

Healing *the* Wounded Heart

WORKBOOK

The Heartache of Sexual Abuse
and the Hope of Transformation

Dan B. Allender
with Traci Mullins



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In order to protect the confidentiality of those who have shared their stories, sufficient details have been changed to alter their identities. The stories are most often an amalgamation of a number of people; no story describes a single person unless otherwise noted.

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To the original teaching faculty and staff of the Allender Center:
Cathy, Jeanette, Abby, Susan, Rachael, Andy, Trapper, and Wendell.
Glory and goodness to your labor for decades to come.

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Preface

Welcome to the Healing Path

It has been my privilege since 1986 to walk with women and men on a journey that no one readily chooses. In fact, it seems infinitely more reasonable to do anything other than to pick up this workbook and move further into your story. Perhaps you have postponed and fled from this moment for a long, long time, but now you find that your abuse is leaking into your life in a way it was not a year ago, or ten. Something has changed, and starting this journey toward healing is unavoidable. You join the rest of us who are on this path, admitting that we don't know how to go forward but somehow we know we can't go back.

What is this “back” we can't return to? It is a return to pretending, ignoring, or denying the fact that we have been sexually abused. You wouldn't have picked up this workbook if you had not crossed that threshold. And in doing so you have admitted you are alien; you can no longer live in your home, family, marriage, friendships, church, or body as you once did. The terrain feels like a minefield full of uncertainty and danger. It is like getting bad news. You go to bed and can't sleep, and after a fitful night of tossing and turning you awaken, and in that first instant of consciousness you hope that what is true is not true. Maybe it was all a bad dream and this new day will wash away the heartache. But it never does.

You don't feel it now, nor will you for a long season, but you have made one of the most courageous decisions of your life. It will not only

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change your present but will also reverberate in the heavens and for future generations. If you could only see the fruit of your labor now, you would grieve that you didn't start sooner. For now, I doubt that my words will be of much comfort because they'll seem untrue. You don't feel courageous. You feel scared, desperate, resigned, and reluctant, and would likely choose almost any other course of action to escape the voice that calls you out of the shadows. But that doesn't change the fact that you are courageous.

It grieves my heart beyond words to say that the vast majority of victims of abuse choose not to suffer more for the hope of a new and better day. Instead, they cut off desire, heartache, truth, and ultimately God in order to keep their seemingly safe boat from capsizing. This choice in favor of an easier present truncates the future and inevitably makes life little more than a tiresome repetition of the past.

You may not know what to do with the abuser, your family, or your spouse. You may be like many of us who hoped that we could just "forgive" the abuser and forget all that we didn't want to remember. I am saddened by the harm you have suffered and the harm you have inevitably done to yourself over the years. And I am honored and thrilled to walk with you as far as you wish to go from here.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed to allow you to personalize the material from *Healing the Wounded Heart*. To personalize means that the focus will be less on theory and more on exploring what it means for you. As much as I believe *Healing the Wounded Heart* is a helpful book, the process of actual change is far wilder and more unpredictable than any words can express or any framework can determine.

Therefore, while a path will be laid out for you to consider and at times follow, the Spirit of God may direct you to another way for deep and abiding change to occur. It doesn't make this resource less helpful or your path right for everyone. It is simply an acknowledgment that God is in control and designs your story and journey uniquely for his purposes.

The path laid out in this workbook is not meant to be strictly followed as much as it is meant to prompt, stir, focus, and invigorate you as you move

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forward. I suggest, first of all, that you fully read *Healing the Wounded Heart*. If you read the original *The Wounded Heart*, I hope you have both books somewhere so you can easily access both volumes.

Throughout this workbook there are many exercises I encourage you to ponder and write about. I am purposely not providing much space for you to write in the workbook, but there is space to begin. My hope is that you will do many of the exercises on your computer or in an additional notebook.

I also encourage you to go back to *Healing the Wounded Heart* and reread chapter 12, “Steps to Transformation.” This workbook aligns closely with that chapter. As you go through this process, the ideal is for you to engage the workbook while in conversation with a good therapist, a kind spouse, strong friends, a supportive church, and a committed group of fellow pilgrims on the same journey. There are few who will be blessed with all five, but one is enough to begin. If you have none, then your fortitude might make it possible to begin the process until you can find at least one of the five. You need support. Period. You need more than mere encouragement to hang in when it gets tough. You need people who will weep, pray, ponder, suffer, and laugh through your changes. It will seldom be people in your family. If your deepest support comes from someone in your family, then count your blessings because you are one in a thousand.

The people who join you will be those who either have been on their own journey long before you started yours or are at least humble enough to want to both support you and learn with and from you. These people will also need to read *The Wounded Heart* (or listen to the audio) and *Healing the Wounded Heart*. Knowledge and shared language are crucial for the journey ahead.

You will notice that this volume is two workbooks in one. The first is for those who have been sexually abused and are choosing to take this life-transforming journey. The second workbook is for the equally courageous spouses who intend to do all they can to make this journey successful for their abused spouse and their marriage.

As the spouse of a mate abused in childhood, you may have been sexually abused yourself. In some strong marriages it is possible that both partners could be going through the first part of the workbook at the same time.

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In most cases, however, it is better for one spouse to take the lead to walk through the stages of healing and to have the other spouse do the work of accompanying and supporting. At a later point, it would make sense for the supportive spouse to address his or her own history of past sexual abuse.

The goal of including the second workbook is to ensure that couples walk through this journey in a manner that strengthens their marriage and intensifies their awareness of the harm of sexual abuse. If you are the spouse of the abused, this will require that you read and engage the material in both *The Wounded Heart* and *Healing the Wounded Heart*.

None of this is done quickly. The impulse for both the victim of sexual abuse and the spouse will be to start and then let the process dwindle in focus to the point of quitting. It is crucial for both of you to embrace the reality that this journey is going to take a long, long time. If you want an exact timetable, it can't be provided, but this is assuredly not something that is going to be finished in a few months. In most cases the journey will take a year or more. Therefore, both spouses will need to make time in their schedule for a weekly checkup. There needs to be time to share what you have written and discovered and to ask questions and pray together. Change will not happen by merely answering the questions. You need to talk. You need to listen. You need to learn how to give and receive stories that take you deeper into your heart and into the heart of your spouse.

If you are not married, or if your spouse refuses to join you, the second workbook can also be utilized and adapted by a dear friend or family member. It is always best to use the two workbooks in community. It is even better to do this in a small group with other survivors of sexual abuse who covenant together to engage the issues opened up by the book and the workbooks. The Allender Center for Trauma and Abuse (theallendercenter.org) has videos to address some of the realities you will face individually, with your spouse, and in a group. Utilize that resource, especially if you are doing this without support.

More Help along the Way

Working through issues of sexual abuse in yourself or your spouse is a tumultuous trek. Here are some guidelines to support you on the journey.

1. Go Slow

The natural tendency is to want to “get it over with” as quickly as possible, and many rush through the healing process, only superficially addressing the wound. The rush creates a lot of dust and debris and seldom allows the time or energy to ponder and to hear from God. This workbook is not to be done chapter by chapter on consecutive weeks. No one can go that fast and profit. You should stay in each stage until the work in it has not only been completed but also metabolized and made your own.

2. Get Feedback

There are so many ways to keep our heart from the truth. We do not naturally face difficult things regarding our way of being in the world or our families, abuse, or gifts. Often we will not go any further than those with whom we relate. We tend to play to the level of maturity of those with whom we spend the most time. If these people are not wise, caring, and bold, then you will likely not be getting feedback about yourself that is truthful and kind. What is not needed is a mere ally who tells you what you want to hear, nor do you want an adversary who is bent on telling you where you are wrong or what you need to do. What you need is someone who is patient and kind while also thoughtful in asking wise and bold questions. A friend like this is a rare treasure.

3. Find a Good Therapist

A wise guide who has walked with many on this journey is more precious than gold. It will cost you some gold to hire one, but the dangers and complexity of the journey will not be engaged as well on your own. Knowledge of the terrain of the human heart and the effects of trauma is crucial. Be sure you are working with someone whose work is primarily with trauma and abuse victims and ideally operates both in the realm of human relationships and the unseen spiritual realm. If a therapist with those qualities is not available, then at least find someone who does not interpret your spiritual language as pathological.

4. Enlist Your Spouse

There may be no more difficult process than engaging the harm of abuse and simultaneously working on your marriage. It is like juggling multiple chain saws—for most mere mortals it is not possible. I will guide you through some of the minefields and greatest dangers, but if you're dealing with a spouse who is opposed to and brings contempt and/or indifference to your journey, it will feel like you're being asked to run a marathon with a thirty-pound pack on your back. It can be done, but it will be slower and much harder. Ideally, your spouse will be open to reading, writing, and reflecting on his or her own past, present, and future and joining you in this trek of transformation.

5. Write

Writing is your most important tool. It is your chisel and hammer as you slowly carve the wood to make sense of your life and also your private place to express the unsaid—the not-yet-named matters hidden in your heart. Writing will give you a detailed account of the process. It will tell you things at the moment, and even more so later, that you knew but couldn't express in words directly to another person.

If you find at any point that writing is too difficult, then read through other portions of each stage that may be equally important for you to engage. Don't be put off by writing. It will come. For some, the only way to write is first to take a long walk and talk out loud. Others need more time in prayer or perhaps listening to worship music. You may find that creating a collage from magazine print and pictures allows you easier access to answer what is being asked than writing. You can also draw, paint, or sculpt. Just don't scare yourself into a corner where you feel there is nothing you can do to engage this material. Don't quit. This journey requires only that you take whatever steps you can at any given moment. Stop worrying about what is ahead. Simply do what you can do today.

You will want to make sure your writing is inaccessible to anyone, unless you invite another to read it. There are many ways to protect your writing—from a locked desk file to computer encryption software. You need to feel utterly safe. I often write in a notebook, and what I think important to keep I then transfer to an inaccessible computer file and shred the written material.

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Your writing will be most helpful, however, if you do read it to another. Inviting someone you trust to ponder and reflect on what you are discovering almost always leads to more opportunity for you to rewrite and clarify your story.

6. Commit Time and Set Apart Space

If it's not on your calendar it isn't going to happen. We may fail to do what we plan, but if we don't plan we have failed before we begin. I'd recommend setting a weekly or biweekly time to read, write, reflect, and open your heart to God. Often if we budget an hour we will feel overwhelmed, and then it is harder to return the following time. I'd set aside half an hour, twice a week, to begin. When the half hour is over, even if you are actively engaged in writing or pondering, stop. Stick to the parameters that you create. If you find that you can easily exceed a half hour, then expand the first session by fifteen or thirty minutes and leave the second session a half hour in length. It is a simple premise: build up slowly and create the desire to spend more time rather than put yourself under too much pressure.

I'd also recommend that you do your work in the same space each time. Make sure it is sufficiently private so that if strong emotion arises you won't feel compelled to shut it down. Mark your space with a few soothing and meaningful symbols of your journey: flowers, candles, a special piece of art, a photograph of a dear ally. This is a place that is meant to welcome you and hold you with kindness. Make it so.

7. Operate without a Timetable

Put off the issue of when you will finish. There is no hurry. Take this on for a year, then see what is next. If there is more to be addressed after a year (and there will likely be), then you can plan for a second year. Realize that this is a war. The war will one day come to an end. The journey will be far longer than you fear and far, far better than you can imagine now.

Others may ask you, "When will you be healed?" or "How long will this take?" The best answer to the first is "Heaven," and to the second, "It will take just as long as God desires." You owe no one an answer to those questions, but if you do offer any response make sure it doesn't stem from guilt or pressure.

8. Take Seasons Off

No field can be planted and harvested season after season and still bear good produce. It must lie fallow. You need a weekly Sabbath. You need daily breaks in order to be fully human and imaginatively productive. You can't bulldoze your way through these issues quickly or constantly. You may have thoughts that come up outside of your two half-hour periods of time. Jot yourself a note to remember. Take five minutes and write down some of the details that have come to you. But leave your most significant work for the times allotted.

During the remainder of your week, work, love, serve, play, rest, pray, shop, and live life. After steadily working on these issues for six months to a year, take some time off. Put your notebooks aside. Don't see your therapist. Lie fallow. But don't allow your break to serve as a meandering period without boundaries. Create a start date when you will return to the trail, and stick to it.

9. Join a Group

The harm done to you was in the context of a relationship; therefore, the journey of healing is best experienced in the presence of others. One of the best ways to do this is in a group. It needs to be clear, however, that a group can't dictate what stage you are in or how fast you are to move through it. Group work with this workbook would be disastrous if group members pressured others to push through one stage a week, or in any predetermined time period. There will be some in your group who are further along than others, but everyone needs to go at his or her own pace. Again, you will find videos at the Allender Center (theallendercenter.org) to help you do good group work.

10. Honor Your Body

I left one of the most important recommendations for last: take care of your body. One of the major effects of abuse is cortisol-based, stress-induced illnesses. It will not serve God or yourself to take on this journey and add additional injury to the existing harm. You will not finish this path unless you learn to honor, care, bless, and become kinder to your body.

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This task may be as difficult as any work you do on this trek, and it needs to be repetitive and expansive, not done once and for all. One of the most important tools you will develop along with writing is listening to your body and then writing about what you experience. If you don't feel what is happening in your body, you will not hear God clearly or develop the wisdom to know how to engage your world well.

Counting the Cost

As you begin this arduous but healing journey, you can't know in advance who you will become or what you will suffer, but without question you will not remain the same. This is a question many frightened spouses ask: "When will he be normal?" The spouse is really asking, "When will she return to being who she once was?" The answer is never.

I don't mean to scare you, but if you walk this journey not a single relationship or activity will ever be exactly the way it once was. I can't promise it will all be better and everyone will be thrilled with your soul makeover. In fact, if you count the cost honestly, there is a high probability that some of your friends, family, and, sadly, even your spouse will prefer the "past" person and reject the one who is now coming alive. People don't like change, especially when it requires them to change too.

There are obviously many factors that can make this journey seem too daunting. But you know that the suffering that got you here is too great to ignore. The quiet prompting of the Spirit is urging you on. You know you can't deny the impulse to move forward; you also know you can't ignore the fear that warns you that the cost is too high. There is little doubt that you are caught in between. I trust that you will do what is best for your heart, no matter the risk or the timing. You would not have gotten this far without a strong desire for change.

The next part of the workbook explains core theories related to sexual abuse that will guide you on your journey. If you have an idea of the direction you wish to travel, these theories will function like a compass, helping you to stay on the path to healing. May you begin this trek with the eyes of your heart open and your hands reaching out to whom you wish to become.

Part One

The Wounding of Sexual Abuse

When I wrote *The Wounded Heart* twenty-five years ago I had no question that the harm of abuse was profound. The years since then have not made me doubt for a minute its origin. I believe sexual abuse begins in the belly of evil and is one of its most significant means of bringing heartache to the earth.

The Wounding of Sexual Abuse

In both *The Wounded Heart* and *Healing the Wounded Heart*, I put forth the premise that the kingdom of darkness hates faith, hope, and love. Often these are considered virtues or ethical qualities. I view them instead as the essence of what it means to be human, irrespective of religious conviction. Every human being lives on the basis of trust (faith), imagination (hope), and reciprocity (love). One can no more escape the intersection of faith, hope, and love than one can refuse to breathe.

I saw early on in my work that evil uses betrayal to disrupt trust, powerlessness to distort imagination, and shame and contempt to mar the pleasure of giving and receiving. It is a progressive and cumulative assault that slowly and insidiously effaces life, turning the heart from both the glory of God and the glory of being human toward greater harm of self and others.

It is a horrible word to use, but evil is “brilliant” in its return on investment because abuse involves an act that may take only a few seconds to perpetrate yet will shadow the life of a human being for decades if left unaddressed.

My theory of the wounding of sexual abuse begins with a definite cosmology. I hold that humanity has a common enemy, Satan and his kingdom of darkness. Over the years I have been surprised by people who don’t hold to this perspective yet have found *The Wounded Heart* helpful. One woman came to a Recovery Week and announced, “I don’t believe in Jesus or any of this religious garbage, but I have read countless books on sexual abuse and yours was the first I found helpful.” I was honored.

Every human being is attempting to make sense of a complex world, and for the victim of sexual abuse this world can feel especially confusing and threatening. My convictions may not be yours, but what most who engage the topic of sexual abuse can agree on is that the victim of abuse is thrown into a dark web of contradiction, confusion, and heartache that doesn’t ameliorate simply by knowing that the abuse was not their fault. Much more work is required to name the harm and extricate oneself from the web.

Before we turn to the process of transformation laid out in this workbook, we need to reexamine the unique harm perpetrated by sexual abuse.

The War against Faith

Faith is a network of beliefs, convictions, and presuppositions that allow us to locate ourselves in the world as distinct people and yet connected in relationships. Faith grounds us and helps us establish our identity. It serves as a compass to help us navigate who we are and how we relate to others. The Bible calls faith an anchor for our soul (see Heb. 6:19).

Faith begins through the attachment process of bonding to our primary caregiver(s). It grows through hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of experiences that enable us to test the world and our growing assumptions regarding it. Early in life, a child learns whom to trust, what it feels like when security is lost, and what is required to restore a bond with others if trust is broken. In the midst of this early patterning, an abuser reads a child's struggle with bonding to assess how to establish a relationship that is better than what he or she is experiencing with their primary caregiver. It is an intentional and diabolic move. The abuser reads where there is fear and loneliness and uses this brokenness to gain access and build a bond. This sense of bonding in the abused is the result of a rise of oxytocin—the biochemical of bonding. Bonding enables a child both to be aroused by care and to rest in the relationship. For someone who has experienced abuse, the experience of rest in relationship is eventually despised and becomes the foundation for suspicion and even contempt. As a result, the common reaction is to fear and/or hate any experience or person who seems to offer what the abuser used to seduce trust.

The quandary is that we can't live without trust. We trust whenever we drive a car, or when we join with others to build a new company. We can't escape the need to trust, but for a victim of abuse, hypervigilance is considered essential in order to minimize the probability of betrayal. Hypervigilance is a sentinel that stands guard at the heart, suspicious and watchful, assessing who is worthy to be allowed in and who is not. No human being escapes betrayal, and we are all, to some degree, assessing who can and can't be trusted. Sometimes we are wrong, and we learn and suffer in order to refine our skill in bonding.

The abused man or woman suffers a deep wound and often refuses to trust because they were “fooled” by an abuser who offered hope for love and life. This vow, *I will never trust again and be betrayed like I was*, becomes

a means to lessen the inevitable heartache of betrayal. The vow is like a bubble that insulates and protects—and simultaneously suffocates and kills. What he or she employs for protection begins to ruin core relationships.

The majority of people I see for therapy come because their relational realm is broken. Something has penetrated the bubble, and though it has been resealed the residual ache cannot be denied. Most want the fractured relationship restored without having to give up the insulation. As a result, the roots of the core war are seldom addressed; to do so means reentering memories of betrayal that are full of pain and bitterness.

The dentist's chair is a good metaphor. As soon as I walk into a dentist's office I become tense. When I slide into the chair and am positioned for the hygienist to most easily access my teeth, my muscles prepare for a war. I wish I could relax. I can't. I am so aware of my anxiety that all I can do is try to appear calm and then go into fight, flight, and freeze mode. All my resources are spent on self-protection and survival. If asked why I am so afraid, I would tell you that I don't like pain.

The truth is more complex: I have countless memories of childhood and early adolescent dental agony. The filling of eleven cavities in one sitting with minimal Novocain is but one of them. I don't want to remember how my twelve-year-old self, just returning from a summer camp where sexual abuse occurred often, sat in a dental chair for at least three hours and felt as trapped as I had at the camp. I don't want to consider how my experience at that camp might affect my visit to the dentist's office as an adult. It is easier to simply gear up for the battle, enter the conflict, and survive.

To remember means to enter the scene of harm in the dentist's office and allow myself to feel again what I barely endured in the original harm. Add to that the fact that I have not developed kindness or allowed myself or anyone else to feel grief for that boy who was rendered powerless and terrorized. It is better to wall off the memory, insulate myself, and carry on. That works—until the bubble gets pierced by sufficient fear as I sit in the dentist's chair, and the dental hygienist says, "Are you okay? You seem really anxious today." Her words alert me to the reality that the ache demands attention that harshness or denial will not resolve.

We grow in trust (faith) to the degree that we do what seems counterintuitive: open our heart to remember, grieve, and ask God to engage

our heartache with tenderness. Reentering the terrain of past abuse, long fenced off as forbidden and purposefully forgotten, is an act of profound courage. It requires learning to read our story with eyes that see as God sees. This requires walking slowly and intimately through a landscape we left behind long ago.

If we start with an assumption that every human life bears the marks of evil's hatred of the glorious creations we are, it leads us to understand that every human life is a crime scene where evil has stolen, killed, and destroyed. It is not hyperbole to say that every life must be explored as wisely and methodically as if we were a CSI agent. We can only reclaim what we name. If we refuse to enter our past with courage and sensitivity, the harm of the past will continue to war against us in the present.

Most of us tell stories regarding the heartache of the past in a manner that allows us to tell the truth without being transformed by it. We tell without telling. We allow details to be generalized and painful scenes to be edited. Few enter the forbidden terrain searching for clarity or intending to grieve. The result is that our memories don't call us to God. Seldom do we remember in a way that makes us feel desperate for God to be God.

Remembering stories of past harm is meant to open our heart to mourn and receive the comfort of God. It is comfort that enables our heart to imagine a day and a world transformed by hope.

The War against Hope

Faith and hope are identical twins. It is almost impossible to tell them apart. Faith is hope regarding the past. It enables us to believe that the past is the part of our story most open to interpretation. We can engage the past in such a way that we comprehend meaning in the midst of suffering: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV). Hope is faith for the future. As Gabriel Marcel stated, "Hope is a memory of the future." Hope draws from the brokenness of the past a dream of what might be different in the future.

I spent a week working with a brilliant man whose success in life had been honored on the cover of major magazines related to his field. He was a good, godly man. His past was deeply scarred, yet he had lived an

immensely productive life. He acknowledged that he lived with a thick and impenetrable bubble that kept everyone out of the deepest parts of his heart. To him it was the only way to live given the heartache from his childhood. The bubble was penetrated when his wife discovered him looking at pornography. This triggered a cataclysm for him. He was heartbroken over the pain he caused his wife and sought therapy to repair the breach.

When we began to explore his life, we eventually entered his earliest uses of pornography. He was ten when he discovered his father's treasured magazines. He described in another context the utter, profound absence of warmth, words, or care from his mother, father, grandparents, and extended family. I was hearing about a child who grew up in a desert. There was no greenery, fruit, or signs of life. It was as stark and empty a world as I have heard described.

He had never owned the desolate world he grew up in as anything other than “not happy.” He had never considered how the pornographic images he viewed at age ten were not overtly sexual for him. That boy had no clue what sex was or how it worked. He only knew he was riveted to the pictures and they made him feel alive in a way he didn't within his family relationships. The man had never allowed himself to grieve—not only for the empty little boy but also for how pornography was for him a small taste of beauty, warmth, softness, and imagined care.

As a result of our work together, that ten-year-old boy began to see a small opening into the insufferable emptiness of his childhood, but it was quickly resealed minutes after sorrow began—until I asked a simple question: “If you were describing the life of your grandson, would your heart feel any different?” Tears—a rich, profound, life-giving flow—changed the texture of his face. It was as if the desert flowers hidden from sight sprang out of the ground in a display of grandeur. He looked at me with ferocity. “I would never let my grandson suffer that kind of harm.”

Hope is defiant against the possibility of harm. Hope refuses to believe the inevitable is so. What has always been and can't change is an illusion; if anything is true, it is that change is inevitable, not that the inevitable will not change. Hope is confidence that what is divided can be reunified and goodness can reign. But the voice of “reality” caustically replies, *Nonsense*.

It is what it is. You will only be more discouraged and frustrated until you accept reality.

We are all held in the tension between the already and the not yet. If it isn't too hard to handle, then why risk what is known for what is unknown and may be worse than what already is? *Be careful what you wish for; you may get it.*

We live in a world that craves danger without risk or consequence. We want the excitement of a roller coaster without the risk of any danger of falling. We want to feel close to our spouse or a friend without risking vulnerability. So we settle for less, accept the diminishment of desire, and squander what we have on relief rather than the prize at the end of a long race.

We hate hope. This is a strong statement that bears serious consideration. Evil hates hope and wants to diminish our desire for relationship and sate us instead with sugar and trans fats, binging on ten episodes of a Netflix drama, or living on fantasies of pornography, travel, and being the next *The Voice* or lotto winner. Our hatred of hope grows when we repeat destructive patterns that ameliorate desire and shrink our dreams. I have talked to countless folks who want to write a book but don't write, young people who want to make scads of money but play endless hours of computer games, and husbands who want better marriages but refuse to risk vulnerability with their wives. Repetition of destructive or empty behaviors empties us of courage.

Beyond mere repetition, hopelessness rises as we reenact patterns that lead to the same heartache we experienced in the past. Reenactment is being bound to a loop, a reiterative pattern of living out the unaddressed and unresolved harm of the past. I have a friend who suffered sexual abuse by her father. She has lost fifteen to thirty pounds more than ten times in her life. Each time she gets to a weight where she begins to be noticed by men, she "unconsciously" begins to pack the pounds back on. Perhaps the first half dozen times she did so unconsciously. But not the last four times. Those times she knew what she was doing and why. She knew she was terrified by what was aroused in her when men whistled or made comments about her body. The attention she felt, even when it was a form of sexual harassment, felt similar to when her father eyed her developing body and

remarked on what men would want to do with her sexually. She said, “I feel safer under my fat than I do when my body feels thin.” She reenacts fleeing to the “safety” (the bubble) of being fat when she begins to feel alive and aroused.

For a long season her reenactment was hidden under subterfuge and dissociation. All addictions glide through the grass unrecognized until they are seen. Now that she sees the pattern she feels even more powerless to stop it. It feels like a weight bound to her that will inevitably drown her if she gets near the water.

The demand of hope is to engage the reenactment and the addictive patterns with boldness, honesty, and kindness. Again, this is counterintuitive. We will not regain the ground of hope by force or mere self-control. No addict has changed merely because of the pain. Desire for goodness must seize the heart to imagine—to dream. Addiction needs to be tripped up by kindness. The more we experience desire with blessing rather than fear or despair, the more we will move into what our heart most deeply desires: honor, goodness, and beauty. Engaging repetitive patterns of reenactment with a heart open to receive kindness instead of contempt increases hope.

Faith and hope are the servants of love. Faith gives us an identity, and hope enables us to risk for the sake of something greater than ourselves. Both serve our capacity to give and receive love. And it is love that is most hated by evil.

The War against Love

The greatest of the three, love, is opposed by the greatest human struggle, shame. Evil wields shame against humanity as a weapon of mass destruction. The experience of shame sends a shudder through the soul so deep that most human beings would rather disappear, lie, or give up all that feels dear to escape the cataclysm. It is no small matter that the first story after the rebellion of Adam and Eve portrays both humans as willing to do whatever was necessary to escape exposure. Adam and Eve had to know that hiding from an infinite, all-knowing God was impossible, but shame makes a person mad and is the impetus for some of the most self-destructive and harmful acts against other human beings. Adam and Eve

were willing to turn against one another in a heartbeat in order to blame the other (and God) to diminish the horror of exposure. Loyalty melts in the wretched heat of shame.

We usually think that the antonym for love is hate, but I believe it is closer to say that the opposite of love is shame, which inevitably produces hatred as a defense against nakedness and the terror of being seen. If this is true, then it stands to reason that human lives are profoundly shaped by even one significant experience of shame. It makes even more sense that evil waits for these moments to arise and then opportunistically offers counterfeit solace and protection according to its diabolical design. Evil anticipates and instigates these moments and offers the consolation of contempt. Contempt functions as a protective shield to blunt being shamed and in turn gives the shamed person the power to shame others. It is a simple and darkly elegant cure: when we are ashamed we feel self-contempt and restore a sense of power by becoming violent. Let me illustrate.

I hate being late. This hatred was birthed as a child when I accompanied my mother to social events. She was notoriously late. We would make an entrance to a party, church, or parent-child conference well after the appointed time. I could easily read the frustration or disdain of our “audience.” I would work furiously to get my mother ready on time. It never worked; in fact, the more I pushed, the later we would be.

Recently I was asked to lead a small group at a Recovery Week and I lost track of time. One of my colleagues had to come to my office and tell me that the group was waiting for my arrival. I was mortified. The second he turned his back I hit my forehead brusquely with my hand.

The act of violence was reflexive. I cursed; under my breath I spoke violent words against myself for my mistake. In an instant I had taken the bait of evil and joined it as an accuser against myself for an unforgiveable act. The hostility rolled on for another moment as I scrambled to pin the blame on someone else. I blamed my coleader for organizing this week on a schedule that differed from our normal schedule. The next instant I realized how absurdly I was behaving, but instead of being humbled I felt even smaller for being so immature as to be caught so quickly in the trap. Rather than repent, I simply shut down and went to join the group. I felt foolish and disqualified—exactly what evil wanted.

The Wounding of Sexual Abuse

Shame feels like sinking sand that traps our car—the more we try to extricate the vehicle, the deeper we sink in the morass until it feels easier to abandon the effort and quit. Or we turn our fury over vulnerability against someone smaller and more vulnerable than us to make him or her pay for the insult we have endured. In this endless cycle we propagate shame and birth more suffering for everyone.

The shame of sexual abuse is centered in a sense of complicity. The abuse has connected us to the abuser. His or her touch brought warmth and perhaps the first bright light of care. As the abuser touched our body we could feel the pulse and pleasure of the abuser synchronize with the sensual experience of our own arousal. As this perceived betrayal of our body's arousal congealed with fear, awkwardness, powerlessness, and disgust, the pleasure became more difficult to comprehend or address. As pleasure intensified and became too difficult to hold, the mind split from the body through dissociation. We concluded that the abuse was somehow our fault because our body was aroused. We felt like a drowning person who sinks below the waves and then kicks back to the surface for a wet mouthful of air, only to sink deeper the next time. The impulse to simply survive drove a host of stress chemicals through our body that mixed with our pleasure chemicals. We became a biochemical mess. No wonder we wanted to disappear and eventually turned against what seemed to cause this horror: our body. *My body is the enemy. If only I could stop feeling, I could survive.*

What we can't comprehend is that we are seeking solace from a thief, killer, and destroyer who desires nothing more than for us to join it in cursing our goodness and the beauty of our sexuality. Evil may only be a microbe in the wound of sexual abuse, but it will proliferate and grow like a cancer to rob us of life.

What is required is far more than merely acknowledging we were sexually abused, though no healing can come until we do. And we must do far more than merely know it was not our fault. Rather, we must allow God to open up the festering wound to expose the infection and begin to address the curse(s) against our body and heart. Then we must learn to bless what God blesses and curse what he curses. We must stand against the seduction and rampaging hatred of evil and discern how our trust in its solace has shaped our personhood.

This is not a journey taken by many. It is a healing path that seems, at first, worse than the disease. It is not. It is life-giving, freeing, and empowering.

The Path to Transformation

Let me reiterate: healing requires entering our stolen story to grow faith by remembering and learning to grieve. In turn, we regain hope by receiving kindness that disrupts reenactments that kill our wish for change. Finally, we must bless what our body experienced in the suffering of arousal and curse only what God curses: the shame and contempt evil has woven into our body and soul. As difficult as this may be to understand and to do, it comes not all at once but in a process I have referred to as the topography of change.

In the chapters ahead we will consider five core dimensions of our life: story, body, heart, relationships, and future.

Story

Our story is written by God and coauthored with us. Our part is to take responsibility for how we live the present, but we are also responsible for how we care for our past and prepare for our future. To the degree we fail to care for our past, we are bound to repeat it in some form. Caring for our past includes coming closer and closer to the truth of what happened and how those moments shaped our way of being in the world. Caring will also involve deepening our grief for what we have suffered and how we have harmed others. Greater capacity to grieve opens our heart to the comfort of God in the present. The more we receive from God what our heart is most meant to receive, the freer we become to pursue the dreams that give birth to our future. The deeper the grief and comfort, the better prepared we will be for the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Our story is also a gift from God to reveal his story. As important as we are to God, we are not the hero of our story. We are not the point of our existence. We will find rest and joy to the degree that our story reveals the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Our suffering is meant to help us explore what it means that Jesus died for us. Our freedom and joy

are a window into a deeper understanding that the resurrection promises death will not have the final word. Our talents and abilities are ascension gifts that reveal that Jesus has all authority and power because he sits at the right hand of the Father and reigns over his kingdom.

At this moment, you may disagree. You may have a strained relationship with God or may not be a Christian. I don't intend to quibble or push Jesus down the throat of anyone, but what seems unquestionably true is that if our story is all we care about, our life will wither from not having a larger purpose. We must have a meaningful context in order to sustain our engagement with the particulars of our smaller but profoundly important story. Without considering our story as part of a greater whole, we will too easily lose perspective and be lost in the woods.

Simply said: our story is not ours alone to do with as we choose. Rather, it is ours and it is God's. And it is in coauthoring our story with him that we will know the greatest freedom and joy.

Body

We will come to know our story and our God as much through our body as we do through our mind. Just as your life is a once-told story that no one else can replicate or mimic, so is your body. No one has your face. No one has your beautiful body. Your body is not a mere husk that houses your soul until death. In fact, your body will one day be redeemed fully and you will be recognizable as *you*—fully and completely the you whom you were created to be (see 1 Cor. 15:35–49).

Just as our body is the ground that evil used to bring about profound harm, it is in and with our body that God intends to work out our redemption. We must learn to pay attention, care for, and be led by the innate wisdom of our body. For most victims of abuse, the body is to be controlled so as not to be harmed by others or to inflict harm on others by following one's impulses. As one woman in a recovery group said, "I put my body in jail so I won't harm others with my lust or anger."

Redemption that doesn't engage the body is not only less than God desires but it actually contradicts what he intends to transform. God intends to restore the body fully to be the way it was meant to be. We will be utterly transformed when we see him as he is (see 1 John 3:2), and until

then, even though we are aging and our outer body is decaying, our inner person is being renewed (see 2 Cor. 5:2–5). The promise that our body will be renewed fully is the impetus we need to take hold of all the healing in our body that is possible on earth.

Heart

The heart is usually considered the core of our being—the central motivating, life-determining, relationship-shaping center. It is not merely our spirituality, our conscience, or our emotions. It is who we are.

The deepest part of our heart is attuned to the world we cannot see. It is where we house our longings to be known and to know God. It is what continually draws us back to the voice of Jesus. It is also the part of us that is most susceptible to the violence of evil. Our heart is in a war and we must have the courage to face our enemy and its efforts to steal innocence, kill hope, and mar beauty. We must also look at what God does with the debris of evil to re-create an even greater glory for our story and body. God gives us access to our heart in order for us to discern our direction and make calibrations that will return us to goodness and health. We gain access by opening our heart to the particularity of our story and all of its implications.

A human life is like a sailboat that moves according to how we direct the rudder. If the rudder is ignored, the boat will turn in circles or in whatever direction the wind is pushing it. Our heart is our rudder, and we must tend to it daily, making sure we are moving in the direction that is life-giving. To the degree we fail to tend to our heart, evil will be wielding its power to send our boat careening onto the rocks.

Relationships

Our Triune God exists in mysterious beauty as a multiple One. There are not three gods; God is three persons. Not aspects, not metaphors, but, in fact, three separable personalities in complete, beautiful union with each other. God is relational, and he has made us to be like him. We will find the life God desires for us to experience only to the degree that we are invested in the lives of others for the sake of the glory of God.

Relationships arc from our past to our future—from our parents to their children and to our children. If you are single, your relational story with your parents and family is a window into your heart. Your relationships with friends, lovers, co-workers, mentors, and acquaintances are rich texts to read in order to discern the direction of your heart. If you are married, the most central relationship in life, for good or ill, is with your spouse. It is with him or her that you discover the depths of the story of Jesus and what it means to suffer death and humiliation on the way to celebrating resurrection joy. It is in your family relationships—with your parents, your children, and your grandchildren—that the story of God is revealed in the midst of your most poignant despair and most profound joy. How we participate in these relationships determines how large our heart will become and sets the trajectory for our eternity.

Future

As a Christian I am convinced that every moment, word, and gesture matter for eternity. If the gospel is true, then we are not condemned; instead, we are cherished by God. We are not meant to strive for love; rather, we are meant to receive it like an invitation for a day of play—one we anticipate, prepare for, and participate in to the fullest. If that is our future, then we must reckon with what we bring to the game. God made us to play a special part in his kingdom, and if we don't understand how he designed us, then we will have only a portion of the joy we are meant to know on this earth.

Your calling is to live out the story he has authored, to embody your calling in the way you open your heart to others for the sake of the story of God. You need to know yourself as he made you. You must study yourself in order to grow in your capacity to be the *you* he made for the unique creative work he has invited you to live. The more alive and committed you are to what it means to be fully human, the greater your joy and in turn the more good you are able to bring to the kingdom of God.

It is for the sake of this future that you take the journey toward healing your wounded heart. Unless you have a future that is meaningful, you will not endure all that is required to plunge into the depths of harm or allow yourself to be swept up in hope.

The Wounding of Sexual Abuse



This workbook will ask you to consider these five dimensions of your life—story, body, heart, relationships, and future—in the stages on the path set before you. In certain stages there will be greater emphasis on one or several dimensions and less or none on others. I have outlined seven stages that I have found helpful to those who have been harmed as they seek transformation and redemption amid the rubble of sexual abuse. There are as likely thirty stages as there are seven; no one number best describes all that needs to occur, nor can anyone assure the traveler that the sequence will follow the same trajectory for everyone. There are overlaps and differences for all who walk this path. The stages I offer are an approximation of the truth, but I trust that the Spirit of God will uniquely fashion and direct you as you walk toward the truth, no matter how haltingly.

Fare thee well. Accept help when it comes. Press on. It is possible to heal a wounded heart.