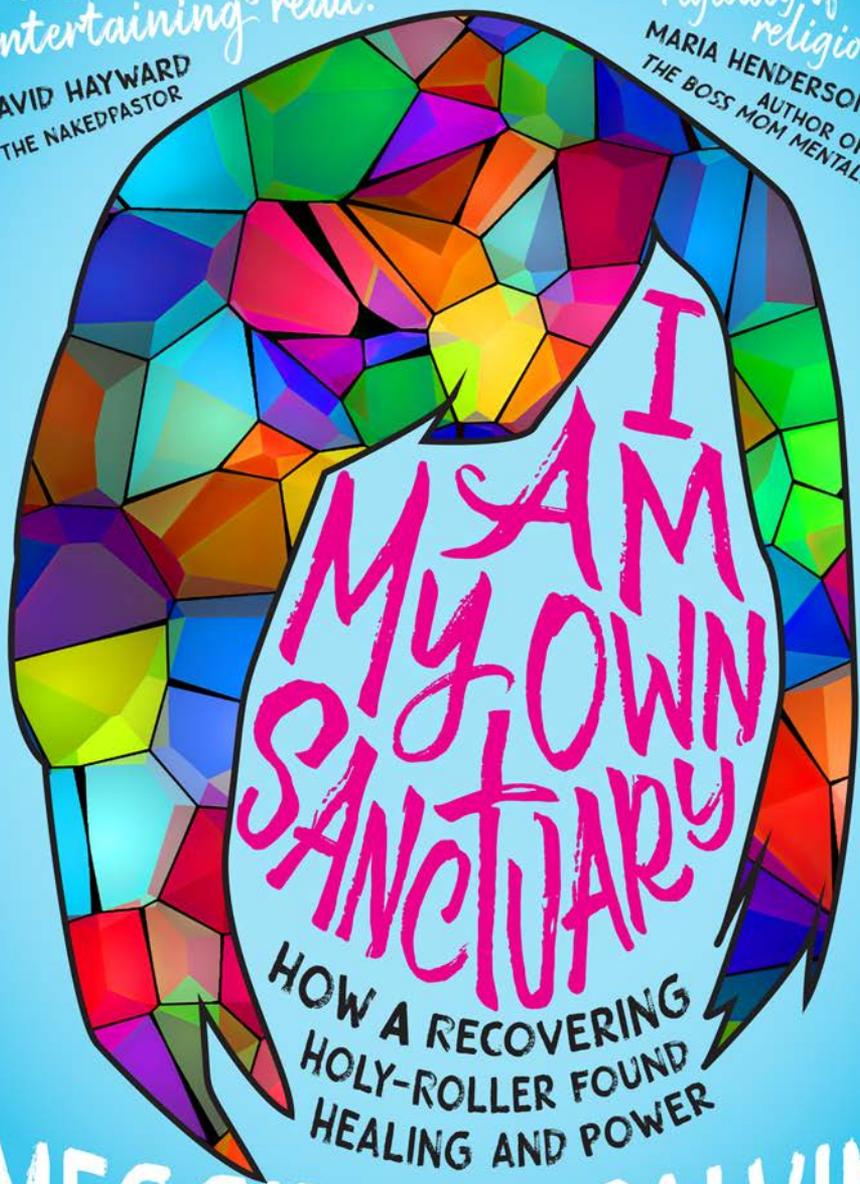


*"An enticing,
educating,
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DAVID HAYWARD
THE NAKEDPASTOR

*"An honest take on how
a young woman finds
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rigidity of
religion."*

MARIA HENDERSON
AUTHOR OF
THE BOSS MOM MENTALITY



MEGGIE LEE CALVIN

AUTHOR OF THE BLUEBONNET CHILD

WHAT FOLKS ARE SAYING ABOUT

I Am My Own Sanctuary

“If you want to read a book about taking good care of yourself that is approachable, honest, wise, and funny, then read this one. It’s an enticing, educating, encouraging, and entertaining read. Actually, all those adjectives describe Meggie, too!”

David Hayward (AKA the NakedPastor)
Author, Cartoonist, and Life Coach

“This book is full of highly valuable and practical information to help you find, embody and live out your vocational calling. Jesus said, ‘The meek inherit the earth.’ I believe this means those of us who are willing to be vulnerable have the most influence. Meggie created a book that finally pulls off the ‘Christian’ mask and vulnerably shares real-life lessons from her path in ministry. The good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the funny, All of it. This book is a must-read for anyone looking to find their calling and path in this life or the church. I believe this book serves as the unspoken, highly desired bridge to living out everyday life in a powerful way as a modern day Christian.”

Aj Amyx
Life and Business Coach, ajAmyx.com

“An honest take on how a young woman finds herself through the rigidity of religion and somehow through it all discovering her own sanctuary, finding inner happiness and a true sense of self.”

Maria Henderson
Author of The Boss Mom Mentality

“There are many elements that make *I Am My Own Sanctuary* an addicting read. Meggie invites you first, to be her friend. As your friendship develops with her as you turn each page, you find that even if you have different life experiences from her, that she still wants you to question, reflect, and grow into your own self. Meggie wants you to laugh, she wants you to dig deep, and she wants you to make room in yourself for holiness—not for strict rules or religion or the voices of others. As you turn the pages, you’ll find that Meggie is a gifted teacher—a ready mentor—and someone who’s suggested reading list will quickly fill up your bookshelf. If you’re at a point in your faith where you’re asking yourself for another perspective, you’ve found the book that’ll help you refine your own.”

Miranda Priddy

Co-host of the Listening Chair Podcast

“As soon as I began reading Meggie’s new book, I had an immediate thought...This book ‘feels’ exactly right. The more that I read, the more that my feeling was strongly confirmed. If I’m being completely honest, this book had me at the title itself: *I Am My Own Sanctuary*. Speaking of ‘sanctuary,’ why do so many make an effort to visit that place each week? You know what I’m referring to right? The sanctuary is that special place in church buildings where all the magic happens. I suppose it’s because the sanctuary is the place where we understand that God fully dwells. Here’s a news flash, however. Every building and room previously labeled a ‘sanctuary’ was but a shadow of the real one. The *real* sanctuary is *me*. However, ‘me’ can only be understood in the first person. This is also true of the divine as well. According to Psalm 46:10, (Be still and know that I AM God) true knowledge of the divine can only be found in the place of stillness and in the place of I AM. Stillness

is the place where we come home to ourselves and understand the ultimate phrase of consciousness and awareness...‘I AM.’

If ‘me’ is the place where we truly recognize the dwelling of ‘I AM’ (sanctuary), it's imperative that we ‘return to church’ by coming home to ourselves. Meggie’s book is a courageous memoir of her journey out of a rigid form of evangelical Christianity and back home to her true sanctuary of self. This book will have you laughing hysterically, and moments later, releasing your own tears of empathy and sadness. Let me encourage you to read her book and discover that you too are your own truest sanctuary.”

Jamal Jivanjee

Bestselling Author, Podcaster, and Life Coach

“Meggie has a special way with storytelling that not only promotes deep conversations that we need to have with ourselves and others, but does so while we’re wiping tears of laughter from our eyes! My heart needed this book, and my list of people to share it with grew with each page!”

Ashley Boyd

Author and Life Coach at AnointedWithPurpose.com

“Meggie opens up about what it is really like to be a Christian. She gives insight to not only life in the church, but the experiences she has had throughout her life. Each page brings out a new story that will make you laugh and give you some questions to ponder. She encourages you to find your inner holiness and to make yourself your own sanctuary. If you are looking for a book to make you laugh but also help you work through hard questions of faith, this is the book for you.”

Carly Redding

Token 18-Year-Old

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I AM
MY OWN
SANCTUARY

HOW A RECOVERING HOLY-ROLLER
FOUND HEALING AND POWER

MEGGIE LEE CALVIN

Dedication

To my grandparents, Brenda and Guy,
who first taught me to recognize the Holy within.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Brittany Donals and York Moon for
being the test readers of this odd beast of a book
and assuring the proper landage of jokes.

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that the landing was a grammatical one.

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content-creators that disrupt thought patterns.

And last, but not least, thank you to Garrett and Henley
for letting me land the role of a lifetime as their family
member and for supporting, “write-night Tuesday.”

Ego Sanctuario Meo

(I Am My Own Sanctuary)

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Introduction

Hi, I'm Meg and I'm a recovering holly-roller.

(Hi, Meg.)

I used to believe that I *had* to read the Bible every day.

I used to believe that love from God, like love from others, was performance-based.

I used to believe that church services were a mandatory part of life.

I used to believe that being Christian meant that you didn't befriend those of other faiths.

I used to believe that being a Christian meant only listening to Christian music.

I used to believe that God would only love me if I were a virgin, so I was until my husband.

I used to be utterly afraid of my body, afraid of my sexuality.

I used to slut-shame those who were not afraid of theirs.

I used to think that I was weak in my faith if I felt anger or any other "unattractive" emotion.

I used to look down on those who cussed, drank and smoked.

I used to make *every* decision based on the opinions of my church members.

I AM MY OWN SANCTUARY

I used not to know about the mind, body, soul, and spirit connection as it was not taught in my religious upbringing.

I used not to be aware of my own power, my own worth.

Over the past 7 years, that's all changed.

In the following pages of this book, I vulnerably share how I've overcome being a burnt out, overworked holly-roller and now have confidence, peace and certainty in who I was made to be and the work that I was made to do.

As result, I now have published two books, have a marriage that is on fire, love hanging out with my daughter, host a top podcast and get paid as a speaker. All of this has been possible because I chose to get outside of *all* my limiting beliefs of how a woman of God should be and started questioning *everything*.

Now...enough of all the seriousness. Let's have some fun and dive into this book.

Be wary of your next tattoo idea. Because it might, in all actuality, be a book idea that will require a *much* higher pain tolerance.

I have always been obsessed with grit. This ability to bounce back after adversity and keep on towards a goal demands my committed curiosity.

Why is it that some get going when the going gets tough and others don't? Why do some burnout too soon, while others cross the figurative finish-line?

The furthest thing from athletic, my favorite thing to do while being forced into watching any sport is to psychoanalyze the athletes before they shoot the ball or run the bases for a touchdown. Oh, yes, Super Bowl meetings. I mean...functions? Gatherings? Parties? Yes, there it is, "parties." (See, I know sports stuff.)

MEGGIE LEE CALVIN

I irritate the poor soul who squished in on the couch next to me, by constantly blurting out things like, “What do you think number fourteen is visualizing right now? Is he doing a deep breathing exercise? Is it just me, or is it too loud? How exactly is he to analyze his next move with all of that shouting and clapping? I mean the guy can’t even hear the mantra that he and his sports psychologists made up together. Can everyone *please* just be quiet for a sec so number fourteen can focus?!”

And then there are those athletes like Ryan Shazier who have been through hell and back, yet remain kind and unshakable. Isn’t this mind-blowing? These types always leave me a little star struck, as if I have encountered a mutant X-man of sorts who have some rare superpower of resiliency. He has every reason in the world to be angry, vengeful and to no longer give a flip, but with great grit and grace, he forges onward.

As the poet, Naomi Shihab Nye writes,

“Before you know kindness as the deepest
thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak it ‘til your voice
Catches the thread of all sorrows and
You see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
Only kindness that ties your shoes
And sends you out into the day to
mail letters and purchase bread,
Only kindness that raises its head
From the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
Like a shadow or a friend.”

My great-grandmother, Ola Lee, encompassed this poem. As a Hellenistic southern belle, mighty tales of this matriarch

were shared like the parting of the Red Sea to the Israelites. Her legend kept us grounded in God and grounded in our own potential. Being born the youngest after three older (Rose bowl-playin') brothers, her snort-like sounds as an infant earned her the nickname "pig." The name stuck, and she became known as "momma pig" by *everyone* forever more. (Seriously—it's on her tombstone.)

Although her own mother was the *furthest* thing from a selfless and kind role model (She was *very* precarious), Momma Pig rose above the ashes as exactly that. She displayed physical grit on her dairy farm and emotional grit through infidelity and divorce. Her divorce not only lost her everything, including the farm, but it was during that time that she gained another mouth to feed when she adopted her nephew after her sister's passing. Intellectual grit was also exuded as she then went back to school in her late-forties and became a nurse at the state mental hospital. Through great grit, her goals of professional and financial success were *all* achieved, and she altruistically shared their fruit with her family.

It was necessary to hear encouraging stories like hers as our family figured out life together. There was divorce, war, and other equally fun external factors that established grit within us at an early age. Even as a kid, I was fully aware that my parents were *earnestly* working against the cards that had been dealt to them.

I picture a younger version of my Mom escaping an unhealthy marriage with my biological dad. I see her in her 30s where she forged through international airports, the four of us on toddler leashes (Don't judge. We weren't the best of listeners.), mounds of luggage in tow from tarmac to terminal as the Army shipped my stepdad (and only dad) around. "Isn't this a fun adventure, everyone?" she would say with nervous confidence.

Before my dad was the mighty military man of my childhood, he was a young boy who fled Mexico on a raft with his family. Once in the States and in the throes of generational poverty, his dad struggled with alcoholism and there were moments of abuse. Even in these darker days, they lived from a place of grit and *never* went on welfare.

My dad found himself in an English-speaking classroom unable to understand the language or the people. Despite this, he kept his grades high and became the fastest runner in the school. However, due to the costs, he was unable to join the track team. And if being in poverty wasn't enough to make school tough, the other kids weren't always kind. The scars of white kids throwing rocks at him still remain on his face, that face that has seen some *shit*.

Both of my parents, in different ways, successfully rose above their challenges. But their battles, as they do in all relational systems, inherently became mine. As Dr. Murray Bowen teaches in his Family Systems Theory—more to come on this—parents pass on their anxieties to their kids; and while there have been palpable doses of grace poured over my family, remnants of these inherited worries remain *and* along with them—the desire to overcome them.

I guess I come by my obsession of grit naturally, for my family is *unstoppably* irrepressible.

As Bowen's Family Systems Theory also teaches, our relational patterns within our childhood homes, follow us into our careers. My obsession with grit soon took on its current shape of sustainable servant leadership. This was a good fit for me because I came out of the womb addicted to the rush of playing tag with my goals, and since I served in the ministry, my workaholic nature was commended. My first sermon gets the credit for

initiating this ridiculously long round of chase. The topic was on “counting your blessings,” and I was the mature age of thirteen. It was poorly and exegetically built on Proverbs 17:22. My benediction was Bing Crosby’s song from *White Christmas*, “Count Your Blessings.” And yes, I *did* sing it. The high that I felt from writing and presenting it apparently affected the church leaders who were encouraged to add me to the payroll just a short four years later.

You guessed it; I was “special.” Ya know, one of those odd middle schoolers whose social life *is* the church. (Whack-job alert!) I initially enjoyed the constant affirmation I felt as I sang or spoke. In time, as I matured, this community of faith led me into an authentic relationship with the healing Christ.

What once met an adolescent need fostered my vocational calling.

As I write this, I have been on a church staff for fifteen years. Yep—you know those years where most twenty-somethings explore other gigs, take gap years and have all sorts of regrettable fun? Not for this gal. For better or for worse, I have served in the non-profit/religious sector since I was a teen, and this, my friends, takes grit. No pity-card here, just callin’ it like I see it.

I think I also picked up on a need for grit in ministry because I saw so many ministerial leaders who were on the verge of professional/spiritual burn out or charred to a crisp by their parishioners.

In my experience, some of the loudest voices in churches seem to come from those who are not only the *most* emotionally broken, but are also the *least* interested in being healed. And what do we do with them? We recruit them to chair committees. Yep, and rather than dealing with their own darkness, as life coach, Aj Amyx says, “they hide behind the scriptures and

find edification and self-esteem by tearing others down” through their micro-managing ways of advent banners and lengths of prayers in worship.

Of course, this is me judging them from my own place of hurt (and we’re going to unpack difficult relationships later on), but that is how I felt. Ya know what I mean? And, I hear ya, Dear Reader Friend, I know God’s grace covers all and that Jesus hung out with lepers and tax collectors, *but* do I really have to sit through another hour-long meeting over the stickiness of the new communion gloves with the lonely, curt cat-lady who’s still pissed that we changed the words to the hymn “Good Christian Men, Rejoice” to be more gender-inclusive!?

Or as Jan Richardson observes as Jesus ran into forces other than God’s in the temple in Mark, “Interesting, isn’t it, that this encounter took place in a holy space? It’s a great example of what I’ve seen time and again: that places meant for worship and seeking after God often attract the most chaotic folks. That which is opposed to God is often most drawn to those places devoted to God.”¹

It is for this reason, that during the trenches of ministry and the thick of infertility issues that the quote, “Ego sanctuario meo,” became my first tattoo idea. Never had three words done a better job of encapsulating my long-winded essence, nature, goals, identity, longings, and values. Never have three words simultaneously comforted and catalyzed me.

Ego sanctuario meo. I am my own sanctuary.

Now, before you go running for the hills shouting, “Heresy, Heresy! She’s discounting the institute of religion! She’s discounting the faith community! She thinks she can do it all on her own

1 Richardson; *In the Sanctuary of Women*, 152.

like some independent, post-modern yuppie! She's taking the wheel back from Jesus! She's taking Christ out of Christmas!" hang with me here.

When I came across this quote, "I am my own sanctuary," it affirmed in me that the grit and peace that I cultivated did *not* rely on the choices of others. Adversity might momentarily redefine the process, but it doesn't completely derail the route to the goal. I call the shots on my emotional health and let others call their own. I teach others how to treat me, thus my source of affirmation comes from within. The correct psychological term for this is being 'differentiated' and was coined by Dr. Bowman.² In seminary we took *many* psychological exams to assure our level of differentiation was high enough to survive the gnashing of teeth that awaited us in the local church.

Ego sanctuario meo because as our youth directors casually threw around to keep us from pre-marital sex, "You are a temple of God, and God himself is present in you. No one will get by with vandalizing God's temple, you can be sure of that. God's temple is sacred—and you, remember, *are* the temple."³

The Holy Spirit dwells within *you* and the Holy Spirit dwells within *me*. And when I type the word "Spirit," I am referring to the "The *same* Spirit" Romans 8:11 teaches "that raised Jesus from the dead."

When I type the word "Spirit," I am implying that "deep within [you] is the wisdom of God, the creativity of God, and the longings of God."⁴ Yes—*that* Spirit is within you. A shortage of grit and peace should never be a concern, for these are sourced

2 Nichols; *Family Therapy*, 78.

3 1 Corinthians 3:16-19

4 Newell; *Christ of the Celts*, 21.

from the Divine, cultivated by us and stored within our souls for whenever we need them.

Similar to what Reese With— I mean, Cheryl Strayed, felt as she hiked towards healing on the Pacific Coast Trail in *Wild*, “I was amazed that what I needed to survive could be carried on my back. And, most surprising of all, that I could carry it.”⁵ It took me a while to trust myself as my own fully equipped sanctuary. Not only did it take some time, but it took some work. I had to get intentionally acquainted with all the difference parts of *my* sanctuary.

From my body, to my mind (concepts, judgments, inferences); from my simplest emotion to the deepest yearning of my spirit (heart, will, character); *all* make up my soul, *all* make up my own sanctuary. And as Dallas Willard reiterates, *all* are interconnected and house the Holy Spirit.⁶ Since some of the above terms have differing definitions, I will use Willard’s definitions to categorize our journey together.

Our journey takes place in a season of transition, for I am leaving the church that I have served for nearly fifteen years as I write this.

While some of the information that I share with you will, in no way, be news, I hope that the fresh way that I have assembled this is enough to engage and encourage. I will simply share stories of discovering myself as my own sanctuary and my observations of said stories. I will also be doing some major name-dropping of folks who have assisted me on my search. If at any point during our chat you feel a need to set this down and *Amazon* one of

5 Strayed; *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*.

6 Willard; *Renovation*, 30.

their books, please feel free. This is your book, so open it, write in it and dog-ear-it however you see fit.

(Lame alert!)

As I printed out some of the first pages of this book, I literally hugged the stack and like a newborn, I asked of it, “What do you want to become? What stories will you grow to tell?”

Little did I know this second book that I birthed was already a teen and was *very* flaky with its identity and responded with, “I want to be a memoir on some pages, and then a self-help book on others, and sometimes I want to even read like a spiritual devotional of sorts. And I want to pierce my tongue like Jayna. Above all else, I think I was made to make the reader chuckle while she/he feels encouraged and equipped.”

And like an earnest parent with the purest intent and the highest of hopes I said to the pubescent stack, “Go, be, do, my love, and tell the tales you were meant to tell.”

So, on the following pages, you will read poems, lyrics, scriptures, blog posts, and an *insufferable* number of similes.

There are also many neurological studies shared. I am in *no* way an expert in this area, but I someday hope to be if the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapist, Ruby Wax, would ever respond to me on *Twitter*. (Teach me your ways, Fair Ruby.)

The contents page, which is intentionally detailed so you can access any beloved section with ease, also reveals that the biggest chunk of the book is on relationships. This is, as you guessed it, on purpose. Since becoming my own sanctuary, I have been continually convinced that the love, grace and grit that we cultivate within are not meant to be hoarded but to be shared.

Each chapter also comes with reflection questions. (You are welcome.) Because as Edmund Burke shares, “Reading without

reflecting is like eating without digesting.” (And that’s just uncomfortable for everyone.)

You will also notice that many comedians will join you on this adventure. Ever since I was a preadolescent human, I have been obsessed with the art of comedy. The ability to take another to the highest form of glee with one well-crafted sentence has always left me in awe.

One of my most beloved comedians of *all* time, Miranda Hart, addresses her readers as Dear Reader Chum. I would like to steal this from her; for although I have prayed for you, Dear Reader Friend, I have yet to learn your name. As I read Hart’s books, I feel so cared for when I see, “Dear Reader Chum”, and I desire nothing less than to make you, Dear Reader Friend, feel exactly the same.⁷

So, hence forth, ye shall be called, Dear Reader Friend, and it is my pleasure to serve thee.

With each chapter, may you welcome *all* the feelings.

If a paragraph cradles you, then rest in the nook of her elbow.

If a sentence strikes an uncomfortable chord with you, then seek the reason behind the offense. As Bob Goff said, “Know that what brings you to tears will lead you to grace and your pain is *never* wasted.” God *is* faithful in healing.

If a parenthetical statement causes you to chuckle, then *literally* laugh out loud because chances are you need it and no one will care (except for that guy sitting behind you).

If some words dare you to act, then forge boldly ahead because let’s face it—you *so* got this.

7 Hart: *Peggy and Me*.

I AM MY OWN SANCTUARY

With the reflection pages, may you gather your thoughts as you move with grit and grace. These lines are your confidant, your drawing board, your microphone, your stage.

By the close of the last chapter, may you know God a little deeper and trust yourself a little more. And may you be encouraged, for you *already* possess enough grace for every wound and enough grit for every goal within *sanctuarium tuum* (your own sanctuary).

CHAPTER 1

The Holy Within: The Differentiated Samaritan

I was once part of a Bible study group made up of a dozen or so women of all different Christian sects. (Side note: one must be extra-articulate with the ‘t’ or else it sounds like something else—“secTs.”) Most often the conversations were grace-filled and intelligent, but then there were other moments like this one:

A few of us were discussing the life-enhancing tool known as the *Enneagram of Personality*. Unlike other personality assessments, this one has spiritual roots and explores the relational systems of one’s childhood as a cause for her current nature. It has helped many in keeping their egos in check and drawing them nearer to God. (Check out Helen Palmer, Dear Reader Friend.) As we discussed our “wings” and “false selves” with an unnecessary amount of passion, we were suddenly interrupted by, “I think personality assessments are sinful.”

“Come again?” I laughed, assuming she was being funny.

“I think personality assessments are sinful. They take the focus away from God and put the focus on us and that’s a sin,” she proudly expounded.

I paused for a moment, attempting to control my extroverted tongue, and as a Three on the *Enneagram* with a strong Two wing, I replied as if these were the last words I would ever speak.

“I could see a smidge of truth in that statement, but what if there was someone whose days were the furthest thing from peaceful or joyful, and it was simply because her choices and surroundings were not honoring the way that she was wired? What if someone lacked all kinds of self-awareness and had no clue how to love herself well? Or care for her needs?”

Yes, all of that—I *literally* said all of that with great fervor; and looking back, I wish I would’ve added, “Furthermore, the Bible explicitly teaches of different types of gifting being giving to each of us. How effective are we if we remain unaware of these gifts?” (mic drop)

“Hmm, no,” She said with a lazy shake of her head, unfazed by my etymological explosion. “God will guide us for our needs. Focusing on ourselves is sinful.”

And just like that, the door of the conversation was closed.

REALLY?!

Is it though?

It is really sinful?

Really...?

Does it *really* hurt one’s relationship with God to explore her inner terrain to assure she is revering how God put her together? Not to sound like Seth and Amy from *Saturday Night Live*, but...*really*?! This? *Really*? Honoring my limits and trusting my

gifts is the same as me lusting after another man or murdering Hitler? *Really?* It's the same?

This?

Really!? A Sin?! *Really?!?*

What is it with us Church-folk?

If we're not flogging ourselves, we are equating the *Myers Briggs* with porn and shaming ourselves for liking our test scores. I'm pretty sure when Jesus said, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first," in Matthew, He did *not* go on to say, "And those who hate themselves the *most*, and vow to never use their brain to become more self-aware shall receive honorable mention upon entering heaven." No...never happened. As Rick Warren teaches, Jesus simply desired for us "to think of ourselves *less*, not to think less *of ourselves*."

And yet, we "holy-rollers" get it *all* wrong sometimes.

We deny our own self-care, in order to care for others and then walk around with our burnout like a badge.

I will never forget one Staff Parish Relationship Committee meeting I observed as a college intern. I had the "joy" of shadowing many pastors in the area, and this specific one was truly a cautionary tale.

The committee chair had asked for the Senior Pastor's report for this quarter and copies were passed around the table. My 19-year-old eyes were shocked by the bold words at the top. Ninety-six hours a week. Yep, his average workload exceeded the required full-time amount by 56 hours! Beneath that, a breakdown of how these were specifically spent with pastoral calls, sermon prep, committee meetings and so on. When the ill-equipped committee chair asked him if he thought this size of workload was wise, the pastor answered a seemingly different

question with an aloof amount of pride, “My prayer life with the Lord will sustain me.”

As I got to know this frazzled pastor, I discovered he was always like this. Sadly, the outlined report he had given me seemed to be the only thing about him that I could find impressive. He had no sense of self (his limits, his talents) and no routine of self-care.

He lacked the grit that derived from the fact that he and his calling were worth fighting for. And he lacked the deeply rooted peace that it would in fact be *God* pulling most of the weight in the fight. In his overly-committed life, he was never *still* enough to feel the peace of the Holy Spirit whispering, “You got this, because *I* got this. Now stop working 96 hours a week and take up napping as a hobby!” In the months to come, I sadly watched from afar as his marriage ended and a heart attack ensued.

Fear overtook me as a naive pre-ministerial student because around the same time that he reached burnout, another pastor-friend in town was let go by his congregation for asking for a sabbatical. Doubt filled my being. *Will this be me? Will the church eat me alive? Will I burnout before I am thirty!? Will I be incapable of authentic friendships, or nonetheless—normal human interactions? Was Nigel right in The Devil Wears Prada when he told Andy when her boyfriend broke up with her, “That’s what happens when you start doing well at work. Let me know when your entire life goes up in smoke, then it’s time for a promotion.”?*

If some voices of my youth weren’t confusing self-awareness with sin, they were surely confusing self-love with sin.

As I began serving at camps and presenting at conferences across the Bible Belt, Midwest and the East Coast, I came in contact with a cliché of Christian women that were much different than I. They preached a “homily of homely” if you will

(trademark pending). It's as if their fear of sexually tempting their parishioners by looking "too feminine" (whatever the heck that means) made them vengefully turn into asexual beings that seemed to be genderless.

What do I mean by this? I mean they were *adamantly* against the pleasures found in the world of cosmetics and fashion.

Yes, these women, in the name of our great and glorious Savior, would show up to work looking like they just rolled out of bed. As a born and bred Southern Belle with the scarlet letter of a contoured face, I was quite struck at how they took *so* much pride in taking *no* pride at all in their appearance. As a Wanna-Be-Femi-Nazi, I admired their right to choose how they presented themselves. Thankfully, friendships grew despite a friend's belief that my vain lipstick was hurting my faith and my pierced ears were sinful.

Newsflash, Patrice, the apostle Paul was writing about specific women in a specific city in 1 Timothy who were worshiping a false god, not me and my eye-shadow! Gah, Patrice!!! [Insert eyeroll.] (Yes, that was meant to be read in the tone of the character "Robin" from the ABC show *How I Met Your Mother*.)

THE FANTASTIC

Both of these experiences point to a much larger systemic issue within popular Protestant theology that teaches you to fully deny your inward-most person. This disconnect not only robs us of the joy and beauty of exploring the inward person, but, as we learn from the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, a relationship with God is distorted if it leads us away from a relationship with the self. Or, in Kierkegaard's own words, "The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates

itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can only be done through the relationship with God...the self is healthy and free from despair only when, precisely by having despaired, it rests transparently in God.”¹

“*Whose task is to become itself...*” (And boom goes the dynamite!)

“And now that we are all twitching and drooling on the floor in the fetal position,” as my late, *beloved* philosophy professor Chris Caldwell used to say, “let’s unpack this in laymen terms.”

Kierkegaard was wary that some had a perspective of God (the Infinite) which he termed, *the fantastic*, that would disconnect them completely from themselves— or the self/spirit.”

“The fantastic is generally that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself.”²

This not-so-fantastic-state (by modern use of the term), not only leaves one disconnected from self, but inadvertently connected to God in a warped way. It is for this reason that, “The greatest hazard of all, [is to lose] oneself...very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all.”³ Therefore, in order to know God deeper, one *must* know herself more deeply.

Whenever we emphasize or even *celebrate* the beauty of the self, we are in no way downplaying our relationship to God, but we are in fact commemorating God’s stunning handiwork and the holy interconnectedness of all of God’s creation.⁴ It is for this reason that I am always blown away when intelligent,

1 Kierkegaard: *The Sickness unto Death*, 30.

2 Ibid., 31.

3 Ibid., 32.

4 Acts 17:28, Ephesians 4:6.

postmodern spiritual leaders feel guilty for taking time for self-care or disregard the value of self-love altogether.

PORCUPINE

I recall taking an emotional quotient test as a seminary student. This exam would “test” the health of our relationships with self (intrapersonal relationship) and with others (interpersonal relationships). I was stoked for this because my mom had always comforted me with the reminder that EQ mattered *way* more than IQ in the real world. But I think she might’ve just been lying to me whenever I was jealous of my two *very* academically successful sisters.

Regardless, I knew my EQ, unlike my IQ, was sure to impress and, for the ultimate confidence boost, it did. Sadly, I could not say the same for most of my friends. While the hope was that our class would all score around seventy-percent out of one-hundred, many sadly scored in the forties. We servant leaders suck at being nice to ourselves sometimes, well—most of the time (apparently).

How do we improve upon this? How do we learn to love ourselves enough to *rely* on ourselves? How do we let the confidence of our inner and outer beauty enhance all other areas of our lives? How do we not get sucked dry by the needs of others while also being in healthy personal and professional relationships? How do we let others do their own emotional work without bringing us down in the dumps with them? How many questions is enough to get this point across? Five? Seventeen?

We succeed at these things by learning to juggle our human needs of individuality and needs of togetherness.

Or as psychologist, Dr. Murray Bowman calls it (and the goal that my counselor and I are working towards), we aim to become “differentiated beings.” As such, one does “not respond automatically to emotional pressures [of others] and has the capacity to reflect and act wisely in the face of anxiety.”⁵ This is one reason why the imagery of being one’s own sanctuary spoke to me. Regardless of the poor choices, overreactions of others or general stress of my surroundings, I am safe and can think strategically within my own skin.

“Where an undifferentiated person finds it challenging to maintain their own autonomy, especially around anxious situations, a differentiated person has the ability to resist the pull of emotionality”⁶ from others. As a differentiated person, even as a Christian, I have come to realize that I am only responsible for my *own* emotions, and I let others be responsible for theirs. And at the end of the day, this is all I really have control over in my life—not the weather, not my child’s behavior during family photos, and not who wins *The Voice*.

An enlightening visual, as shared by psychologist, Deborah Luepnitz, for what healthy differentiation looks like is porcupines in the winter. (Hang with me. I have a point. *Punny!*)

When porcupines are cold and wish to stay warm, they must cuddle for warmth to survive. However, if they cuddle too closely, they will harm each other with their needles. So, the goal is to find the healthy proximity for warmth without pokes. The goal is to maintain her pokey individuality without sacrificing their piney togetherness.⁷

5 Nichols; *Family Therapy*, 78.

6 Ibid, 78.

7 Gilbert; *Committed*, 223-224.

Before years of counseling and some intentional discomfort at seminary, I was a *highly* (H-I-G-H-L-Y) undifferentiated person. As Bowen teaches, the relational habits of my upbringing followed me into my professional relationships. Like the “fortunate fool” on a stage that Jack Johnson sings about, I *performed* daily with hopes of impressing everyone and *my* mood was at the disposal of another’s reactions. This is not a good thing when you live your life in a fish bowl as a nineteen-year-old church intern.

With church being extremely personal to many, some have eccentrically *strong* views about how things should be done and how a church employee should act (dress, date, and dance). I had *no* life outside of the church, and when I look back, I honestly don’t recall that much from those years. I was constantly frazzled and my mind was operating out of survival mode, i.e. I was rarely ever mentally present.

This state of emotional (un)health did not set me up for success during tense interactions.

I recall falling apart when I was asked by a church matriarch to go home and change before attending a church reception because my \$100 Liz Claiborne khaki outfit was not formal enough. I abided.

I regret not standing up for myself one Saturday when I was chewed up one side and down the other for returning the communion dishes two-hours late. I had worked *beyond* overtime that week to host a women’s retreat, and they weren’t even going to be used until the next day anyway.

My first (and hopefully only) nervous breakdown occurred when several holy-roller friends of mine literally “unliked” me when I protested their idea to protest worship services due to a lesbian serving on the tech team. If I did not impress others or

if another disagreed with me, the day was a complete failure—I was a complete failure. (Geesh! Talk about a real whack-job!)

As I graduated and entered the “real world,” the unhealthy ways of being undifferentiated continued.

My husband’s shirt morphed into a tissue after many stressful days of serving in the church. I would cry on his shoulder as parents were annoyed with me for giving Bibles out to kids who were not church members (true story). Tears would flow whenever I was bulldozed by well-intended senior coworkers, or whenever triangulations would take place. At the slightest sign of tension at a meeting, I would shut down emotionally out of fear that I might offend someone with my alternative views.

These situations are not unique to me, of that I am certain. Multiple talented, young people with a surplus of empathy and a low self-esteem are taken advantage of in other ministerial positions as well. It’s as if, as Kelly Ripa said when Strahan did what he did (he *knows* what he did), our “politeness is viewed as passivity,” and our range of talents exclude us from basic human needs.

Congregations often forget that ministers are *people* first and foremost.

We are people capable of feeling *all* emotions.

We are people who desire and require an identity outside of the church.

We are people who have the right to occasionally disagree with you (in a loving, well-rehearsed, diplomatic way).

And finally, we are each just another person. Not a person that is both fully divine and fully human. We are each just another person like you.

What I am getting at is that although some ministers might have a Messiah complex, *none* of us are Jesus. None of us were

birthed from the holy womb of Mary. Emmanuel, none of us are. We should not be worshiped for our preaching styles, beliefs or personalities. We should not receive all of the credit for the church's successes (as limply defined as that may be), nor all the blame for the church's areas of growth. We are *just* people following a divine nudge to serve other people in the name of the Lord.

Fortunately, my seminary experience equipped me as a differentiated person, and I was finally able to honor my preferences and trust myself in the midst of disagreements. Whether it was me harmonizing by ear while I led in the praise band, the Christmas tree in the Fellowship Hall being moved, or the placement of the prayer in the service, my favorite phrase to use with overly-reactive parishioners was, "I really do not appreciate the tone you are taking with me."

This was often followed with me shakily saying, "I know this is not your preference, but I ask that you trust that I am doing what is best for the church and we can review the result together after-the-fact as we plan for next time."

Yeah, my husband witnessed one of these reactive moments once with a parishioner and said I sounded like a conflict-resolution textbook—word-for-word. By that time, I probably had one or two of those books memorized.

Instead of shutting down emotionally during intense meetings and replaying SNL sketches in my mind (true story), to lower my blood pressure, I would take deep breaths and do a mindfulness exercise (more to come on this) known as a grounding exercise. Once I was able to slow my heart-rate down, I would simply start asking questions about said sticky situation. These tactics made it easier for me to remain a non-anxious presence. Don't get me wrong, I still replay SNL sketches in my mind during meetings, but it's only during times when we are

debating the color of carpet in the foyer or the outreach ministry of stray cats in the alley.

As a differentiated person, I did not lose my super-power of empathy. I could still feel what people were feeling, but I was able to do this from a distance (in a sense). I was able to be moved by their emotions with boundaries, and with this, as Brené Brown teaches, came *increased* compassion for them. While I was the one being empathetic, he/she was still the one in charge of his/her own emotional health—not me.

Becoming a more differentiated person was not only a benefit for my personal life and my sustainability in ministry, but, frankly, it improved the health of our entire team. As Bowan teaches, any change in behavior by one member of the relational system will have some effect on the relational system as a whole. Like in a game of chess, “my opponent moves in relation to my moves. One change on my part changes my opponent’s strategy too. By holding myself accountable for my own emotions and reactions, I implicitly held others accountable for their own (at least in their interactions with me). By teaching others how to treat me as Dr. Phil says, some ended up treating themselves and others in a healthier way as well. I was also a better teammate because I could think clearly about decisions and authentically do what was best for the ministry as opposed to doing what I thought others would find agreeable or impressive.

CHARTRES

I truly was growing into *my own* sanctuary, like the legend of the mighty French church, the Chartres Cathedral; regardless of the surrounding stress, I had discovered that the sacred and secure

strength *within* was sufficient to sustain me. (You are welcome for that *scrumtrulescent* alliteration.)

The year was 2001, and I was a wee lil' high school freshman raising my head to take in her glorious stained-glass windows. There was a herd of us young Methodists standing outside. My sister and I joked about the hunchback and Esmeralda (like naive Americans who thought it looked just like the Notre Dame cathedral). However, this holy fortress told a very different story.

For over fifteen-hundred years, the Chartres site has been a space of Christian worship. While it had withstood may fires during the Dark Ages, one finally took it down in the 11th century. The locals gathered together with plans to not only rebuild but to upgrade it. And that they did. Through emotional, financial, and physical support, the townspeople erected a superb structure that, to this day, baffles historians and architects. No records remain that detail the cost to create one of the grandest churches in the world.

The Crusades took place during her rebuilding, but since the locals believed that war went against the way of Christ, the men were sent to help build the Chartres Cathedral instead. In 1200 CE the final touches were made. The famous labyrinth, with its six-petaled rose in the center that represents the Lord's Prayer was set in the middle of her nave.

While it was flooded with tourists, it still felt holy for me to step in its path. The tour guide shared that the cathedral once housed a school and the labyrinth, a crucial part of their curriculum. I recall thinking about the *millions* of souls who had prayerfully strolled before me. I recall thinking of how, although we lived at different times, my spiritual journey was somehow in step with theirs.

I AM MY OWN SANCTUARY

I could go on and on about the beauty of the labyrinth, but there's more to her mysterious legend to share. Over the centuries, not only was she a stunning and sacred cathedral that was built out of peace and love, she was also *unexplainably* strong.

Throughout the French Revolution, other churches were robbed and obliterated. But the Chartres Cathedral stood untouched. Kathleen McGowan shares, "Although the violent and destructive revolutionaries got as far as the foot of the cathedral steps, they turned back before entering the church and simply walked away from it. Through two world wars, when bombings had destroyed other Gothic structures across France in places like Reims and Vezelay, Chartres was again spared any damage. Chartres was built with a very specific intention toward peace, with a foundation of faith and service, and it holds that intention to this day within its stones. It is God's place, built by God's children, and protected by God."⁸

Now while the mysteries of this true tale might be a little much for some straight-laced-skeptics, I think all could get on board with the idea of living as *your own* Chartres cathedral; for you are.

You *are* your own sanctuary.

You *are* a house for the divine.

You *are* unexplainably strong.

You *are* full of peace.

You *are* untouchable to the outside chaos. (You really are.)

HOTEL BILL

So, what does living as your own Chartres Cathedral look like?

8 McGowan; *The Source of Miracles*, 98-100.

What does serving others while preserving your autonomy look like? How can you compassionately lead with firm boundaries?

To find the answer, we turn now to a snarky discussion between Jesus and a lawyer.

The lawyer tried to test Jesus with a question on earning eternal life. As Jesus often did, his concise answer led to an action step on the listener's behalf. He pointed the man in the direction of the law, that read, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor *as yourself*."⁹

These final two words, "as yourself" are often missed as permission or a *mandate* to love ourselves well. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner points out that it is easy for us to "miss the interconnectedness of these three loves: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self."¹⁰ While it is nearly effortless to love the first and easy to fake love for the second (#SayinItLikeItIs), the third is easier said than done; especially when one feels overcommitted, overly-tired, and undervalued.

After the law is shared, Jesus in a sense says, "Game on, Lawyer!" He then shares the parable of the good Samaritan. Now while it is awesome how Jesus puts this lawyer in his place by suggesting an unclean Samaritan would be a better neighbor than the overly religious, this scripture also has much to teach us on serving others as a differentiated person. It has much to say about self-love. As you read Luke 10:29-34, be looking for any help the Samaritan had and how his own plans changed.

9 Luke 10:27, NRSV.

10 Stevenson-Moessner; *A Primer in Pastoral Care*, 47.

“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’”

Did you catch it?

The Samaritan displayed self-love as a differentiated person by “managing to care for the man by delegating some of the responsibilities (to the innkeeper),” not altering his original plans in lieu of the man’s personal issues, “and then following up with aftercare.” And in so doing, he maintained his autonomy in a potentially sticky relational system and “he avoided compassion fatigue.”¹¹ With these choices, the Samaritan took steps towards a more sustainable future. This parable illustrates such a lovely balance of being self-aware enough to care for ourselves *and* others. Or as Bowen would say, it teaches a healthy balance of togetherness and autonomy.

The interesting thing about this balance of which Bowen speaks is that it is a paradox to live it out well, for the rise of loneliness in the U.S. is on the rise because we are too often forgetting about ourselves.

11 Ibid, 47.

As Dr. Emma Seppala teaches, “The answer to loneliness may be to pay attention to the person who is not paying attention to us—the person who stopped caring for us: our own self. We [are] so lonely because we don’t take care of ourselves—whether lack of time, energy, or interest, or simply because we don’t deem ourselves important enough. Sometimes we feel so lonely because it is *our own friendship* we are longing for. [...] It is an act of love for yourself to [physically, emotionally or spiritually] nourish yourself.”¹²

Unlike the frazzled pastor I mentioned before who had completely forgotten about his needs and goals, this Samaritan, in some way, exemplifies successfully living in this paradox. What would it have looked like if that pastor would have followed the Samaritan’s differentiated example?

He could have set a firm boundary with his staff/parish/relations committee that he would strive to honor a forty-hour work week (except on the rare occasion when there are four weddings and a funeral). The tasks on his plate that were not in line with his talents could have been delegated. These two changes *alone* would have freed up Friday nights for dates with his wife. What if he had viewed himself as his own Chartres Cathedral, responsible only for his own emotional health regardless of the surrounding emotional chaos? He would have felt more comfortable saying, “no,” and would not have relied on the emotionally-fickle parishioners for affirmation.

If he would have trusted himself as his own sanctuary, his necessary grit and grace from within would have prevented his burn-out. He would have cultivated grit for the days when others didn’t like his decisions and grace for days when he didn’t like

12 Seppala; *The Loneliness Paradoxes*, 100-101.

his decisions. And this cultivation would not have been his own doing, for within his own sanctuary resided the Holy Spirit. As J. Phillip Newell shares, “Deep within [you] is the wisdom of God, the creativity of God, and the longings of God.”¹³

NAMASTE

The divine moves and breathes within the neurons of our brain and the marrow of our bones; and as I tell my daughter, “The divine is always speaking to us, but the voice will sometimes sound differently than other voices; so, if we still our brains and quiet our bones, we will hear from the One who made us, who knows us, and loves us.”

Have you forgotten that you have such an arsenal of Holy?

If you have, in a few pages, may you be reminded that you do. And if we revisit the scripture from a few paragraphs back, we find much more depth awaits us in the metaphor of being one’s own sanctuary or temple, if you will.

1 Corinthians 3:16-19 reads, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

While it’s easy to read this as an anti-bikini verse (as many have), this is not (at all) what the early church leader who wrote it had in mind. Paul believed that each member of society had the option to tap into the Holy Spirit which resided within, and those that did collectively made up the Church—God’s true temple.

See?

13 Newell; *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, 21.

It's never been about dress code; your body is a temple as it houses the Holy Spirit. Paul cautioned that in our communities, our *togetherness*, we must be wary of dissension and division for this will destroy the temple of God in a double-sense.¹⁴

And it is *only* in owning our identity as a sanctuary that houses the “wisdom, the creativity and the longings of God,”¹⁵ that we can live out our togetherness as a vital part of the community. Within this community, we all have been wired with different talents (1 Corinthians 12:8-10), and it is *only* in serving one another *with* said talents that the fullness of God is experienced (1 John 4:12).

As a chubby teen who took Yoga to get ripped, I was introduced to the term “Namaste.” While this once Hindu, now secular, term is not explicitly Christian, I think it holds much theological value. In saying this with a bowed head at the end of each class we are inherently saying, “The divine in me bows to the divine you.” My sanctuary which holds the divine honors your sanctuary which equally houses the divine.

How beautiful, yeah?

This conviction changed my self-esteem, and I took this new perspective with me while I traveled with my missionary grandparents. Once at an orphanage they were building in Matamoros, Mexico, my grandfather *quickly* learned that I lacked the skills to join him in building cinderblock walls. As a prideful teen, I stuck with it, but after many mistakes, he “encouraged” me to return to a task that was in line with my talents. Luckily, painting the fingernails of the orphans was a reasonable alternative.

14 Barclay; *The Daily Bible Series: The Letter to the Corinthians*, 34.

15 Newell; *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, 21.

I AM MY OWN SANCTUARY

“¿Puedo pintar tus uñas?” was the first complete sentence that I butchered in Spanish. This was such a sacred time of sparkly pinks, and the aroma of acetone. I would paint one of the girl’s nails and then she would turn and paint another’s, and before too long a domino-effect of recognizing the divine in another through service occurred all throughout the orphanage. Like many who travel and serve in similar ways, I was surprised at how the Holy Spirit was so active within their lives. I was surprised that they ministered to me *more* than I to them.
#cockyAmerican

It is only in recognizing yourself as a differentiated sanctuary that houses the Holy Spirit that you can fully recognize this in others. From your body, to your mind; from your emotions to your spirit, the divine is moving through every part of your person. But let’s follow our ole’ youth director’s example in his poor exegetical work with 1 Corinthians, and let’s put *way* too much emphasis on the physical body.

I am my own sanctuary.

*My being houses the Holy. Grit
and grace come from within,
regardless of the choices of others.*

**AS YOU FORGE ONWARD AS YOUR OWN SANCTUARY,
ASK YOURSELF:**

1. What is the relationship between a warped view of self and a warped view of God? When was a time that your skewed view of self hindered how close you felt to God?
2. How would a current stressful situation feel different if you assumed the posture of your “Chartres Cathedral” whose emotional health was protected from the outside chaos and you let others be responsible for their own emotional health?
3. As one in whom the Divine dwells, you already possess the necessary grace for every wound and grit for every goal. If you could mend a relationship based on this, would you and which one? Or if you could chase a goal based on this, would you and which one?

CHAPTER 2

Grace for My Body: A Temple Tuned-In

STRIPPER

I once dated a stripper.

I did not know he was a stripper at the time that I agreed to the date, but he was a stripper and I did in fact date him. I should have known he was a stripper at first glance, what with the product-filled hair, insane body (not to objectify you, Sir Stripper), and fake-bronze glow. But these clues were less obvious in his *PF Chang's* uniform.

While my two sisters, mom, and I dined, a blonde waiter with Drew Carey glasses approached us with waters. After taking our order with an excessive amount of banter, my mom suggested that I ask for his number because “I should date someone like that.”

Yes, the man who we had known for three minutes was apparently my soul-mate. (Thanks, Mom.)

As usual, I kindly thanked her for the “suggestion” and politely changed the subject. It was an exciting time for my sisters, and there was much to talk about on their visit. The younger one, beyond academically and athletically impressive, was starting her junior year at high school. The older one was coming into her own as a young educator. As we joked, shared, and dreamed, we quickly became a table of laughing hyenas.

We inhaled our lettuce wraps, and Mr. Tight Pants kept returning to refill full drinks. He was quickly sucked into our ridiculousness. We learned that he was studying computer science and this was one of his *two* jobs to support his studies. The sapiosexual within me was highly impressed with how articulate he was.

After about an hour-or-so it was time to check out. He brought us the ticket and on top of it was a fortune cookie that had been cut in half, but placed back together. He handed it to me and walked back to the kitchen. Sealed inside the wafer-of-an-envelope was a little slip of paper with his number on it. I freaked, and my mom and sisters began urging me to go talk to him.

Now to say that I was socially awkward in flirting situations would be the understatement of the century. As one who came out of the womb a workaholic, I would approach guys as if we were making a business deal. I would not be the first one to speak. I would be emotionless (so, the opposite of a flirt), I would stick to the facts and wrap it up with a confident handshake; just like Jack Donaghy taught me.

And this is exactly what happened in *PF Chang's* that day.

Gathering my gumption, I slid across the sticky, unnecessarily large booth and went to find him. He was already serving another table, so I waited by the kitchen entrance, because that

is what normal people do? He spotted me as he was refilling another's coffee, grinned, and headed toward me. My nerves got the best of me. I began talking really fast, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I got your number and that I would be very interested in making these arrangements. Thank you so much for this offer and when is the best time to contact you?"

Nailed it. I had this flirting thing down!

He laughed (I mean—who wouldn't after that uncomfortable display), and said, "Cool. Yeah, just whenever. I'd love to hang."

"Yeah, great." I stammered, "Let's hang. So.... I guess I'll call you and you won't recognize my number, but it will be me calling." Looking back, maybe I didn't want to go on a date with a hot metrosexual based on the nonsensical words I was saying.

He laughed again and said, "Yeah, I know, I will answer."

His eyes were darting around the room at his tables, so I knew it was time for me to wrap up this "meeting" with a firm handshake and the ol' post-worship pat on the top of the hand that was being shaken. And that was exactly what I did.

Flirt well? Check!

He smiled confusingly, and we both said our goodbyes.

I called him that night and the following weekend we were on a date. As I contoured to Mariah Carey's "Fantasy" (the ultimate get-hot-for-a-hot-date-song), my mom called to give me the usual advice of, "How about try actually flirting? And maybe don't talk so much?" I was only half listening to her though. On this night, my excitement was louder than her critiques.

As it was the first date, we reasonably drove ourselves to a very nice restaurant. While the conversation was adequate, I found myself unreservedly distracted. It was *very* apparent that he spent a *tremendous* amount of time on his body. Pants and shirts had never fit that way on the praise band members that

I usually dated—on any man I had ever seen, to be frank. *Who was this guy?*

We chewed and chatted and very early on he shared that he was stoked for his new work playlist.

“That’s nice that they let you listen to music at *PF Chang’s*.” I said.

“Oh, no, not there. For my other job.” He replied dabbing his chiseled chin with a napkin.

“Oh yeah—what’s that?” I said as my mouth searched for my straw.

“I’m a stripper.” He nonchalantly replied, “Is that weird?”

I nearly spit out my water and before I could speak, he said, “Sorry, I should have told you before. I just wasn’t sure how you would have responded. It is a weird gig, but it pays *so* well, and it really helps with school and—“

My laughter interrupted him, “You’ve got to be kidding me? Do you know what my job is?”

“Are you a stripper too?” He said with a sly smile.

“Nah, I’m too short.” (That was my lame attempt at a joke.) “I serve at a church as one of the ministers.” I said with a chuckle.

“No way!” He said, “Well, check us out! A minister and a stripper? We’re just like Jesus and Mary Magdalene.”

And Dear Reader Friend, it was at that exact moment that I should have followed my mom’s advice, but I just couldn’t let one of the apostles *to the* apostles be misrepresented. Not on my watch! And surprisingly, after my *long-winded* spiel on how *The Magdalene* had been mislabeled by the Catholic church as a prostitute for centuries, and that there are sacred, non-canonical texts telling more of her story, he was still up for going to see a show with me.

The traveling acrobatic show was nice, but for some reason, he was not that interesting to listen to when he was not sitting in front of me. (I'm shameless, I know.) I quickly realized that the only thing we had in common was that we were both fans of his body. By intermission, I had decided that there would not be a second date.

On the way back to my car, he took my hand and held it as we walked and talked. This surprised me, and I thought, *Oy vey, you're not going to like what I have to tell you.* When we got to my car, he chivalrously opened the door, and right as I was opening my mouth to break the news to him, my words were stopped by his lips.

He pulled me in at the waist for a deeper—albeit subpar—kiss. *Every* inch of him was touching me. His pecks felt like two burly shields. As my fingers caressed his back, I felt more muscles than I knew existed. I had never been embraced by such physical strength before. It felt as though I was making out with a veiny bicep. While I knew our lifestyles did not match and he was the *furthest* thing from “marriage material,” the inner-voices of standards hushed and I just kissed back.

Now, we'll get back to this frothy moment later (“Frothy” is my mom's ladylike term for “#*\$&@.”), but for now I want to pause and talk more about his body. (Because we haven't done enough of that already, right? *Dude. Was. Ripped.*)

Underneath the sheer attraction to his physique was my *utter* jealousy towards him. During this season I would preach in sports bras as to hide my womanly curves (that I had detested since I was a tween), and here he was prancing around with great pride for his body. There was a part of me that envied him, a part of me that wanted to *own* it and rock it like he did. Yes, both of our bodies were temples, but unlike me he was *quite* proud of

his. I wanted to be proud of mine too, and flaunt it with satisfaction; in a modest way, of course, like the occasional fitted shirt or a two-piece.

But, alas, I could not be so lucky to share his view. Having no life outside of the church had left me completely afraid of my vagina and ashamed of my D-cupped figure. Ever since the fifth grade, I can recall sucking it in in front of the mirror, just wishing that I was a less substantial being. I am sure I am not alone in these thoughts, for the struggle (and the body-shaming) has been real since (and well-before) biblical times.

BREAST MILK-DRINKING NUNS

Instead of a “temple” the Greeks sneeringly labeled the body as a temporary “tomb” which would someday pass away. This school of thought was known as Gnosticism, which argued the body and all matter were pure evil.¹ What mattered most was solely the spirit. The spirit would not overtake us with desires of sleep, food, and sex. Unlike the spirit, the body would be escaped from at the end. It was for this reason in Corinth that they did *whatever* they liked to and with their “tombs,” and quickly rose to being one of the most immortal cities in the Bible.

This, of course, led to much debate when the apostle Paul rode into town, preaching on the body as a temple (not a tomb to which we are shackled) as we read in 1 Corinthians 6:19. Paul believed that while, “the stomach and food are passing things; the day will come when they will both pass away. But the body, the personality, the [person] as a whole will not pass away; [he/

1 Winner; *Real Sex*, 34.

she] is made for union with Christ in this world and still closer union hereafter.”²

It is during the works of Paul and other New Testament authors that the Greek word, *porneia*, appears fifty-five times. Isn't it interesting that the issue of human sexuality comes up more in the New Testament than the word 'orphan' (forty-times) and (a word similar to) 'hell' (less than ten) in the *entire Bible*?

As you can tell from the root of this word, *porneia* deals with illicit sexual behavior and some verses could translate into pre-marital sex. These scriptures on human sexuality, though, have often been read through what the ivory tower scholars call, “proof texting” which is where readers pick verses out of context and string them together to support an argument.

In exploring the cultural context of some of these passages however, one sees that a woman's virginity was imperative in the business deal of her dad and husband when she was “sold” into wedlock. Some believe that these verses stem more from this point than the point of God's mandated abstinence. In fact, many go as far as hypothesizing that marriage was an altogether different beast in the middle east two-thousand years ago than it is in the US in [Insert year that you are reading this.]. But these are only educated guesses.

Regardless of *porneia's* explicit meaning, it is clear that as the early church grew, its leaders spent much time on the fact that since God gave us such a sacred and supernaturally powerful gift as sex, it *must* come with some major responsibility.³ But since the body was perceived as that from which to escape, many did

2 Barclay; *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Letter to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 56.

3 Winner; *Real Sex*, 39.

not attend to these teachings and treated their bodies (and entire beings) poorly through sexually unhealthy behavior.

Paul would need back up in correcting this misinterpretation, and it would take the ancestors of our faith quite a while to come around to the truth. (Thanks, Gnostics!) However, one major perk arose from this lie regarding our bodies during the twelfth century through matriarchs like Christina the Astonishing.

She was a self-harming, mental health advocate, and nun, whose body was of very little value to her (hence, the self-harming). Like others, her sole focus was on the pious ways of her thoughts and feelings. In fact, she believed that her sweet breast-milk was God's reward for her piety, so she would drink it as sustenance. And while some might have doubted her sanity, it was during her life that the, "focus on the soul enabled women to release themselves from the physical inferiorities ascribed to their gender in order to achieve the status of an authoritative figure."

These medieval female leaders would derive strength from their souls as opposed to what was viewed by others as their lesser than bodies. While this perk bared major fruit in their ministries, there was still some major body-shaming going on. Christina was sadly ahead of her time with regard to the flogging trend and would angrily beat her own breast and body and shout, "O miserable and wretched body! What is to you that you keep my wretched soul in you for so long? Woe to me, who am united to you (body)."⁴

Fortunately, her successors brought forth a much healthier, holistic perspective and appreciation for the body. One matriarch of our faith in the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena, emphatically taught of the intertwined nature of the body and

4 Cantimpre, 449.

the soul and how, “the soul could improve the physical state of the body.”⁵ A century later, another saint Teresa of Avila, complimented her perspective with proclaiming how “peace of the body would restore peace of the soul.”⁶

SPIDER WEB

These matriarchs of the faith were on to something that neuroscience would confirm years later, and that is how our emotional sensations affect our physical being and vice versa. Or as Dr. Ash Ranpura puts it, “The brain and the body are connected like a spider web made out of many neurons. When an insect gets trapped anywhere in the spider’s web every single string on the web vibrates. The spider can feel that vibration from any point on the web. The brain and the body are like that, they’re totally interconnected, a single system. Anything that affects one part affects the whole system.”⁷ Studies even suggest that one’s mood (with the exception of those who struggle with chronic depression) could manually be altered by “opening up [one’s] chest, lifting your head and going for a walk.”⁸

Crazy, yeah?

To further unpack the lovely, interconnected way we’re all designed, the Buddhist monk, Gelong Thubten states that, “Our body never lies. Our mind can play all kinds of avoidance tricks on us, but the body will *always* tell us how we feel. It’s important

5 Hanson; *Connections Between Body and Soul*, 30.

6 Blog, Dan Burke, *Peace of Body, Peace of Mind from Teresa of Avila*.

7 Wax; *How to be Human*, 68.

8 *Ibid*, 70.

to listen to that. Sickness, for example, is a messenger—it can be a wake-up call to get us to see what’s going on in our minds.”⁹

It is important to listen to our bodies. As part of our sanctuaries, they are trustworthy navigators through our lives.

As a very anxious child, I carried all of the world’s problems in my stomach which led to an ulcer at the age of ten. As I shared in the intro, certain environmental factors were not exactly setting me up for success, emotionally. Eventually, the fear and worry led to an insane pain in my upper stomach, a very bland diet, and a decade-long relationship with Prilosec. (We’re talkin’ such pain it would take me to the floor in the fetal position instantly. No bueno.) This is not surprising since as Dr. Ash Ranpura says, “the stomach processes so much information long before it reaches our brain and we cognitively put words to it.”¹⁰

As the stomach is the second brain with, “its vast neural network”, too much anxiety being held here for too long can negatively affect ones physical health over time. Thus, the endless cycle of emotionally feeling like shit to physically feeling like shit begins. This will make you think twice next time you’re tempted to not trust your gut won’t it?¹¹

By the time that I graduated college, I had learned to manage my stress-level with more play, stillness, and healthy friendships. Not only was my constant tummy ache gone (along the prescriptions), but I was able to focus on the things that mattered most in life like drinking coffee and eating chocolate.

9 Ibid, 70.

10 Ash Rapura, *Ruby Wax in conversation with a Neuroscientist, a Monk & Louise Chunn*. Penguin UK, Interview.

11 Brown, *Hackspirit.com*.

About a decade later, a family member of mine made a horrendously vile choice, and while I thought I was worried sick, a new bodily sensation had made itself known within me.

To impress you with medical jargon, the ulcer scar on my mucosal lining was not shouting at me like it had when trauma would arise. I felt nothing in my stomach, actually, *but* I felt tension in my forehead.

What was this feeling?

This sensation? It was hot and unabashedly moved through me like a soldier on the front lines. A feeling with such force I had never felt before. It was truly enlightening to me that I noticed and labeled it physically before I intellectually named it.

I was *angry*, not afraid.

My younger self was fearful—no, incapable of feeling this. Good little Christian girls don't get angry, right? But as an adult I was angry to my core and pissed off with every cell in my being.

I. Was. Mad.

As lame as it may sound, I thanked my body for helping me “name it to tame it” as Dr. Tina Payne Bryson says. My body was leading me on a clear path towards healing—healing for myself and healing within my family. If I had not been tuned in to *and* trusting in my body, I would have confused this emotion as something different and would have reacted *much* differently.

Conducting oneself out of fear looks *much* differently than conducting oneself out of anger. Anger, unlike fear, is not hesitant or passive. Anger, towards injustice, births a higher voltage of courage. Acting out of anger is like—well, we're not at that chapter yet, so let's return to our bodies.

Our bodies are the furthest thing from temporary “tombs.” They are our sages, our guides, and *imperative* parts of our own

sanctuaries. Your body was “fearfully and wonderfully made”¹² by the divinely creative Creator.

Your body was made to dance and to hug, to sense and to act, to move swiftly and rest sweetly. Your body was made to get goose bumps when Lauryn Hill sings *His Eye is on the Sparrow* (*YouTube* it!) and to erupt with laughter when Kristen Wiig plays *Sheena* on SNL. (*YouTube* that too!) Your body was made to experience beauty and to do “good works.”¹³

Our bodies were made so that you and I could be the hands and feet of *Christ*. It is quite sad that the church has been so anti-body for so long (and many still are), or simply quiet about the subject matter. And often when it is spoken on, confusing (and sometimes harmful) messages are shared.

PURITY RING

The confusing messages that shaped me were probably from the church conforming *too* much to its culture. Being raised in the Bible Belt, every day was a dichotomous pageant in which I needed to look good enough for men to want to sleep with me, but I was forbidden to think about/desire to/or sleep with a man. (Even the *notion*!)

This was truly a perplexing standard, but I tried—and I tried hard. In my pubescent mind, I saw it as an easy opportunity to receive the acceptance and affirmation that was absent in my house at times. All I have to do to be good *enough* is keep my pants on like a good lil’ Puritan!? Sign me up, society! When can I be measured for my chastity belt?

12 Psalm 139

13 Ephesians 2:10

Now how often is it appropriate to tell others about my purity ring?

Twice a day?! Only on Sunday?!

Or then is that a sin too because I'm bragging?

Oh well, I will just tell others if they ask.

And so, I did.

During my first month of high school theater class, we were asked to share two goals as an icebreaker. (Yep—everyone was still getting acquainted with each other.) When it was my turn I confidentially shared with this mixed-age group of students that I wanted to be on Broadway and not have sex before marriage. I thought I was *so* cool, but as the cookie usually crumbles, I was the *exact* opposite. The room erupted with laughter and the curt theatre teacher (as they often are) laughed and said, “Wow, that’s a lot of information that I don’t think anyone cares to know. Next person, please!”

But why didn’t they care to know about it???

Is that not a measurement of my moral character? Isn't that how I proved I am close to God—a real Christian? Isn't that how I am better than all of the other girls who actually have boyfriends to go too far with? This is a competition of chaste, and I want to—I will win it. Just give me an A+ for a low libido or a medal of asexuality, Ms. Theatre Teacher, because my sense of worth depends on how you think of me right now, and I want you to think I am a good girl who keeps it in my pants.

Yes, obviously, I was a *highly* undifferentiated teenager. I would always feel so sorry for a fellow teen who would cry at a church lock-in out of shame for going all the way with her boyfriend, before gloating about it to my grandmother and mother to assure they knew that I was not like her.

I had withstood the temptations of the flesh! (Pat me on the back someone!) Since I had no life outside of the church, even my weekends were spent at holy-roller retreats, and while spiritual disciplines, sacramental worship and acts of service came up, the majority of the curricula was focused on keeping our V-cards.

Dear Reader Friend, some of these church-retreats were *so* intense on sexual purity that you would have thought that the second century Christian thinker Tertullian, who taught that original sin was encapsulated and passed through a man's semen, was in charge.¹⁴ Yep, we are talkin' *intense*. And as Lauren Winner points out in her book, *Real Sex*, that would have saved me a lot of grief in my teens, these retreats were filled with lies such as: premarital sex will lead to eternal damnation and a horrible sense of self, men need/want sex more than women, and that our bodies are gross and unimportant. (Screw you, Gnosticism!)

I remember thinking that if their curricula had spent more time building us up in our talents, we would naturally make better choices in our dating because of an increase in one's confidence. One has little time for rebound make out sessions if she's too busy as a student council officer or the lead in a play. I also had to chuckle a bit when we would spend an entire day on sexual purity at an all-girl retreat, only to be surprised by our teen-male waiters at a banquet that night. I was so confused.

Are not my hormonal feelings bad? Yet, you invited all these guys to be all dressed-up and chivalrous to me? What am I supposed to do with this? Is what I'm feeling the Holy or the horny moving through me? Is this a test?! Is that why there is an empty seat at the head of the table for Jesus, so he can see clearly to grade my interaction with

14 Shroyer; *Original Blessing*, 154.

all of the hotness in this room? Give me a big fat 'A' for abstinent, Sweet baby Jesus!

I AM SO CONFUSED, CHURCH!

It's like that time Disney used the Jonas Brothers' sexuality to *market* purity rings and uphold their "pure" image. What the what?! How does that even make sense, Mickey?!¹⁵ (Remember? Even Kenny fell for it.)

I guess it makes sense for the church to harp on this since less than three percent of Americans are not having sex outside of marriage,¹⁶ so many take advantage of the gift of sex. *Still*, doesn't God care more about my pure heart than my pure hymen? I used to think this when I finally discovered what a hymen was (and that I had one) when I was twenty—I mean, a teen.

The neurotic guilt I struggled with as a teen after hot-and-heavy make-out sessions was enough to make me tap into my inner Christina the Astonishing and shout, "O miserable and wretched body! What is to you that you keep my wretched soul in you for so long? Woe to me, who am united to you (body)." I was *so* hard on myself. I would tearfully jot down prayers of forgiveness in my journal.

Why did I touch his leg? My mom said never to touch a boy's leg, and I did it anyway. Stupid, stupid Meg! Why did I keep on kissing him? Just keep it in your pants so that Jesus will love you, and you will finally be good enough! If you go too far, the church board

15 This is a reference to *South Park* episode 1, season 13. Kenny and his new girlfriend are encouraged by the Jonas brothers to wear purity rings, which is secretly a marketing tactic by Disney to sell sex to their young viewers.

16 The Guttmacher Institute. "Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954-2003." *US National Library of Medicine*, Public Health Rep. (2007 Jan-Feb) :73-8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17236611>.

will find out and you can't sing in the choir anymore because only the celibate can sing in the church choir. God help me next time to honor my "boundaries in dating" (My favorite book in high school. Yep, cool...I was so cool.).

While the feeling of making out felt *so* good, I hated my curves for making me like *my* potential sexiness. (And this followed me well into my twenties.) As was illustrated on a date with my then fiancé, where we were gathering eggs (#Kansas) and he was explaining to me how the chicken's eggs were their menstrual cycle. And my dumbfounded face and juvenile questions about female anatomy forced him to point to my lower abdomen and jokingly, yet seriously ask, "Do you know how *all* of this works?"

No. No, I did not. I was oblivious and terrified of my vagina.

What's that down there?

No clue and I'm not gonna be the one to find out because that would be sinful!

Around this time, I met a gal who was the Lucia to my Punchinello.¹⁷ Like the wooden people in Lucado's book who gave each other dot stickers for their flaws and golden stars for their accomplishments, I felt weighed down by the stickers from the church and society regarding my body and my purity. Then, in walked Hilary.

She was an honor student and a cheerleader who was the epitome of kind and (get this) a Christian. She walked with a confidence of which I could *only* dream; and behind her, left a trail of dots from the church on her purity and stars from society on her independence. Being the epitome of differentiated, she

17 A reference to Max Lucado's *I Am Special*.

was not out to impress anyone, so their opinions would never stick.

I idolized her, though I'd never admit it.

One day by our lockers, Hilary was sharing that her mom had talked with her about different forms of birth control and encouraged her to talk with her when she was ready to make certain choices with *her* body.

Correction! Thought I, the High School Pharisee. *That's not your body, Hilary, it's the church's and they have a lot to say about what you do with your (whisper this next sinful word) 'vagina.'* *Do you want me to call your mom and explain that to her? I'd be more than happy to. It's really important that she be clued in on this.*

I was greatly befuddled by Hilary's self-esteem. She talked about "her" body and "her" choices with great honor. She was not giggling out of teenage hormones but was communicating with maturity about a serious subject—a sacred milestone.

In the years to follow, Hilary would share in private of the first time her boyfriend (now husband), like the unwed lovers in the Song of Solomon, climbed her sturdy branches and drank *abundantly* from her sweet milk. There was no shame in her voice, only joy. She felt cared for and respected. She chose the day and (apparently) called a lot of the shots during the act. And because of the honest talks with her mom years in advance, she was prepared with birth control as well. To my surprise, the guy didn't even paint a red letter on her chest and dump her after his original-sin-filled semen entered her.

Amazing.

While Hilary *truly* inspired me, I was not emotionally mature enough then to actually learn from her strong sense-of-self and quickly reverted to my old, unhealthy ways of slut-shaming her to my mom and grandma. I am in *no* way proud of this, and

continually seek forgiveness for the *many* female friends that I have slut-shammed over the years (through gossip sessions that we holy-rollers reframe as “Joys and Concerns”). Throughout my high school years, I developed more and more into Mandy Moore’s character from the (fantastic) satirical film, *Saved*.

Out of a lack of love for my own body, I was extremely condemning of others and absurdly terrified that others would find me flawed or impure.

I thought my platform of purity was a common worldview held by my peers.

Didn't every teen fear being kicked out of the church choir for making-out the night before?

No. They did not. I was mistaken.

As an upperclassman, I had been dating a guy for a month. Like any hip chick does, I was talking about my purity ring in his Bronco in my driveway.¹⁸ He then shared the *devastating* news that he was *not* a virgin. My heart dropped. I had really liked this guy, and now I would have to (obviously) break up with him because as they said in youth group, “You can’t put a used toothbrush back in the package,” and there was no way I was letting him put his used toothbrush in me. I tried to hide the shock on my face, kept the convo short and went inside.

My mom greeted me from a dark kitchen, as she doused the kitchen with bleach for the fourth time that hour. (We were a strange upper-middle-class family who *rarely* turned on lights to save money. So. Strange.) I told her the sad news that I would be breaking up with him because he was not a virgin like me, and

18 Let it be known, Dear Reader Friend, that I did not break up with him that night and he brought much joy to my, until then, *very* dull high school experience. We are still good friends, and he is someone that I respect and admire.

“once you lose your V-card, Mom,” I said hoping to make her proud of me, “you can’t get it back.”

[Insert pageant-like-wave of the purity ring.]

She confusingly stared at me, which I took as an invite to share more (a mistake most extroverts make).

“Everyone knows that since he has been intimate with someone already, he *can’t* be intimate with me. Our relationship was basically over before it started because he’s not a virgin like me.” I preached.

She sat the sponge down as her face went from confused to *utterly* disappointment. She then poured on the guilt like gravy on biscuits. “Meg, how can you just judge him like that?! Who are *you* to judge him like that?! Sometimes things happen and people make mistakes, but it’s OK. You can’t just break up with someone because of a difference in opinion.”

I stood silently for a moment, mainly because I couldn’t breathe due to the bleach, but then a bewildered sadness came over me.

Why aren’t you proud of me? One’s V-card is everything, Mom, everything!!! I did the right thing. I am just holding him to the same standard that our family and the church have shoved down my throat. Why is it much easier to overlook his error of judgment, than it would be for mine? Why the double standard, Mom, why? Does God seriously not care if he gets some tail, but I can’t? Why can he go all the way, and I’m told not even to touch his leg? Why is no one giving me a gold ribbon for doing the right thing?!

HAPPY MEAL

Hearing an opinion that differed than the church’s continued to catch me off-guard as I matured(?) into my twenties. During

some of my summers as an undergrad student, I served as a chaplain at a sailing camp in Long Island. My boss and friend, Greg, encouraged me to explore seminaries nearby, so we ventured over to Union Theological Seminary. I had romanticized this visit so much in my mind because such theological greats like Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr had served there.

My heart leapt for joy as we walked down the lovely grey stone hallways. The energy in the space was electric until we opened the door to the admissions counselor's office.

The guy's nook was an utter disaster with stray paper and fast-food bags all over the place. He was a substantial man with his feet propped on the desk and his stained shirt partially untucked like a Texas high school football coach. *Bonhoeffer would be appalled, sir! Tuck your shirt in! Sit up straight and, for God's sake, throw your McDonald's bag away!*

It turned out he not only looked like a lazy Texas football coach, but he also addressed me like a player which made this exchange quite comical. We explored some of their master's programs, and as the conversation moved towards housing options, he said something most unexpected. "Yeah, you can live with, sleep with whomever you like. We know we all have different views here at Union, and we encourage diversity."

Come again? Am I in the right place? Did you just encourage promiscuity? Are you implying that I should not take the sacredness of my body and what I do with it seriously? Did you not notice this giant cross purity ring on my hand, sir? [Insert pageant style wave of the ring.] Also—how can that stain be from BBQ sauce? It is ten in the morning. Have you not changed since yesterday?!

On the drive home to Camp Quinipet, I thought of how while I did *not* appreciate the fear-based teachings of my

childhood on sex, I *most surely* did not appreciate the lackadaisical, happy-meal-smelling tales of promiscuity of that guy either.

So, what was a happy medium? Could I learn to love my body and my libido? What is a libido? Is it even real? If a libido increases in the woods, and no one is around to hear it, does God care? Could I live from a healthy view of myself and my sexuality that would not allow the pendulum to swing too far in *either* direction? If so, what would this look like?

I would grapple with these questions for *eons* and the memories of the Bronco, the bleach and the BBQ stain would pop back up while I was on a second date with the stripper years later, as he said to me in his muscular glory, “So a minister huh? I gotta ask ya one question that I’ve never understood. What’s the deal with Christians and sex? Why do y’all hate it *so* much?”

Well, you extremely hot man, let me tell you.

A lot of the credit for this fear of and distaste for sexuality goes back to the fourth century. It was at this time that instead of being a religion, Christianity morphed into an empire. With this immense shift, J. Philip Newell teaches that, “our natural sexual attractions and longing for physical union being regarded as among the deepest and holiest expressions of the dance of the universe,” were skewed as “opposed to the rhythm of God’s being” and “a tragic separation was introduced between the spiritual and the physical.”¹⁹ This worldview also affected our doctrinal beliefs, and even though the early New Testament manuscripts make it clear that Jesus had siblings and the prophetic words used in Isaiah 7:14 is “young woman” and not “virgin,” Mary’s permanent virginity began to be revered. In no time at

19 Newell; *Christ of the Celts*, 55.

all, chastity was held as a superior spiritual path than tying the knot.

Newell goes on to expand our minds to the fact that in John's gospel, Mary is never referred to as a virgin. He writes, "she is a mother. And in no other gospel is she more honored, but it is because she is a mother, the conceiver and bearer of sacred life, not because she" eternally had her V-card.²⁰ While we will get to know Mary a bit more later, it is hilariously worth noting that by the fifth century, the church's view of sex had become so distorted that they believed that the holy semen must have entered through Mary's ear because the Holy would have had nothing to do with one's naughty bits. Ridiculous.

"If [these views] had not done so much damage," Newell proclaims, "we could just describe them as deluded. But they represent the tragic severing of the spiritual from the physical and the holy from the sexual that has worked untold havoc in the hearts and lives of countless men and women through the centuries and continues to do so today. Of course, our sexual energies are infected with selfish desire and have been linked to some of the most horrific acts of domination and abuse in the history of humanity, but it is precisely because we have forgotten the holy root of sexuality that we continue to forget how it is to be truly expressed."²¹

While my view of sex and my body were just as shaken-up and skewed as Mary being impregnated through the ear, my grit to maintain my V-card was *unshakable*. And unlike the holy-roller gals I hung with that "kissed dating goodbye" (another book that will *not* help you in the flirting department), this was

20 Ibid., 56.

21 Ibid. 57.

a little more difficult for me because I was *actually* dating. And for your amusement now, Dear Reader Friend, I will list the nicknames that my family and friends gave the men of my late teens and twenties:

- “The-Devil-Made-Me-Watch-Porn” Guy: I was out of this one about ten seconds after hearing that.
- The “Looming Friendship Guy”: The lesson here, Dear Reader Friend, is that if someone is not willing to call you “Girlfriend” after a *year* (Shame on me, I know.) of committed frothiness and describes your relationship (?) as a “looming friendship”, you recede from him as *quickly* as possible.
- Spoiled Prince: This one broke up with me for being “too Methodist.” (Yep, he was a non-denom guy who was not so hot for a high-church gal.) When I wouldn’t end it with Wesley, he ended it with me.
- Socially-off Youth Minister: Dude was *uber* awkward, as is sadly the case for many church staffers. #RealTalk
- The Stripper: Really doesn’t need a nickname, does it? Dude was a stripper!
- And my all-time favorite...Stoner-Jesus: Self-explanatory really, dude looked like Jesus, if Jesus smoked a whole a lotta pot.

While I have no regrets (not even one letter) of how I was romantically physical, the relationships above were *filled* with shame, self-abasement and a horrible body image. As far as my story is concerned, I do *not* regret waiting. However, I highly regret my *motive* for waiting. I regret the *terror* that I felt about

my body in these relationships. And like a shout in a cave, this shame of being sexual (and being a sexual being) reverberated within me until three weeks before my wedding night.

I had done it. I had played by all of the rules. I had earned grace. I was twenty-four and I hadn't let any guy drink the milk for free. I was a virgin. I'm not sure what more of a turn-on to me was: how impressed my church members would be to marry off a grade-A virgin, or the idea of sleeping with my husband. (If I'm being honest, it was probably the first one, because I was clueless as to how totally awesome sex was.) Everyone would be so proud of me. I beat the odds. So few were as strong-willed as me, and guys enjoyed the chase of 'neurotic-guilt-girl'. I had to most certainly be an abstaining role-model for all.

I pretentiously spoke loudly at the doctor weeks before my wedding when I was getting on the pill. I loved the look on her face when she asked a second time to make sure, "And you've never had sex—like, ever?" Maybe another nurse would hear and be impressed by what little fun I had been having.

"Nope. I'm saving myself for marriage." I said, as my hot air filled the room.

One young nurse did hear and she called down the hall through her laughter, "Gina, come here. This woman's a virgin."

I sat up proudly on the foot of the examination bed.

Gina quickly ran down the hall as if I was a bearded woman at a circus.

She said, "What?! You are? But why?"

I cleared my throat and cockily said, "I'm just a very religious person, a minister actually, and this is what we (I) do."

And as they both looked back at me, I realized that they weren't impressed by or proud of me. They didn't envy me or even understand me. They seemed to have pity for me.

I didn't think too much of this moment, because I was kind of a dick, and didn't think that the opinions of the unchurched mattered. I also only shared that I was a virgin to one up them and to make myself feel better about myself. Mission accomplished. (I also realize now how unprofessional this whole moment was as I relive it nine-years later.)

However, in the weeks coming up to the *most* important night of my life (as I was brainwashed to believe), these nosey nurses triggered within me great doubt.

I had spent my whole preteen, teen, and young adult years making choices *solely* based on impressing the church, and for what? So I could sit here like some arrogant ass in an examination room and make two fellow women feel less than? This doesn't even make sense. This isn't even a fun result—a worthwhile prize. Most importantly, this is the *furthest* thing from godly behavior. Were all the times I slid out of the back-seat of a car leaving many a male with blue balls worth *this*? Shouldn't sex be more explosively beautiful than this perfunctory chore, this obligatory show-pig I had made it into? (In the Midwest, we have fairs where livestock are shown in a pageant-like compet—you get the point.)

Was this what I had been waiting for?

What had I been waiting for?

If I hated being abstinent, and the only reason I was waiting to share my milk was because that I *honestly* believed that the church had controlled every aspect of my life (including my vagina), then this was not the start to my marriage that I had dreamt of when we drew our future husbands back at those ole' purity lock-ins.

I wanted to take my life back from the church, and for me there was one way to do that.

My husband wanted me, just me, not me as the mouthpiece of the church. My husband and I neither one wanted the cloud of witnesses with us in our honeymoon bed beaming over us with tearful pride as we awkwardly read lubricant labels.

So, three weeks before my wedding night, I took back control.

I took back the control of my values.

I took back the control of my thoughts.

I took back the control of my feelings.

I took back the control of my desires.

I did all of this by taking back the control of my body from the church.

And I did this by laying with my fiancé in the biblical sense.

No one was allowed to have any say in this decision. For the first time, it was *all* me—and him (obviously). I, Meg, was in charge of what my body was capable of and. It. Was. Perfect.

This decision, which set the standard for my sex life, was the most shameless, spiritual decision I've ever made. I felt, for the first time, a *complete* love for my body *and* for my sexuality. I felt that God loved me, Garrett loved me, and that my neurotic guilt around pleasure was doing *nothing* but hindering my quality of life.

That night taught me that the body is *not* something to escape nor is my sexual body something to vilify.²² And above all else, It's OK (even fun) for me to be sexy. I have also learned over the years that the tempting fun of promiscuity that I once found enticing cannot compare to the sex between a committed couple. As Laura Winner explains,

“The sex of blind dates and fraternity parties even of relatively long-standing dating relationships, has, simply, no normal

22 Winner; *Real Sex*, 94.

qualities. Based principally on mutual desire, it dispenses with the ordinary rhythms of marital sex, trading them for a seemingly thrilling but ultimately false story. This may be the [most twisted lesson of premarital sex]: that [casual] sex is exciting. That sex derives its thrill from the instability and drama. In fact, the opposite is true: the dramas of married sex are smaller and more intimate, and indeed it is the stability of marriage that allows sex to be what it is.”²³

[We must allow sex to be ordinary.] This does not mean that sex will not be meaningful. Its meaning, instead will partake in the variety of meanings that ordinary life offers. Sex needs to be clumsy. It should at times feel awkward. It should be an act we engage in for comfort. It should also be allowed to hold any number of anxieties—the sorts of anxieties; for instance, we might feel about our child’s progress in school, or our ability to provide sustenance for our family. Sex becomes another way for to people to realistically engage the strengths and foibles of each other. Not only sexual intercourse is transformed as we allow it to take on the varieties of the commonplace; the varieties of the commonplace themselves are transformed as well.²⁴

(And Yes, I know that Winner would be perturbed with me quoting her directly after I shared my tale of premarital sex. Lo siento.)

In retrospect, it was the way that the Union guy downplayed such a sacred and powerful gift that irked me so. I, of course, couldn’t have articulated this then because I wasn’t gettin’ any.

But now that I experience the empowering, uniting, and comforting nature of sex, I’m even further confused as to why Mr. BBQ stain lowered the bar for his students. Why would he *not* want his students to aim for the best? Why settle for second-rate, fast-food-smelling, greasy-fried, synthetic-filled-snack-like

23 Winner; *Real Sex*, 119.

24 Ibid, 81.

hook-up? Why not aim for what sex could be—what it was *meant* to be—the replenishing, satisfying, scrumtrulescent feast of lovemaking?

I look forward to discussing such quandaries with my daughter someday when she's old enough to know that a tampon is not actually a giant q-tip like I told her it was when she pulled one out of my purse at Target. #shes3

DEAR DAUGHTER

Dear Henley,

This is bound to be an uncomfortable conversation. It would be for anyone. I think this is because so much of our world misunderstands sex. So many don't know what to do with this gift. Regardless of the discomfort that your questions and my answers might bring, please know that I am here to affirm and educate you.

No matter what you hear at school or on [Insert future form of *Spotify*], sex *is* sacred and supernatural and sometimes I wonder why God gave us (often) stupid humans a gift with *such* power, for with this power comes *great* responsibility. [Insert #hornyspiderman if hash tags are still a thing.]

As the pastor and writer, Frederick Buechner teaches, “Contrary to Mrs. Grundy, sex is not sin. Contrary to Hugh Hefner, it's not salvation either. Like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts.”²⁵ (Of course, there will be footnotes in the letter to my daughter. Who do you take me for?)

25 McCleneghan: *Good Christian Sex*, 9.

Your dad and I trust that you will handle this gift with great responsibility, and we would encourage you to share your personal boundaries with those whom you *choose* to be romantically physical.

When it comes to creating your boundaries, don't ask questions like, *Will this make me less holy?* or *Will I be less loveable by my future spouse?* Instead, try (actual helpful) questions like the ones in Margaret Farley's book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Ethics*. These would be such questions as, "Will this physical act show respect toward myself and my partner as persons or am I using him/her as a means to the end of pleasure? Am I respecting my own autonomy? Or is this physical act what is best for our relationship at this time?"

I would love to read this book with you and discuss it as she unpacks these criteria for love in a highly applicable way. Tools like these will equip you to move with intentionality as you grow and mature.

If I would have had Farley by my side as a young person, I would have carried around less shame. However, I have no regrets about my dating life as a teen and adult. I had *a lot* of fun with guys before your dad, and those moments were filled with mutual care and respect. While I think there is something special about your dad being the only man with whom I have slept, I am fully aware that your story might read differently. And my personal story in *no* way diminishes the sacredness of another's journey of sexual exploration. (Yep—I heard it, that was awkward. Won't say that again.)

Above all else, I want you to know that I'm here for you, because this (although it's sacred and supernatural) is *just* another topic that you and I can talk about (as long as you feel comfortable with the conversation).

I AM MY OWN SANCTUARY

Because as my spiritual director, Danielle Shroyer teaches, “[We should, when we view our lives as one of original blessing from God, and *not* through the lens of our own sinfulness] approach sex with far more perspective and sanity. Sexuality is not bad, but it isn’t everything either. It is one part of the human experience, and is to be given its healthy and rightful place. In a broader sense, original blessing carries far greater opportunity to respect and value our bodies, rather than contribute to a culture of shame...and negative body image. If we are taught to see our bodies as the source of our sin nature, it’s not particularly easy to appreciate them, much less to know what to do with them. When we believe that *our bodies are good*, we can choose to live into them as a natural part of human life *blessed* by God.”²⁶

As you soar through middle school and high school, may you pour your heart into your friendships, homework, and hobbies. May you have a blast discovering your talents and dreams. Know that at the right time, romantic love and the opportunity to *be* romantically loving will present itself. There’s *no* need to seek it out. And no matter what the church tells you, your feelings are *not* sinful. Your body *is* beautiful. Being sexy (at the appropriate age) *is* fun. And lastly, you *do* have a hymen and a libido; they don’t just appear (and then disappear) once you put on a wedding ring.

I love you *more* than life itself,

Mom

I am my own sanctuary.

26 Shroyer; *Original Blessing*, 156.

*My being houses the Holy. Grit
and grace come from within,
regardless of the choices of others.*

*My body is beautiful;
a gift that should be cared for,
trusted, and never feared.*

**AS YOU FORGE ONWARD AS YOUR OWN SANCTUARY,
ASK YOURSELF:**

1. What is a lie that you heard growing up about your body that you would like to correct? Correct it with the *truth* now in ink.
2. When was a time that while, “your mind played all kinds of avoidance tricks on you, your body did not lie to you and told you exactly how you felt” about a situation? Did you listen to your body then? If not, why not? If so, how did that work out for you?
3. Why *did* God give us (often) stupid humans such a powerful and sacred gift as sex? How does it harm one’s sex life to *not* view it as a supernatural gift?

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Meggie was a weird teenager.

We're talkin' so weird that her parents worried about her being *too* religious.

After a divine nudge to preach at the age of thirteen, she answered the call to full-time ministry as a sixteen-year-old. She became a paid church staff member a year later, and from 18-32, served in the same church.

While creating sacred space for others, Meggie forgot to nurture her own. In the rush of ministerial leadership, she allowed many limiting beliefs to hold her back. She searched for validation from others but failed to look within and find that she was already enough. These pages tell her satirical, yet "holy," tale of discovering that because the Divine dwells within, she already possesses enough grace for every wound and enough grit for every goal.

She now offers this gift to you, to encourage you toward the same end. You, yes, *all of you*, are your own sanctuary. Part memoir, part self-help book, and part spiritual devotional, Meggie will make you laugh, disrupt your thought-patterns, and above all else, empower you to become that which you were meant to be—a *sanctuarium tuum*. (If you want to know what that means, ya gotta read the book!)

"This book is a must-read for anyone looking to find their calling and path in this life or the church."

AJ AMYX

LIFE AND BUSINESS COACH, AJAMYX.COM



Meggie Lee Calvin (Meg) helps spiritually-attuned go-getters heal past wounds and reclaim their personal power so that they can have a life that they love. She does this as a sought-after speaker, author, and podcaster. She's an SNL fanatic, an avid line-dancer, and enjoys chillin' out by the chimenea with her husband and daughter. This is her second book and she can't wait to connect with you at MegCalvin.com.



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