
BOOK HOUSE

*NOT MARKED*

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# Table of Contents

1. Discover How Sexual Abuse Affects You . . . . .	1
2. Read My Sexual Abuse Story . . . . .	17
3. Tell Your Story . . . . .	29
4. Find Safe People . . . . .	37
5. Be Honest with God . . . . .	45
6. Forgive the Perpetrators . . . . .	51
7. Live Unmarked . . . . .	57
Endnotes . . . . .	69



# Chapter One

## DISCOVER HOW SEXUAL ABUSE AFFECTS YOU

“If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would’ve lived in the land of silence.”

Psalm 94:17 ESV

If you’re like me, you may feel that the sexual abuse you endured left an indelible mark on your soul, staining your emotional, physical, relational, and sexual health. It permeated the way you view the world. It scars the way you process information, and it left you cynical, scared, and hyper-vigilant. I’ve walked that painful and bewildering path. There were times when I yelled (screamed) at God, asking Him why in the world He “entrusted” me with this abuse. I railed at the utter unfairness of it all, suffering for years for other people’s sins. Wondering why I still struggle to enjoy sex. Worrying if I’d ever feel emotionally healthy in sexual abuse’s aftermath.

The mark left by abuse deeply injured me, yet I dare to believe we serve a God who heals. Not always instantly. It often takes years to lighten a deeply tattooed mark, after all. But He does salve the wounds of sexual abuse. Like Jacob who

wrestled with God, we who are sexually abused have our own sparring matches with the Almighty, hurling a slew of why-why-whys and why-why-why-nots His way. Like Jacob, we walk with a limp in the aftermath. Yet, we walk.

I don't have to tread this earth as a marked victim, and neither do you. So I'm writing this little book to offer you the hope I found along the way. To demonstrate the healing possibilities to those of us who have long felt different, dirty. In trying to erase the mark, I tried many avenues of healing, some successful, some not. I spent more than thirty years of my life pursuing health, and I gained insight into the healing process. This book represents all the wisdom I gained—wisdom I want you to grasp as you chase after the joyful life you hope for.

That doesn't mean your journey will resemble mine. I've never met a human exactly like me (thank goodness!), so my hunch is that we will all heal in us-shaped ways. Often that comes by simply believing we can heal and clinging to an audacious desire to be whole again. It's my desire that in reading my undecorated story, you will believe healing is possible, and you'll sense God's nearness as you take the next step.

I recently re-read one of my favorite books, *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan. One of the chapters



addresses healing. He writes about how we can go on in our lives without healing, becoming quite content in our pain. “Restoration meddles with what they’ve learned to handle, removes what they’ve learned to live with, bestows what they’ve learned to live without.”<sup>1</sup> In short, we become adept at living with a gaping wound. It’s our comfortable place, what we embrace as our lot in life.

Dysfunction becomes our safe place; it’s knowable and navigable. The prospect of healing frightens us because we don’t know what it looks like. Living with freedom feels new, different—alien to the way we’ve conducted our lives until this moment.

Mind if I ask you a question? Does it frighten you that you might not heal? Do you worry that it’s too scary to try? What if you find you can’t heal? Not healing would devastate, so you might believe you’re better off not trying at all.

Satan, aptly called the father of lies, likely fuels your fear. Why would he care if you heal or not? Because he knows if he can keep you shackled to the past, shuddering in the darkness, you’ll never understand healthy, beautiful relationships. You’ll shrink back from life, people, and opportunity because of your story. Saint Irenaeus purportedly wrote, “The glory of God is man fully alive.”<sup>2</sup> When was the last time you felt utterly, joyfully

alive? Does that seem impossible to you? Has dysfunction become your comfortable, cozy place? Does growth seem terrifying?

I won't lie to you.

Sometimes healing and growth excruciate. Tears, heaving sobs, and a feeling of being lost accompany a healing journey. But you can't experience change without tension and fear. Any great adventure includes obstacles, right?

### **The Healing Trail**

In my book *Thin Places*, I likened the journey of healing to a mountainside tunnel. It goes something like this.

You hike along a difficult trail, shrouded by looming, arm-waving evergreens. The scent of pine invigorates the air, and in the darkness of the forest you are grateful to be alive. Because at least you can walk. Ahead of you stands a tunnel hewn from the rock, created by engineers in the 1920s to simplify a train's route, but now it's for folks like you, hikers discovering the beauty of a mountain. A problem arises, though. The terrible darkness inside brings fear. Somehow, you know that if you walk into the darkness, you'll face attack. You hesitate. You pace outside the tunnel, wondering if you can safely venture inward. You

look behind at how far you came, how much the forest sheltered you. The path taken to this point brought safety, but this tunnel represents mystery.

From inside you hear a voice like the voice of God, a thundering, beckoning, frightening, beautiful voice saying, “I will be with you in the tunnel. Don’t be afraid.” You debate whether to step inside. You stretch your toe into darkness.<sup>3</sup>

And then, you take the first steps into the tunnel. You freeze. But Jesus takes you by the hand and sits beside you. Although He already knows your story, He asks you to retell it, and while you do, a giant IMAX screen illuminates the tunnel. When the words of your devastation leave your mouth, the story comes alive before you, stunning you to your spot, making you tremble you inside and out. Technicolor is almost too much to bear. And then you hear weeping.

Who weeps? You? Maybe. But it’s mixed together with the weeping of the Almighty who wept at Lazarus’s tomb, at the finality of death and the grief of life.

Something in you died when that person (or people) stole from you, and you’ve grieved your innocence ever since. Jesus laments alongside you in the dark place as the credits roll. He opens up your wounds, not to frighten you, but to fix you. He cleans the

festering sore, which hurts like the dickens, then sews it up. It leaves a scar. When He finishes, He opens His embrace, and in doing so, you see His scars too. He hung naked on a cross. He received the nails of hatred and violation. His brow still bears the marks of thorns piercing flesh. He understands. Oh how He understands.

He walks through the tunnel alongside you, His scarred hand in yours. The light that comes from the end of the tunnel stuns you, hushes you. Because of the black darkness behind you, the squinting sunshine appears even more brilliant.

On the other side of the tunnel you see a blessed, joyful light. But more than that, you realize that while in the tunnel you climbed above the tree line. Before, you wandered in a dark forest, and now you stand above it. You see mountains majestic, a sky of cumulus clouds, the sun peek-a-booing through them. You see the trail you traversed as important and necessary, but this new vista fades the pain a bit. You thank God for the necessity of the tunnel, how it became the avenue from back then to right now.

That's the journey I want to take you on in this little book. From darkness to light. From fear to hope. From violation to healing. From victimized to victor. From marked to unmarked. From one who hurts to one who doles out healing. I couldn't, and

wouldn't, make this promise if it weren't true in my own life. Jesus healed (and continues to heal) me.

Before we begin the journey, let's look at ways sexual abuse can affect us today. But as we do, take care not to minimize what happened to you. Dan Allender wrote in *The Wounded Heart* that any kind of unwanted sexual touch violates. In surveys and studies, the reaction to and healing in the aftermath of that touch looks oddly similar, whether full penetration took place or an unwanted touch on a leg. Anything that crosses the line leaves a scar. So, as you read this list, see if any of these problems resonate with you. This isn't an exhaustive inventory, but it may help you see how deeply sexual abuse affects you. I've experienced many (but not all) of these.

### **In Your Sexual Relationship:**

- You fear having sex. In fact, if sex were suddenly erased from planet earth, you would throw a party.
- You can't have sex—it hurts or it doesn't work right.
- You feel guilty for not being “enough” for your spouse but have no idea how to sufficiently heal in this area to want sex. It's more duty than joy.

- You are compulsive about sex and take extreme risks in your sexual behavior.
- You view sex as a commodity, not a loving act between two people.
- Sex repulses you. Though you tolerate it for the sake of your loved one, deep down you feel sick, and wrestling with trying to “like” sex makes you angry.
- You find yourself drawn to pornography. This causes you to feel even more shame.
- You worry that if you learn to enjoy sex, you somehow validate the abuse.
- You freeze when sex triggers a flashback, but you don’t speak about it, leaving your spouse confused. Speaking to your spouse about your triggers and flashbacks terrifies you.
- If you do have sex, you disconnect from the act in order to tolerate it. You’re never “in the moment.” Instead you float above yourself.
- Or you fantasize to take yourself out of the equation. You make up stories so it’s not actually you having the sex.
- You become so reliant on the fantasies for your pleasure that you don’t know how to enjoy sex without them.
- You grow deep resentment toward your spouse and even toward God because you “have” to have sex.

- You have orgasm difficulties.
- You have zero desire to have sex.
- You have an insatiable desire for sex.

### **In Your Emotional Health:**

- Shame is your constant companion. Shameful feelings are familiar and normal—it's how you process life.
- You experience memory blocks where you cannot access large chunks of time. You want to know what happened but also fear uncovering the truth.
- You worry that you brought on the abuse yourself, and you shame yourself for not breaking free from the abuse sooner.
- You gravitate toward abusive relationships because it's known (safe) and what you feel you deserve.
- You feel dirty.
- You've experienced symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD<sup>4</sup>).
- You have had strong feelings of suicide.
- You battle catastrophic thinking—if one thing bad happens, you automatically leap to believing the entire world is falling apart.
- You deny that your past has any bearing on your present or your future, hurting you and

others. That was “back then,” you argue. And yet, your behavior shows it profoundly affects you today.

- You minimize what happened, rationalizing other people have worse stories. Why, then, should your sexual abuse affect you at all?
- You fear that if you deal with the abuse from the past, you will explode or die or start crying and never stop. You worry you’ll become so overcome you might take your life.

### **In Your Relationships:**

- You feel used easily. If your spouse pays no attention to you during the day and expects sex at night, you feel like a prostitute or a gigolo.
- You absolutely need the approval of others to feel okay.
- The word “trust” freaks you out.
- You avoid others because you think you have nothing to offer them.
- You have a titanic fear of abandonment. That fear controls you, keeps you up at night, and dictates how you act around others.
- You don’t know how to process your pain without yelling or acting fearfully



inappropriate, so you believe it's better to keep your mouth shut.

- You're good at stuffing your feelings and emotions way down deep.
- You worry that if you talk about the sexual abuse, your family will abandon you (particularly when the abuse happened within the family). You believe telling the truth means you dishonor your parents or that you break an unwritten code of silence.
- You harbor deep resentment toward a parent or caretaker who didn't protect you. Sometimes the rage is palpable.
- You struggle to develop close, intimate relationships.
- To feel safe, you control people and things.
- You have victimized others.
- You fear one gender (either all men or all women).

### **In Your Daily Life:**

- You battle an addiction, one you often keep secret. That addiction fills a hole you can't seem to fill otherwise.
- You feel you've been marked for sexual abuse, even as an adult. Predators seem to find you.
- You startle easily.

- You fear being alone, particularly at night.
- You experience abuse flashbacks and/or nightmares.
- You fear someone may grab you from behind.
- You either obsess over risk taking, or exist as a complete risk-avoider.
- You carried the secret for years because you feared no one would believe you. You wonder if you'll carry it to the grave.
- You walk through life hyper-vigilant, always worried something bad will happen.

### **In Your Identity:**

- You believe you are worthless. In fact, you know you are. Why else would those perpetrators do that to you?
- You overachieve to prove your worth—another form of addiction.
- You underachieve to remain invisible. And you underachieve because, honestly, why would a worthless person bother succeeding?
- You rebel to gain attention, the crazier the act, the better—anything so someone will pay attention to you.
- You believe you are different from others—and not in a good way.
- You feel you don't belong.

- You feel utterly alone, like no one else in the history of the world understands what it is like to be you.
- You constantly wonder why you exist on this earth, other than for others to abuse and take advantage of you.
- You feel small.
- You battle insecurity.
- Even when complimented, you don't believe the sentiment.

### **In Your Health:**

- You deal with panic attacks, sleeplessness, or autoimmune disorders.
- You struggle with a food addiction.
- You stay overweight. Your weight keeps you safe from predators, so the thought of losing weight scares you.
- You have a poor body image. Nothing about you fits the description of perfect or beautiful or handsome or enough.
- You think you will die young.
- You battle depression.
- You fear doctor exams (gynecological or otherwise).
- You battle self-mutilation, anorexia, bulimia, or any self-destructive behavior.

Go back through and circle your struggles, and feel free to add more in the margins. If you're extra daring, share what you circled with your closest friend, a counselor, or your spouse. Chances are, folks have no idea how much your past affects you. Honestly, I wish I could wave a magic wand and erase the mark from both me and you. I often felt like the writer of Proverbs, "I am weary, O God. I am weary and worn out" (Prov. 30:1 ESV). But immediate healing doesn't always work—though I would welcome that. Dismantling these long-lived lies takes a lot of time, a lot of truth, and a lot of unconditional love.

"Sad" and "grim" describe the aftermath of sexual abuse, but I thank God He didn't leave us resourceless. I thank Him that although a large swath of devastation follows us, a larger story of reconciliation and redemption can win out. The mark we carry does not need to become our identity. I believe this verse for you: "Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" (Prov. 23:18 ESV). Jesus can fade the mark, eventually erasing it. He can heal us so much so that we become agents of healing in a sex-injured world.

So even if you start this book with no desire to heal, mad at the world and bitter toward others, with no unction to get better, I pray that Jesus

would woo you toward the wanting of it all. Like Peter, whose faith faltered as he stepped onto the water, Jesus didn't let him sink into the waters because of his frailty, He lifted him from the murky depths.

My story is simply this: “He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along” (Psalm 40:2, NLT). That is my deepest, utmost prayer for you as you read this book.



# Chapter Two

## READ MY SEXUAL ABUSE STORY

“For dogs encompass me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me.”

Psalm 22:16 ESV

### Warning: Trigger Alert

At five years old, I attended kindergarten. Although most people I know remember their kindergarten teacher, I don't. I remember every single teacher I had since then, but I can't conjure up my kindergarten teacher's name, and certainly not her face. When she alerted my parents to my inability to do well in the oddly-named subject Cooperation, she did not know the nightmares I faced at my babysitter's home.

Babysitter Eva loomed large in my life, a chain-smoking woman who took in kids to pay the rent. She didn't really like children in my estimation, and in her care I knew once again I was in the way. So much so that when two teenage brothers asked if they could take me off her hands, she agreed quickly, shooing me out the door. As far as I remember, they did no grooming, no easing

me into what happened next. They took me to a deep ravine near my elementary school and said something to the effect of, “Do you want to have babies someday?”

Me, who wanted to nurture anything, including my posse of thrift store stuffed animals, nodded. But I knew something wasn’t right. The look in their eyes, the leer beneath the glint, the crazy frenzy with which they worked to pull down my pants—all these added up to panic. I remember saying no. I remember struggling, but they were too strong for me. I remember the burning, the fire inside me never extinguishing. I remember the grass and rocks they placed within me, how I had to pull them out later, ashamed, trembling, bleeding.

Every day they came for me at Eva’s in the late afternoon. They violated little me in countless ways, and in different venues. They told me, “If you tell your parents, we will kill them.” I believed them. So I kept my mouth shut.

In the ravines, I kept my focus on the evergreen trees that often saw me naked from the waist down, shaking, and silently crying. They became my friends in a way. They gave me something to escape to, a place where nature reigned, the sun shined beyond, and life could be tolerated. I flew



there while the boys took turns. Some kids who experience violation in such a way do the same thing, but they splinter into different personalities. Me, I watched the tree limbs sway.

I distinctly remember the boy's violation of me in their bunk-bedded room, their mother singing in the kitchen making cookies. She offered me some after they'd torn me apart. What did she think her sons were doing with a five-year-old girl?

I needed a hero, but none swooped from the sky, Ironman-like, to rescue me. I wondered why in the world was I on this earth. I was a mistake to be violated at will, unworthy of protection.

One grace God gave me during this time: I knew what those boys did was wrong. They were bad. That I didn't deserve what they did. I realize now this kind of thinking is rare. So many sexual abuse victims blame themselves, thinking they enticed the abuse somehow.

Eventually those brothers—who wore scout uniforms—invited their friends to join in the “fun.” I became their free entertainment most afternoons. Something rose up in me, a holy roar perhaps? I somehow knew if I continued down this path, it would lead to my destruction. Eventually I decided to tell Eva what happened. It took me months to conjure up the gumption because the only word the perpetrators

used to describe what they did was the dreaded F word. I knew if I whispered that word, I'd get Ivory soap thrust in my mouth. I finally overcame the fear, decided a soapy mouth would taste far better than what those boys did to me. I also feared for my parents' lives, wondering if telling Eva the "F" word counted toward their death sentence. Would those boys know where my real father lived? Would they hunt him down? Would they kill my mother? My stepfather?

I swallowed fear one afternoon after the boys returned me and asked Eva to please come near. I remember how tall she loomed, how her head seemed near the ceiling. I clearly remember asking her to bend down to me. I cupped my hands over her ears and whispered, "Those boys f---ed me." I remember the snap of her neck, the way she loomed again, the look on her face.

Then she uttered the five words that ruined my life: "I will tell your mother."

I believed her.

I went home that night, practically elated. Those boys and their lust-crazy friends wouldn't be allowed to take me to ravines, the evergreen trees waving their hands above me.

The next day, I'm sure I wore a smile when I arrived at Eva's house. I half expected her to

nurture me, to feel sorry for me, to protect me now that she knew about the “F” word. I imagined her telling my mom in hushed tones, my mom’s eyes widening, then turning to tears. But I was too young to understand the ways of adults, though the boys’ rape inaugurated me into their world far too soon. I was too naive to realize that babysitters who let older boys take little girls probably already knew what they did to me.

So I believed she told. And I believed my mom would rescue me. I hadn’t made the connection yet that my mom took me back to Eva, the chain-smoking babysitter. Had I been more mature or logical, I would’ve realized this didn’t make sense.

The rapid knock at Eva’s back door chilled me. They came. Again.

I heard her say, “Oh sure, she’s here. Let me get her.”

And off I went to the woods, to the tree limbs, to the burning that never went away.

### **How I Endured**

I knew this truth about the world: not one human being would inconvenience themselves to take care of me. Only I could. So I did. After the boys took their turns again the day after I told Eva, I decided the next day would be different.

After half-day kindergarten I ate lunch, then took a Rip Van Winkle nap. I slept through two o'clock, three, four, five. The knock came, but Eva, who obviously didn't want to be bothered, told the boys to go away. She couldn't be inconvenienced to wake me up. Thank God.

My plan worked so well, every afternoon at Eva's became one long nap.

As my kindergarten chapter ended, my mother and stepfather decided their hippy marriage, bound together by parties, should end. This meant we'd move away, far, far away from the boys, the tree limbs, and the chain-smoking babysitter.

### **The Mark**

After telling Eva and getting no response, I didn't utter a peep about the sexual abuse for ten years. It became the secret I kept locked way back inside myself. That didn't mean I stuffed the memories. They still woke me up at night. I'd have nightmares of the boys, of chases, of murderers cornering me. In daytime, I fantasized about being Cindy Brady of *The Brady Bunch*, belonging to the perfect family, riding in a wood siding-clad station wagon. The problem with my secret, though? The merit badge the brothers etched into me—a “please come abuse

me” mark that lived like a lighthouse beacon on my forehead for every possible predator to see.

And see it, they did. It seemed every time I turned around, a predator found me. In my barn, a hired worker came way too near, touching my shoulder, telling me I was pretty while I stood alone in horse manure-caked boots. I ran. In a treehouse a boy grabbed the waistband of his Toughskin jeans and yanked them earthward—told me in no uncertain terms that we were playing doctor. I ran. An older brother of some kids I babysat touched my shoulders and eased his way down. I ran. A boyfriend tried the same dance. I ran. And even into adulthood, I realized the mark remains. I encountered predatory men who seemed to know I’m a target. I’ve had to learn the art and grit of creating obvious boundaries to protect myself.

### **More Shame**

The sexually charged atmosphere in which I grew up, coupled with what those boys did to me, warped my view of sex. It both scandalized and enticed me. I found pornography in my home—and I consumed it. I felt guilty indulging in it, but also alive. I wrestled with this addiction (yes, as a girl) for several years post-redemption. Sex, as a

result, became dirty, terrible, and only relegated to aberration.

Although determined to choose virginity for marriage, I still felt defiled not only by what those boys did to me, but also because of my own addiction, following in my father's footsteps. I wanted to be a girl Jesus would be proud of, but I carried this dark, dark secret. I told no one for many years, and only found freedom when I shared my struggle with a trusted friend. I learned then that Satan loves to keep us held hostage in our minds, making us believe we qualify as scum, that we alone deal with these addictions, that we're unredeemable. He knows if we dare let our secrets out into the light, we will be set free. And I was. Not instantly. The healing in that part of my life began when I found freedom.

Once I reached adolescence I had this terrible need for boys to notice me because I wanted a father's love. Before I met Jesus—during my suicide-contemplation years when my mom's third marriage deteriorated—I wanted a boy to ask me out, love me, give me a long hug, and tell me everything would turn out okay. Problem was, every time I liked a boy I panicked the moment he returned the favor. My first kiss came in the sixth grade, sloppy and creepy in our town's only movie

theater. It so freaked me out that I broke up with him. The same thing happened in the eighth grade, then the tenth grade. I craved love, but the moment any affection came my way, I ran.

### **Enter Jesus**

I met Jesus when I was fifteen and nearly at the end of myself. I heard all about Him at Young Life. During my sophomore year, in the fall, I attended a weekend camp where I heard the whole raucous gospel, that Jesus stooped to this pain-stained world, wore earth's shoes, and walked around thirty-three years. He loved the outcasts (and oh how I knew I fit that category). He dignified the broken. He loved the unwanted. The more I heard His stories, the more I fell in love with Him. When I learned of His death on my behalf (someone would die for me?), I cried. I remembered my own father in the grave, the finality of death. But Jesus resurrected Himself, defying the specter Death, and wooed me toward a new life.

I surrendered to Jesus under an evergreen tree, its hands waving high, high above me. I still consider the irony. The place of my deepest violation became my trysting place of redemption. Set free. Loved. Wanted. Sacrificed for. "Oh

the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast unmeasured, boundless free. Flowing as a mighty ocean over me. Underneath me, all around me is the current of His love.”<sup>5</sup>

When I met Jesus, I started telling my story. The sexual abuse came out, first to my mom who initially didn't believe me. I had to retell the story before she understood. Then I told the story to my Young Life leaders who must've been shocked. For a long period of time I became an over-sharer, telling everyone what I went through. I did it to get attention, to say, “Hey, look at what I went through, and I'm okay.” I naively believed 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” ESV) meant that I'd experience complete healing now that I knew Jesus. I thought as a new Christian, I would find instant healing from every memory, every hurt, every pain, and henceforth would be stable, happy, whole, and fine forever and ever amen.

### **The Struggle**

But that past, that great big past, haunted me. It followed me to college where I fell apart over and over again. Still afraid of men, yet needy of them, I continued to woo them and then push them away.



I wanted to be whole, but I didn't know how. I'll share more about this time in my life later because it was the seedbed of most of my healing. Suffice it to say, God met me there through the power of community and prayer. After four years of healing prayers by friends and my church, I believed I'd been healed. Fully. Completely. Never to revisit again.

I since realized I held a faulty view of healing. It doesn't just happen once for all, particularly when it comes to sexual abuse. Healing comes in layers. Healing takes time. Healing is excruciating. Once you think it's done, it's not. Triggers continue. And when they do, I ask myself, *Didn't God heal me in college? Why am I revisiting this?* I chastise myself for my weakness. I wonder if the healing I experienced faded, and why.



# Chapter Three

## TELL YOUR STORY

“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;  
he breaks out against all sound judgment.”

Proverbs 18:1 ESV

Here’s the gut-honest truth: I would not be okay if I had not told my story. I couldn’t write this book. I most likely would find myself divorced, broken, possibly institutionalized, most likely suicidal.

Why? Because an untold story never heals.

It just festers inside and hurts the people you love most because you can’t help but act differently when that story stays captive inside you. It materializes in your actions, attitudes, and the fearful way you live your life. It works like trying to submerge a basketball in a swimming pool. You can do it for a period of time, but you cannot sustain it. Eventually the ball surfaces, usually by hurtling into the air with dramatic flourish.

Let me ask you this: Are you bone-tired? Do you feel like you spend your life in a constant struggle to keep your story contained? Do you secretly feel different from everyone else on this planet because of your untold story? Do you experience flashbacks?

Triggers? A high amount of irrational fears? Does the landscape of your mind look chaotic and frenzied?

I'm not a psychologist by any stretch, but I can say that finding a safe place to let out your story will change your life.

Sharing your story mimics letting the air out of the basketball you try to submerge in the pool. Once you share it, the air (power) goes out of the story, and you no longer have to fight to keep it submerged. Memory is a strange, fickle thing. Often when folks share their stories, they realize their fears morph from the Great and Powerful Oz to a short man on a stool pulling levers. Telling our stories deflates their power over us.

Recently, I met a woman with a sordid, painful story. She couldn't meet my eyes, and when she spoke I had to lean in close because of her whisper. Such shame permeated her awful, dreadful memories. In the space of sixty minutes, the story halted, then poured out. I listened. I felt so privileged to participate in this painful, beautiful moment with her. The downcast eyes upturned at the end of her story. When she knew I understood, and she saw her story as much more universal than she expected, something softened and blossomed in her. I can't prove this, of course, but I can offer

my observation. When I met her, she appeared as a timid wisp of a woman. When we parted, her eyes danced and she smiled.

### **The Pressure to Keep Silent**

Some of you reading this grew up in a generation with an unspoken rule: Never tell your story, particularly if it made a family member look bad—an unwritten, powerful code that hog-tied you to secrecy. The problem with this shame-based model: it didn't allow for truth. And healing seldom comes without truth attached. Maybe you grew up with siblings whose silent pressure kept you from spilling your story. Or your parents threatened, maybe not overtly, but you felt the pressure to conform, to stay quiet. I've heard from many sixty-, seventy- and eighty-year-olds who grew up in this system. They finally found freedom for the first time by sharing their stories with a trusted person. Yet many go to their graves with the secret on the tip of their tongues, never released.

Some of you fear telling your story because it will seem like you dishonor your parents by doing so. Mind if I send a little freedom your way? The Hebrew word for honor (as in “Honor your mother and father”), *kabbed*,<sup>6</sup> means to give weight to. It means

we hold in high regard the office of motherhood and fatherhood. We respect the fact God placed us in families, and we remain grateful for their role in our lives. I found this hard for a long time. While still in the throes of healing, I could not see the positive traits of my parents. But as I walked the healing journey, I began to “give weight to” the better memories that surfaced. (Consequently, you’ll know when you’ve healed a bit when good memories start to resurface.)

So, you might ask, what if I tell the truth? Won’t I get in trouble? Won’t it mean I no longer honor my parents?

We can find assurance as we look at Jesus and how He interacted with his earthly parents. His obedience cost his parents dearly. His choices, completely and utterly aligned with His heavenly Father, hurt his parents. And yet, He did what He did anyway.

Jesus even disregarded his earthly mother when she wanted to meet with Him. (See Mark 3:31–35). He defined our true family as those who follow after God, not simply our earthly family.

Honestly, at times in my life I wanted to be free, able to live my life without the heartache associated with family. Yet, Jesus reminds us that even if our parents (or other family members entangled in our sexual abuse story)

act as enemies to us and to God, we still have a responsibility to love them, pray for them, and ask God for guidance as we set boundaries with them. Jesus said, “But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” (Matt. 5:44, NLT).

For years I kept quiet, believing silence equaled honor. Eventually I began to see that silence actually enabled bad behavior and unreality. I learned to set appropriate boundaries with family members, which, to be honest, didn’t go over well. I still smart from the resistance I received. But I emerged much happier and healthier as a result.

With untruth and an inability to say what really happened, we close the door to true forgiveness. We cannot forgive what “didn’t happen.” The brave act of telling the truth flings wide the door to reconciliation and forgiveness. Keep in mind that truth-telling doesn’t guarantee relationship—in many cases, it alienates. But you’ll never know if the other person can willingly walk toward you if the truth doesn’t first sit between you.

### **Why Tell the Truth?**

Why this push toward truth? Why not bury our story and hide it? Because we cannot heal

without truth and light. Satan, the father of lies, flaunts our worthlessness in the hidden, dark places. When we become brave enough to share what really happened, he no longer taunts us and hollers our inferiority. “He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44 NLT). And those lies thrive in our minds, particularly if we haven’t let the story out. They become bigger than a monster, untamed, unchecked. But look what happens when we speak the truth in the light: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NLT).

Truth always frees.

Hiding keeps us in darkness.

Anne Lamott famously penned, “Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you’re a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps we shrink from telling our stories because we don’t want to risk being “unliked,” particularly by the people who shaped us growing up. Or perhaps the fear of what will happen in the aftermath feels far too great. We cannot see



freedom because fear looms larger. Maybe we chose control as one of our coping mechanisms plucked from a chaotic childhood, so to tell the truth means we invite chaos. Or maybe we identify with King David after his indiscretion with Bathsheba and the subsequent killing of her husband—we think hiding works.

Maybe you shared your story once but no one believed you. That happened to me too. Had I let that fear prevent me from further sharing my story, I would not be who I am today. Find a safe person. This prevails as the best way to share a story, particularly such a sensitive and painful story like sexual abuse.



# Chapter Four

## FIND SAFE PEOPLE

“Safe people open the door for you to share more—at your own pace. They listen rather than telling you where you are. They are caring rather than offering trite answers or religious platitudes (for example, ‘Trust Jesus’s). They invite. Rather than closing you down, they open you up.”<sup>8</sup>

Lucille Zimmerman

Even if you shared and someone shut you down, dare to share your story with a safe person. You may find your safe-person assessment tool is wonky. You keep ending up with unsafe folks who make things worse after you share your story (either by disbelief, blame, or exploitation). In that case, consider reading *Safe People* by Cloud and Townsend. It will help you retrain the way you see relationships—to find truly safe people.

To help you identify safe people, here’s a helpful list.

### **Safe people...**

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Don’t jump to conclusions.
- Aren’t passive-aggressive.

- Empathize with you, not needing to interject their own story of doom to one-up you.
- Encourage other relationships.
- Honor and encourage your relationship with God.
- Want the best for you and your healing journey (don't have their own healing agenda or pressure you to heal their way).
- Aren't domineering.
- Tell the truth—even the painful truth—but they tell it in a winsome way.
- Offer grace.
- Are self-aware.
- Reveal their flaws.
- Aren't defensive.
- Apologize, even before they're caught.
- Take responsibility for themselves.
- Work on their own issues.
- Want to learn from their mistakes.
- Accept blame.
- Avoid gossip.
- Are humble, teachable.
- Have a positive influence over your life.
- Have proven themselves trustworthy over a period of time.
- Are the same person in different situations—consistent.

- Applaud your growth.
- Don't try to parent you or act as the Holy Spirit.
- Love freedom.
- Don't demand trust—instead they earn it by consistently acting honorably.

I healed because I found safe people in college who listened to me, loved me, validated the horror of my story, and prayed me toward health. (Besides getting counseling, I attribute the bulk of my healing to fervent prayers by others.) They assured me my worth wasn't tied to the violation. In sharing my story, I opened up communication for deeper discussion within my friendships. I often discovered many others lived my same story, different verse. Dr. Henry Cloud affirms our need for community as we seek healing, “Without a solid, bonded relationship, the human soul will become mired in psychological and emotional problems. The soul cannot prosper without being connected to others.”<sup>9</sup>

As I look back on my healing progress, I see now that it slowed to almost a halt in my twenties. Why? Because I shut my mouth for another decade. I believed—wrongly—that my healing was complete, and that I would no longer stand shackled by the

sexual abuse story. While I experienced much healing, I had a long way to go, which accounts for the major fall-apart that took place in my thirties.

Sharing your story won't magically heal you, but it is an important first step on the long and beautiful, and sometimes rocky road to healing. I wish I could offer you a panacea, that if you share your story, you'll automatically share it with a person of peace who loves you through healing. That as the result of one precious encounter you'll find healing once and for all, and suddenly you'll think of sex as holy and amazing. As I mentioned earlier, nothing guarantees complete healing this side of eternity. We wait. We groan. We hurt in this life, sometimes disillusioned, sometimes clinging to a shred of hope.

But if we long for wholeness, we can't underestimate the power of telling our stories to safe people. University of Texas professor Dr. James Pennebaker researched the difference between rape and trauma survivors who tell their stories versus those who keep them secret. "The research team found that the act of not discussing a traumatic event or confiding it to another person could be more damaging than the actual event. Conversely, when people shared their stories and experiences, their physical health improved, their doctor's visits decreased, and they

showed significant decreases in stress hormones.”<sup>10</sup> Pennebaker’s studies can also help those of you deeply terrified about telling your stories to others. The bulk of his research deals in expressive writing.<sup>11</sup> He found that journaling about a painful event fifteen to twenty minutes a day during a one-week period boosted victims’ physical and mental health. So if you fear sharing the trauma from your past, consider writing about it, getting the words out, so you can begin to heal.

### **Vulnerability**

When the Apostle Paul tells his story, he boasts about his weaknesses and his vulnerability that came in the shape of a thorn (See 2 Cor, 12:9–10). Why? Because that thorn reminds him of his need for Christ. He wouldn’t know God’s strength without it. I can honestly say that the sexual abuse I encountered weakened me. Sharing it publicly is painful, sometimes excruciating. But I tell my story, not to point to the devastation as much as I can, but to highlight God’s strength. Maybe that’s why all of us should share our stories.

Dr. Brene Brown spent her adult life researching shame, and in that research stumbled upon something extraordinary—vulnerability is something we shouldn’t flee, but embrace. “To

feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Community Also Heals**

Consider this: In scripture Paul talked about his burdens—those most likely caused by dissension and people acting awful. But he didn’t let that negative experience with people taint his ability to share his need with other safe people. That’s a picture of our abuse. People utterly wronged us. Unfortunately, we often let those perpetrators color the way we see the entirety of humanity, even safe people. The very difficult truth? God often asks us to step into what wounded us in the past. Even though community harmed and maimed us, our healing only comes through community.

It seems unfair.

It seems counterintuitive.

It seems foolhardy.

But telling our stories to safe people will always involve at least one other human being, with ears to hear, and hopefully prayers to pray.

Often we build a wall against people because of the choices of perpetrators. We shrink away,



preferring isolation to community, because we feel safer that way. But doing that proves unsafe. Why? Because isolation breeds bitterness and anger, and a crazy brain. We even erect giant walls against our spouses because we cannot let ourselves be truly known. It's just too frightening. We shrink from telling the story of what goes on inside us because we want to protect ourselves at any cost.

I'm not talking about protection from enemies or perpetrators or unsafe people. Paul didn't ever shrink from pointing out people like that, exposing them and distancing himself from them. No, I mean what Paul does next: He entrusts himself to trustworthy people. He embraces safe community for the sake of finding camaraderie and support.

So tell it like it is.

Own your pain.

Acknowledge that it exists and lives as a part of you.

Because, truly, you won't become whole if your heart remains aloof.

Which brings another important point. Finding safe people can scare and frustrate us, and you might be tempted to give up. You may even think selfishness drives you to pursue all this healing. Bravery appears narcissistic in a way—after all it's all about you-you-you telling your story to get

better. As you consider courage, shift away from yourself a moment. If you can't heal for yourself, and you worry that focusing on proves either unnecessary or selfish, choose bravery for those who love you. Heal for their sake. The people who love you long for you to be whole, renewed, fully alive. They want the best for you. They want to see you soar, not sour.

But they also need you—the real, vulnerable you. Sexual abuse typically causes victims to disengage—to stay aloof from life so life can't bludgeon us again. The problem: our loved ones cannot have a genuine relationship with a detached person. They can't engage with an untethered ghost. They certainly can't truly love us if we're not really ourselves, but a facsimile. This makes the healing journey so blessedly brave. It involves heroic risk, daring to dig deeper into our hurts, finding the courage to willingly tell our struggles, sharing our stories with the desire to be set free. We do this for others—to love them well. We do this for ourselves—to taste freedom again or for the very first time.

Healing, my friend, is pure bravery.

# Chapter Five

## BE HONEST WITH GOD

An important part of the healing journey requires honesty with safe people. Have you considered honestly asking God questions about your abuse? I certainly asked plenty.

When I met Jesus, I happily dismissed those questions, preferring to simply believe God knew best. My questions about my abuse would wait for eternity. Oddly, the more I heal, the more I allow myself the pesky ambiguity of questions. I roll them around in my mind, pray about them, and ask others for their insights. I used to think the satisfactory answer to all my questions would describe the hallmark of a completed healing. Instead, as I walk in healing, I sometimes get more confused.

- Why would a loving God, supposedly a heavenly Father, stand by and watch me be raped?
- Why would a powerful, strong God not use His might to rescue all the victimized children?
- Why would God expect the very hardest thing from me (sex) in marriage when it serves as a reminder of the abuse?

- Why did I have to endure what I did? Would I be a more stable, capable adult had I not walked through the devastation?
- Why did my pleas for help, even though I didn't yet know God, go unanswered?
- While I know that in heaven, everything will be righted, and I'll experience full healing, why can't we see more healing and justice this side of eternity?
- What kind of plan does God have for those boys who molested me?
- Why did God put me on this earth?
- If I fancy myself a loving parent, and I would've rescued my child from a predator, what does that make God?
- Why must those submission verses exist in the New Testament, particularly when women get exploited and men use them as justification to abuse?
- Where was God during my assaults? Aloof? Detached? There, but choosing not to rescue?
- Why can't God remove sexual desire from people who perpetrate? Wouldn't that make life easier both for perpetrators and potential victims?
- Why can't healing come instantaneously, like we see often in Jesus's interactions with broken

people? Blind to seeing. Deaf to hearing. Lamé to walking. Why does emotional healing take so long?

In writing these out, I feel a bit Job-like, small and pea-brained, trying to understand the workings of an Almighty God whose mystery remains, particularly when it comes to the problem of pain and evil. I know the platitudes. I understand the doctrine of free will. But knowing theology still hasn't helped me wrestle these questions and come out satisfied. They remain unanswered the more I wrangle them. And even when I try to tack cliché explanations to each one, I cannot escape the niggling that something is not right.

### **You Are Normal**

I penned these honest questions to simply let you know that healing from sexual abuse and its aftermath doesn't always mean you will find satisfactory answers. If you still have questions, you are normal. And if you live in the tension of those questions, frustrated with the answers, it's okay. Asking the questions (or even giving yourself permission to ask them) indicates that you're on the road to healing.

Attached to my questions is a long rope of anger. I am angry that no one rescued me. Angry that it seems Satan uses sexual assault and warping the sexual experience as one of the biggest weapons at his disposal. Angry that at forty-six years old I still struggle with this part of my life. Angry that sexual abuse continues to happen, that children face exploitation daily, and that many prefer to believe the perpetrators over those harmed. Angry, angry, angry!

And yet I don't want to walk around full of rage, always hollering about sexual abuse, maybe directing my anger at men for the rest of my life. How do I benefit—or how does society benefit—if I stay in that constant state of wrath?

### **Consider Jesus**

In times like these, I force myself to stop and simply remember Jesus. Though (as far as we know from Scripture) He wasn't sexually assaulted, He did know what exposure felt like. He absolutely felt the weight of each sexual exploitation when He died for all sins on the cross. I wonder if every awful act flashed through Him as He hung naked and bleeding?

I think about how He treated the broken. How He showed mercy on the woman caught in

adultery. On the woman with the issue of blood. On the leprous man. On the woman at the well. All outcasts. Perhaps some of them shared our story. Perhaps they knew all too well the questions we ask. How did Jesus treat these folks? With compassion and an open embrace.

And then I think of Jesus washing the feet of Judas. It fascinates and frustrates me, until I realize I'm Judas. In focusing on all these questions, I act as if I subsist as the lone victim, the only recipient of sin. I forget that I hurt people too. I sin against others. I betray Jesus by the way I sometimes live. Yet He stoops to wash Judas's dusty feet. He washes my feet with His tears. And I'm undone.

Me with all my honest questions. You with all your honest questions. Neither scares Jesus away. Even our sin doesn't remove His presence from us. Our rage, either.

The questions I wrote (and think) will most likely haunt me until I breathe my last. I pray my anger will lessen with the wisdom of years. But no matter how much I question or direct my anger heavenward, the thought of Jesus stuns me to silence—He who represents the Godhead, He who shouldered what those boys did to me, and what I did to Him. I can live in the tension of those questions when I temporarily rest them in the arms of Jesus.

Honesty comes hard, folks. It's excruciating to talk about sex openly. It's scary to voice the questions you hold inside about God and justice and sexual abuse. But keeping our fear of sex and our possible anger toward God bottled up eventually causes explosions and implosions—a histrionic reaction to the ones we love and a deterioration of our faith. I give you permission today to honestly share your worries, traumas, fear, and questions with those you love and the God you serve.



# Chapter Six

## FORGIVE THE PERPETRATORS

I met a woman recently who experienced sexual abuse. She battled unforgiveness, not in choosing to forgive, but in berating herself when a new memory welled up. Every time a memory surfaced, she felt the white hot anger of the violation, and then she despaired that her anger meant she hadn't forgiven. I reminded her that forgiveness comes in layers. Yes, it begins with the initial decision of forgiveness, but it requires a lifelong process.

Instead of yelling at yourself when another memory assaults you, respond with tenderness. Think, *Yes, this memory hurts, but I chose to forgive. I understand that this new memory bears no indication of my ability to forgive. It simply represents an opportunity to forgive another layer of pain.*

I don't need to preach the importance of forgiveness. Jesus epitomized forgiveness in a beautiful way when he pardoned those who crucified him. We most resemble Him when we forgive, and failure to forgive leaves us bitter. This choice to forgive might involve the perpetrator or not. It may mean you write a letter that you never

send. It certainly can be a topic of prayer between you and a trusted friend.

There is a way through. You may want to consider using an acronym developed by Everett Worthington Junior. I discovered it in *As We Forgive* by Catherine Claire Larson.<sup>13</sup> To forgive, we must REACH.

### **Recall the hurt.**

Don't deny or minimize the pain or memory. Forgiveness, as I mentioned before, doesn't forget. It remembers the pain and then makes a choice to forgive anyway. This makes forgiveness powerful and difficult. We can't forgive what we stuff. We must open the wound, own it, and admit that it hurt like crazy.

### **Empathize with the person who hurt you.**

In other words, try to see the trauma from the other person's perspective. This is not easy. I learned to do this with the boys who molested me, remembering those who victimized most likely were victims themselves. Hurt people hurt people, the cliché goes, but it's true. Find a way to jump into the shoes of the offender. It helps you see them not as monsters, but as human beings.

### **Altruistic gift of forgiveness.**

To offer this gift of forgiveness, it helps to have an anchor—a keen memory of a time when someone graciously forgave you. Remembering this altruistic gift helps us to know how to offer it. If you can't recall a time when someone outrageously forgave, consider Jesus's amazing forgiveness of you.

### **Commit publicly to forgive.**

It's one thing to write forgiveness words in your journal, yet another to share your desire to forgive with a close friend. Determine to forgive, but tell someone else about it. Accountability helps when you don't feel like forgiving. Once you put your desire "out there," you must commit.

### **Hold on to forgiveness.**

This is the hardest for me. I choose to forgive, but then I do take-backs. Or the emotion of the situation attacks me again. Or another infraction blares into my life. It takes tenacity and grit to continue choosing to forgive. It's not an emotion; it's a choice.

### **The Great Reversal**

Many sexual abuse victims get stuck in their journey of healing even after they've forgiven the

offender. The awful memories surface, and they have to grit their way to further forgiveness. But one more person lingers yet unforgiven: ourselves. So many of us blame ourselves for unwanted sexual touch. We think we enticed, asked for it, deserved the leering gaze and touch somehow. We cannot conceive of the abuse without first thinking of what we did to cause the attention or bring on the abuse.

If this describes your experience, I'd like you to read through REACH one more time. But instead of offering to forgive the abuser from the past, I'd like you to offer forgiveness to yourself in that moment. Although you most likely didn't do anything to contribute to someone else's sin, you still believe the lie that you did. You may battle monster thoughts of unworthiness because of this. It's time to offer yourself the grace you so audaciously gave those offenders. It may help to walk through this exercise with a trusted friend or counselor.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Enabling**

I don't want you to walk away from this book feeling like forgiveness equals enabling. In terms of those boys, the Statutes of Limitations long ran out, and I am not even entirely sure of their identities. My story serves as the only evidence. Thankfully,

God sees all of our stories, and He will, on the streets of the great hereafter bring everything to light. He will perfectly mete out His justice.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't work toward restoration here on earth. While it may not happen for me and these boys, hundreds of thousands of perpetrators walk free, able to molest again, because justice in our land has not been served. I hate it when I see our judicial system (or church system or school system) ignore the cries of victims, while preferring the perpetrators. For our sakes, we must forgive, but that doesn't mean we let go of punishing perpetrators.

If I had full knowledge of my abusers' identities, I would do my best to see if they continue to offend. If I could, I'd stop further abuse by reporting what I know. That's forgiveness plus justice. But since I can't prove their identities, I can pray. I can hope that God took hold of those men and changed them. And I can cling to my forgiveness of them, not as a token of my merit, but as an indication of the wild, outrageous grace of God in my own life.

When considering forgiveness, think on the kind of life you want. Remember the people you admire, those who seem to possess that effervescent quality of life you long for. Chances are, they learned the secret of forgiveness, of letting the past go to

anticipate the now. Forgiveness represents the bridge between the two halves of your life—then and now. The more you dwell back there in rage and bitterness, the more you stay tied to the injury. Forgiveness helps you live blessedly present tense.

# Chapter Seven

## LIVE UNMARKED

“God has made me fruitful in  
the land of my affliction.”

Genesis 41:52 ESV

The last stanza of the song “Cedars of Lebanon” by U2 instructs those of us who live in the new aftermath. The gist of the lyrics tell us to choose our enemies wisely because they’ll end up defining us, that those pesky enemies last longer than our friends.

Those two boys who stole from me at age five defined too much of my life. Have I given them far too much power? For a large chunk of my life they ruled my mind. Nightmares, daymares, flashbacks all tortured me for a time. And then as I healed, as Jesus took my hand and led me down a healthier path, the boys faded from memory. I can’t remember their faces. I hope and pray they don’t last longer than my friends.

But they will if I let them. If I stay back there in those bully memories for too long. Now, thankfully, I only visit them to proclaim healing. But if I stay, they find a way of entangling my mind. I

experienced this in a marked way as I wrote this little book. Staying too tethered to those enemies gives them an opportunity to bite, to re-infect, to reinforce my perceived worthlessness issues.

God is in the business of creating new things. He places worth inside us simply because He created us. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, God intends new things for us. I fear we may miss those new things by staying too long with the bullies of former years. Let's not so preoccupy ourselves with the past that we miss the power of right now, that we overlook a river through the desert of that memory.

Oswald Chambers says it beautifully. "Let the past sleep. But let it sleep on the bosom of Christ, and go out into the irresistible future with Him."<sup>14</sup>

We have an irresistible future! We don't need to follow U2's words. We don't need to let our enemies define us. They do not have to hold power over us. They cannot haunt us if we press forward, looking to the future, awaiting the new things God brings.

### **Do You Want To Get Well?**

Jesus asked the paralytic in John 5:6 the question He asks you today. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"



You have been in your condition many years now. Do you want to get well? Really? Would you rather rehash the past over and over in an endless loop of pain, or do you want healing? Or do you prefer to stuff it way down deep, becoming exhausted in the effort? I find most people don't pursue healing. The difference between the healed people and those still living in the past, defined by their enemies, is this: tenacious running after healing. You must want to get well so bad it wakes you up at night.

Here are four important truths about this healing journey.

### **Truth One**

It is possible to be set free. Tell your story. Ask people to pray. Seek wise counselors—all so you can experience the New in the Now. It's available, though the road toward health often feels long and arduous. Every new territory gained represents an opportunity to rejoice in what Jesus did. An avenue to beckon others who hurt to join the journey. Each snippet of healing helps you become salve to those who begin their healing path. The most satisfying times of my life, full of energized, effervescent joy, occurred when I had the privilege of coming alongside another by joining their healing story.

Jesus offers an irresistible future. It beckons. It allures. It hearkens. The past? Gone, cradled by Jesus. Today is full of possibilities, and the future sparkles with potential. Oh to live that kind of freedom-infused, anticipatory life!

### **Truth Two**

Jesus heals us to become healers. Paul reminds us of this: “All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God gave us. “For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ” (2 Cor. 1:5 NLT). We become whole so we can usher in wholeness. We find freedom so we can help to set others free on this enslaved earth. Jesus touches us so we can stand in as His hands and feet and heart and life to others needing His touch. It’s a great, sweet privilege and the hidden gem of being healed from trauma.

### **Truth Three**

There is no passive healing. We can’t just lackadaisically want healing and hope it comes. Jesus

touches us, yes, but He also asks us to do something. To pursue healing. To go to the pool and wash. To so want healing that you chase after it, finding counselors, asking for prayer, reading great books about sexual abuse recovery. “My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for He will pluck my feet out of the net” (Ps. 25:15 ESV). Note that the Psalmist makes a concerted effort to fix his eyes on God.

### **Truth Four**

Often you have to make difficult choices to completely separate from perpetrators in order to heal. Otherwise they open up a gaping wound that never heals, constantly re-injuring a raw sore. And once you heal, there’s no guarantee that you’ll ever experience a safe relationship with an enemy. Even from a distance, they may haunt. But they don’t need to exercise power over you anymore. You are a new person. You belong to the family of God, as his child. You appear as amazing, whole, and restored in His sight.

### **Time to Live a New Unmarked Story**

Jim Loehr in his book *The Power of Story* wrote something I underlined and starred several times. “The most important story you will ever tell about yourself is the story you tell to yourself.”<sup>15</sup> What story

do you tell yourself? That you're an unregenerate victim of sexual abuse who will never feel whole or clean? That you'll always be marked, destined for further abuse? That you'll never enjoy a satisfying sex life? Have you resigned yourself to a lesser story? That kind of story only leaves room for your perpetrators, but it doesn't allow Jesus the space He needs to utterly redeem what they did to you.

Let's live on the soil of grace, tilling the decay underneath so that it can produce growth. When we live this way, we see our past as a gift—the very death that ushered us into Jesus's arms, the weakness that thwarted our self-reliance. It may sound strange, but I'm grateful for my story. It's supreme evidence of God's ability to transform a ragamuffin into a warrior, a wordless victim into a redemptive storyteller, a fearful slip of a girl into a brave encourager. I would not express empathy for you had I not walked the path of pain. I certainly wouldn't have found the courage to write this book.

I love what Psalm 90:15 promises. "Make us glad for as many days as you've afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil" (ESV). Yes we experienced affliction. Yes we saw evil. But God promises gladness in direct proportion to our sadness. It may not come all at once, but grace is in the sweet, sweet air.

Perhaps you spent much of your life with an imprinted sexual abuse mark, a beacon inviting others to abuse you, a reminder to you and others that you carry secret shame. It seems so permanent, more indelible than a Sharpie's ink, as if the sexual abuse pierced your skin like a tattoo.

I'd like to encourage you with a new story. Picture yourself walking down the street in your neighborhood with an "I was sexually abused" tattoo in blaring red ink on your forehead. People walk by, point at your mark. Some snicker. Others raise eyebrows. Some flirt. One person tries to stop you, asking for a kiss.

You rub your forehead in desperation, but the mark remains.

You take to watching your feet, sick of people looking at you and your mark.

You nearly run into Someone, spying sandaled feet on the sidewalk in front of you. You look up and catch the gaze of Love. Jesus weeps as He sees your mark. He wipes his tears, then takes his hand, still wet from tears, and washes away the mark. No evidence of the mark remains—it's washed away.

You are now free to live unmarked.

Friend, live in that freedom!

## BENEDICTION

May your life be marked by courage.

May your days be infused with grace.

May God send you many friends who  
bear your story.

May you heal in your sweet way.

May your prayers for healing find beautiful answers.

May you be a truth-teller in this secretive,  
lie-addicted world.

May you be gutsy enough to live as a forgiving person.

May your mind be full of hope and peace.

And may you live a brand new story, unmarked, free.

Amen.

## LIFE-ALTERING RELATIONSHIP

An amazing adventurous story beckons all of us toward a God who put human skin on and tromped around in our shoes. It's the most sacrificial love story in history, the story from which every story derives its meaning.

The players? A Triune God. A rebellious people. A scrappy enemy.

The setting? The entire earth.

### **The plot goes something like this:**

God forms the world with a breath, and in that world places humanity in a garden. The scrappy enemy of God entices the people to rebel and seek life outside their Creator. Snakelike, he promises god-like powers, but delivers death instead.

This inaugurates a culture of death and decay. Humanity realizes its nakedness and shame, yet God slays animals to cover them in skins. Innocent blood helps cover their sin, but they are still banished and live under sin's curse.

No animal sacrifice made by the people satisfies a holy God, nor can they pull themselves up by their bootstraps to walk the way He asks them to walk. So He becomes the solution by sending

Himself in the flesh, providing an example and empathy.

Once on earth, He destroys the paltry, cheap tricks and works and words of the enemy by living a life of irresistibility, sinlessness, and radical love. He washed the rebels' feet with his sacred hands and told them to do likewise. Then He became the ultimate object lesson by giving those same hands and feet as nail-receivers.

The perfect, irresistible, holy, beautiful, loving One chose the devil's tool (death) for our sake, dying for our sin, throwing it farther than east from west, inviting us back to the garden, to perfect, open, whole, healed relationship and life. And after his heart beat no more, he rested in the earth while the devil sang shrill victory songs, only to hear his whimper when the God of Everything rose again, thrust away death's icy grip, and revealed afresh just who God was and is and is to be.

### **So what?**

We are lost without His story, without His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus shed blood for our sake, satisfying the justice of God, mortally wounding the enemy of our souls. And now we are welcomed as children, set free and healed by His wounds.



The invitation to this story is real. It cannot be revoked.

And all I can say is that God reached out to me when I was in a very desperate state, where I wanted to be done with this life, and He rescued me from those suicidal thoughts. He became the Daddy I always longed for, having been a fatherless girl at that point. And He inaugurated the rest of my story, a story where despair was replaced by hope, wandering with purpose.

I am alive and healthy today because of Jesus. And oh how I desire to see you meet Him too.

**If you'd like to, here's a prayer to get you started in that story-altering relationship:**

*Dear Jesus, thank You for going to the cross and dying for my sin. I'm well aware of it; it is my constant companion. I need forgiveness so desperately. I need to be cleansed. I long for a fresh start. I choose right now to surrender trying to live my life on my own terms, with fist-clenched control. Instead I open my hands (and my heart) and welcome You into the deepest parts of me. I need You. Please hear me. Amen.*



## Endnotes

- 1 Buchanan, Mark, *The Rest of God*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2006) 150.
- 2 <http://www.sticypress.org/about-us-st-irenaeus.nxg>
- 3 Most sexual abuse survivors don't dare stick a toe into the tunnel. The fact that you cracked open this book means you dared. You're tired of living the way you've lived. Sick of the triggers when you have sex (if you can have sex at all). Tired of feeling used, dirty, and shameful when you participate in sex. You're wary of all those years of living a lie, pretending to do an act without actually connecting to the moment. You want to fully live, so you stuck your toe in when you opened the pages of *Not Marked*. I wholeheartedly and joyfully commend you. And as one who placed my toe, leg, torso, heart, and mind into the tunnel and lived to tell about it from the vista of the other side, let me say simply this: it's worth it. Fear is normal. But your bravery in wanting to get well is the first step (even if you feel trepidation with your toe in the darkness).
- 4 See <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml> for a discussion of this and a listing

of symptoms. You may want to pursue EMDR therapy.

- 5 From the hymn “O the Deep Deep Love of Jesus”  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O\\_the\\_Deep,\\_Deep\\_Love\\_of\\_Jesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_the_Deep,_Deep_Love_of_Jesus)
- 6 See my book, *Building the Christian Family You Never Had* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Multnomah Publishing Group 2005) Chapter 7.
- 7 Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Books 1994) Read the chapter, “The Moral Point of View.”
- 8 Zimmerman, Lucille *Renewed: Finding Your Inner Happy in an Overwhelmed World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013) 86.
- 9 Cloud, Dr. Henry and Townsend, John. *Changes that Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1993) 47.
- 10 Brown, Brene: *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Gotham Books 2013) 82.
- 11 Pennebaker, James: *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications 2004).

- 12 Brown, Brene: *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Gotham Books 2013) 33.
- 13 Larson, Catherine Claire, *As We Forgive: Stories of Reconciliation from Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
- 14 Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1935) 49.
- 15 Loehr, Jim, *The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life* (New York, NY: Free Press 2007) 14.

