

JOURNALING as a Spiritual Practice

Allison Byrbe

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*Tracing The Lines of Grace
to God's Presence*

Allison Byrbe

*Moody Publishers
Chicago*

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For Ben, Reed, Lucas, and Ansley
You are the best lines of grace running
through my story.

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Introduction

The Spiritual Practice *That Became My Lifeline to God*

Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.

~William Wordsworth

“Have you tried writing it down?” I asked my friend. She laughed a little, shaking her head. I’m sure she expected that question from me. She knows I love to journal. I have almost my whole life. And it seems journaling is growing in popularity, which makes me, a pen-to-page loving woman, happy.

Experts have been showing us for decades the tried-and-true benefits of putting pen to page. Journaling lowers stress; improves our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health; and can be an effective tool for reducing anxiety

and depression. The embodied practice of writing down our thoughts, processing our experiences, and using our creativity to imagine possibilities is the type of practice that can form us in spiritually significant ways.

For some of us, though, journaling can be an elusive, on-again-off-again habit that seems to slip through the cracks too easily. Journaling becomes another task on the to-do list instead of the life-giving, soul-expanding gift it can be.

I'm hoping you picked up this book because, like me, you're a pen-to-page loving person too—or you want to be. If so, I should let you know this isn't your typical journaling book. It's not just journaling how-to, though you will find that in here. It's also a creative and imaginative exploration and analysis of metaphors. Why metaphors? Because Scripture's metaphors were my pathway back to a renewed faith and love for God.

The Bible, with its richly layered language, is steeped in metaphors. From the earliest writings in Genesis describing God as breath, to Elijah's experience with God in the gentle whisper, to Jesus referring to Himself as living water and the Bread of Life, and to the experience of the Holy Spirit as a dove and as fire, Scripture leans on metaphor to illuminate the presence of God. Imagine the spiritual wholeness we can embody when journaling through Scripture's metaphors illuminates the presence of God.

In this book, you'll come to see how you're probably already more familiar with metaphors than you think—and that they're more important to how you feel and navigate life than you might realize. You'll discover how to spot metaphors in Scripture, and not just that journaling matters, but *why*. You'll explore the spiritual growth possible when you bring journaling and Scripture's metaphors together. And, you'll learn the practical how-to of establishing and maintaining

this journaling practice that deepens and sustains your relationship with God.

This book is an invitation into the richness of God’s imagination, creativity, and words to discover His presence with us, right here, right now, in the stories we’re living.

In these pages, I also invite you into the story that changed everything in my life. As I write these words, fourteen years have passed since our family’s uncertainties about our son Reed’s struggles and delays were diagnosed with a string of letters and numbers that began to rewrite our reality. I’ve written about that time, his diagnosis, and the grief we’ve lived through hundreds of times in my private journal and publicly in online spaces. I’ve lead journaling workshops sharing his story, our journey, and how journaling through it all brought me back to God. So why keep writing about it now in this book you’re holding? Because it’s still rewriting me, and I pray it will lend you some hope too.

I continue to search for words to wrap around the grief and love, the joy and sorrow, the sobs and splitting laughter, the wounding and the healing, the rock-bottom places and the bottomless grace, the dying and the resurrection. *The broken, blessed, and given*, as Eugene Peterson has said.¹

In my journal, I write down the solitary word *broken*, and tears slide down my cheek. This word names how I have felt. Inching over just a bit on the page, I write *blessed*. My heart hitches and questions circle around it like a hungry vulture. I ask in my journal, “Is a broken life a blessed one?” My pen hovers over this pressing paradox. Then, I scrawl out *given* just beyond the first two words. I recognize

This book is an invitation into the richness of God’s imagination, creativity, and words to discover His presence with us, right here, right now, in the stories we’re living.



that even in what we've lost, we have been given so much, because God's grace is so intricately woven into each line. And now, out of my broken and blessed life, I give—we hold out for others—the hope we have in Christ.

With as much fallible certainty as one human can have, I know our family's story is the beautiful ache through which I've been reborn. It's a strange thing to hold in one hand the utter conviction that I would in one skinny, hot second trade anything for my son to live free of all the brokenness that his diagnosis bears. And on the other hand? To hold the deepest gratitude that he is a straight-up miracle. To try to pull the two apart would leave us with no story at all. I could never have known myself, my marriage, my children, or my God in all their beauty apart from walking this path.

There's healing possible when we put pen to page and imagine all that God is able to do in us and through us.



Perhaps there are lines written into your life that are confusing or upending. Maybe you're looking for a way to make sense of the part of your story you find yourself in. I'd love to take your hand and help you see through journaling the compassionate hand of God that is writing goodness and beauty into your story.

In the beginning, God spoke creation into existence with His breath, with His words. And God's first gift to human beings, to all of us who are born, is breath. In the beginning, God made dirt breathe. And as fragile as things made of dirt might be, we have the resilient, eternal, life-giving breath of God within us. Each one of us—regardless of what we've experienced, what we believe, or how close to rock bottom we've gotten—has His breath in us. That small, rhythmic, quiet reminder that God is with us. This book, then, is your invitation to imagine that life can be breathed

and written into dead places. To believe that your breath and your words hold more hope than you might dare imagine.

If you need a gentle, honest, seasoned friend to walk alongside you as you learn to breathe words onto the pages of your journal, then you're in the right place. I don't have all the answers and can't fix everything that may have gone off course for you. But I can show you a way forward to process the hard things that have disconnected you from God. I can help you learn how to immerse yourself in the metaphors of life and Scripture to experience the real, living, breathing presence of Emmanuel. I can walk with you and show you the healing that's possible when through our writing we imagine all that God is able to do in us and through us.

And if your story isn't one you are trying to make sense of right now, but instead, you love journaling or are simply intrigued to see how you can make it a spiritual practice that will bring you closer to God, keep reading. I'm so excited to come alongside you and share this gift with you!

So, what about you? Have *you* tried writing it down? If you're ready for a fresh way to experience the presence of God, then take a deep breath with me, turn the page, and begin a journey that I think could just change everything.





CHAPTER 1

The Potential of Metaphor:

You Can't Pour New Wine into Old Wineskins

I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable. All these and other factors combined, if the circumstances are right, can teach and can lead to rebirth.

~Anne Morrow Lindbergh

I sat at my kitchen table, on an ordinary day in August 2011, scrolling through Pinterest. When my husband, Ben, answered his phone, I froze. We'd been waiting on this call about Reed from the pediatrician for over a month. Though Ben was only nodding and scribbling notes, I could tell the results showed something.

Hanging up the phone, he turned to tell me the news: a rare genetic disorder. Three extra chromosomes. A spectrum of possibilities but physical and intellectual difficulties guaranteed. Apraxia. Hypotonia. Possible heart issues. Anxiety. Recurring pneumonia. Of course, our pediatrician advised us not to Google the syndrome, and of course, I didn't listen.

I was a first-time mom to the cutest, curly, red-headed little boy, and suddenly now, trying to grasp the story of a genetic disorder that would rewrite every aspect of our family's life. On the genetic report 49xxxxxy was the name of his disorder, if you could even call it a name. Really, it was just a string of numbers and letters only recognizable to genetics experts. Most doctors, we were warned, would not have much, if any, real experience with this diagnosis.

With no language to explain what we were dealing with or even experts to turn to, my fear and grief began to rise. Desperate to make sense of this unknown, strange reality I found myself in, I scoured Google for the answers I hoped would help me find my footing. But Google only answered back with stark medical reports and terrifying statistics, instead of the reassurance that I so desperately hoped for.

Beneath the fear was a profound anger toward God. And my journal was peppered with questions. Why did He allow this to happen to our son? In an already difficult world, why add so much more to a tiny boy's plate? Why us? Why him? Why did so many other people not have to walk this path?

Even though God had blessed me with a husband I loved, work I was passionate about, and a home I enjoyed, this shattering news stood out as a glaring breach of trust. *I had played by the rules and now God was breaking them.*

I found myself thinking things I wasn't ready to say out loud, and so I wrote them down in my journal: The God I thought I knew, understood, and trusted had become strange, contradictory, and untrustworthy. I turned inward, to myself, to make sense of the unfathomable. Questions haunted me on every side.

A normal, healthy, typically developing son? No.

My son being playmate to my friends' babies? Impossible.

More babies for us? How could I dare risk this happening again?

Enjoying the empty nest, golden years with my husband? No guarantee.²

When life went unbearably sideways with this rare diagnosis, I found myself living in a story that I never would have written, enduring hard lines that I'd rather write out of the story. One minute I happily held the dreams of a normal, healthy, typical childhood for our son. In the next, those dreams dissolved into the harsh reality of missed milestones, therapies, hospitalizations, and miles of questions with no answers.

And my relationship with God flatlined.



It's perhaps unfair to blame the whole of my disconnect from God only on this diagnosis. My faith had been limping along for four years. In 2007, my older sister

When life went unbearably sideways, I found myself living in a story that I never would have written, enduring hard lines that I'd rather write out of the story.



Erin learned at thirty-six weeks' gestation that her baby—my niece Zoey—had died. I was devastated. After unexplained infertility and unsuccessful fertility treatments and then many months of prayers, Erin surprisingly became pregnant with Zoey without any outside intervention. We were ecstatic. God had heard our prayers, we reasoned, so why eight short months later were those answered prayers being taken back? What kind of cruel joke could this be?

My vibrant faith in a good, loving, life-giving God was shaken to its core. As I watched Erin shoulder this impossible grief, my spirit sagged under its weight too. For the first time in my very manageable, neat, tidy life of faith, I could not find a way forward in the face of an unfairness that shattered my illusion of control. *Did I really believe all those things I had professed so easily about God? Was any of it ever really true?* I had operated under the assumption that if I prayed hard enough, faithfully enough, righteously enough, my prayers could keep this sort of thing far from me and my family.

In the microcosm of hearing that my niece was stillborn, nothing else was still. Not the frantic phone calls. Not the dropping of everything else to go be in the hospital. Not the rushed planning and painful questions. Not the labor that still had to be done for Erin to deliver her baby. Not the tears coursing down cheeks and sobs heaving through bodies. None of it was still.

But stillborn was an apt word to describe my brake-slammed, whip-lashed faith. I sat so still, straining to hear if my own heart beating. Would we live again after this unspeakable loss? It was hard to fathom.

At my kitchen table in 2011, with Zoey's death still threaded through my heart, the crisis of Reed's diagnosis crushed my faith. How had I so naively believed that one traumatic loss in our family would save us from another? Ben and I sat

side-by-side, shell-shocked, in the low light of our basement, for hours after the pediatrician's phone call. We didn't speak; we silently grieved what would never be, with the curly-topped baby that slept in the next room completely unaware of how our gravity had shifted.

A lie had been planted in my heart: God could not be trusted for good things. And if He was near, He could not be trusted to help.



On that August day in 2011, all I wanted was to go back to the life I had before the diagnosis came crashing into our lives. Instead, I was forced to stay right where I was in the raw, gritty newness of my son's overwhelming diagnosis.

I couldn't reconcile the life I used to have with the reality of special needs that would influence every detail of our current lives and whatever future was left for us. I was in a place I didn't know with no clear map to navigate my way through. I couldn't weave together the fragments of my reality fast enough to stay above water. In my numb disbelief, my emotional and spiritual well-being plummeted me into a spiritual no-man's land.

In the midst of my spiritual crisis, I longed for the comfort of my faith to return, as I grieved and tried to piece my heart back together. But as anyone who has faced significant loss can attest, you simply can't go back. You can't unknow what you've learned, which is its own kind of grief. It is as if you're knocking furiously on the door of a house from which you've been evicted. You can still see the warmth of light flooding out of the windows; you can see all the other house guests warmly ensconced in their safe, cozy environment, but you're out in the cold.

You may also know loss, disappointment, setback, or grief. While the details of your story may be different from mine, my guess is you long to reconnect with God too—and I want to help you. What if I showed you how journaling through Scripture’s metaphors to experience God’s presence is one way to do that? If you’re ready to revive your faith through this journaling practice I’ve developed, the place to start is by understanding what metaphors are and how they work.

What Exactly Is Metaphor?

If high school English class was the last time you thought much about metaphor, then lean in. Instead of dissecting metaphors in literature, I want to show you

**We need metaphors
to make sense of
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the lives we lead,
and the faith we
have.**



how to see the transformative nature of metaphor in your very own life. I’ll define metaphor and show you the places where this figurative language is already showing up in your life. You’ll discover how we need metaphors to make sense of the world we’re in, the lives we lead, and the faith we have.

Take for instance nicknames. Did you have one growing up? I had several, like Allie, Allie Cat, and Alice in Wonderland. One in particular stands out.

My dad loves to tell this story from my elementary school days. As responsible parents do, mine set an 8 p.m. bedtime for me during the school year. My dad, as most reasonable parents might do, often stayed up until 10 or 11 p.m. As he would pass my bedroom late in the evening on his way to bed, I would call out, “Dad! I’m sound awake!”

Dad consistently responded, “Close your eyes little night owl, ask God to help you sleep. Goodnight, I love you.” Of course, my dad did not mean I was literally a creature with big round eyes and soft feathers sitting awake on the branches of a tree at night. But the endearing nickname created a story around my late-night tendencies that still gets shared around the Christmas dinner table.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that a metaphor, as figurative language, is “a word or phrase [that] is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable.”³ In other words, we take a familiar idea and apply it to an idea or person or event that we’re trying to understand.

Have you ever tried to explain a thunderstorm to a frightened child? “That’s just God bowling,” I remember hearing as a child. Has a friend ever tried to explain her grief to you? “My grief came wave after wave, but I never knew how big the wave would be or how long it would last.” These are metaphors, and they are how we name and rename our experiences for ourselves and for others to create understanding. As writer Orson Scott Card is credited with saying, “Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.”⁴

Aristotle defines metaphor even more simply as “the process of ‘giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.’”⁵ We do this so intuitively, we may not even question or think twice about the metaphors we use. I sure didn’t in my early years of teaching college writing classes.

“There’s more than one way to skin a cat, y’know?” I said, eyeing a young woman in the back row of my professional communication class, her eyes bulging over my comment. She covered her mouth as a horrified gasp escaped. Either she thought I had literal experience skinning cats, or she found my figurative language offensive. Apparently, my humor was misplaced that day.

I'd grown up hearing that phrase my whole life, so the metaphor was normal to me. No one in my family had ever skinned a cat (to my knowledge) but somehow, somewhere I'd picked up the idea that if there was more than one way to do something, then the cat phrase applied.

Metaphorically speaking, all I meant that day in class was my students could accomplish their writing assignment in more than one way. In an instant, the power of metaphors crystallized for me. When they don't work, conversations go sideways, and people think you're weird or perhaps need therapy. When they do work, they deliver new perspectives and understanding quickly and memorably.

The skinned cat metaphor may have failed me in class that day, but I'm convinced that metaphors have the potential to change our lives. I know what you're probably thinking, *She teaches writing, for heaven's sake. Of course she'd say that.* I won't deny it—a love for words and language and their power to change our lives is at the core of what I believe. But I've also lived it. Metaphor has changed my life, and I fully believe it has the potential to reorient your heart, mind, and soul, too.

The good news is metaphor isn't some new language you have to learn. Metaphors are baked into our everyday language. James Geary has reported that we use at least six metaphors *a minute!*⁶ Did you realize our normal, everyday conversations were so steeped in figurative language? Have you noticed the metaphors already woven into this chapter?

Once you start looking, you'll notice metaphor everywhere. Lakoff and Johnson show us how metaphor is baked into relationship language: "Their relationship is *in really good shape*. Their marriage is *on its last leg*."⁷ Relationships, of course, don't have a physical body or shape, so how can they be in good shape, right? Relationships don't actually have legs, but we often borrow tangible language to describe

something more abstract. This borrowing is how we make sense of something that may otherwise be difficult to describe or understand.

Journaling as a spiritual practice to reconnect with God starts with appreciating the potential for metaphor to build and grow our imagination for what is possible, hopeful, and true. Even though we use metaphors regularly, we often do so subconsciously. We're not fully aware of using them, their impact on our thinking, or even why they communicate so effectively (or in my case in that classroom, ineffectively). But let me be clear. This isn't a grammar or literature book. This is a book that will show you the prevalence of metaphors, why they're so powerful, and how journaling through them they might just change our lives. Writing is a practice that cultivates hope and healing within us. Journaling helps us connect to the God who calls Himself the Word.

Journaling helps us
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How Metaphor Works

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains that metaphor comes from the Greek word *metapherein* (“to transfer”).⁸ When we speak or write in metaphor, we transfer our understanding of something known to something unknown. This transfer is essential to ground us in our current realities.

Think of a newborn, just moments before birth, encased in the warm, rhythmic cocoon of her mother's womb, then thrust into a waterless, gravity-laden space. Instinctively, the newborn cries to be heard, and her arms reach out, searching for the edges of her new reality. The baby is then swaddled by nurses in a soft

blanket, mimicking as best as can be, the small, safe space of the mother's womb, because we know that babies need comfort.

Transformed from one reality to another, the newborn's understanding of warmth, comfort, and safety has been expanded. If the newborn could form articulate thoughts, she might say, "I like being wrapped up like this. I'm warm and my arms are pressed against my body, and someone is now gently, rhythmically shooshing me. This is a lot like where I've come from, but also different." Instead of an articulated thought, this new knowledge is expressed as the baby's cries quiet, and her body relaxes into her mother's arms. The baby is calmed and soothed because the transfer of knowledge in this new experience has succeeded.

As any new parent can attest, the baby will need to relearn and re-experience this knowledge hundreds or thousands of times as her body and experiences grow. This one moment of soothing will soon be interrupted by more crying, more learning, and more stretching to figure out how to exist in a new moment.

This is how we all grow. First, we experience something new. Then, we process the experience. We assimilate and translate the experiences, linking one to the next, creating a new understanding that is both a mixture of what we already know and what we are beginning to learn. This is the work of metaphor, to be the translator and medium that holds space between what has been and what is becoming.

Metaphors That Tell Stories

Metaphor is the bread and butter of life. We come into this world seeking to know and be known, to hear and be heard, to feel and be felt, and metaphors are one of the primary ways we create stories and templates to be known and to know.

Each metaphor can contain a universe of stories and become the building blocks for the stories through which we frame our lives. As Aundi Kolber describes, “The stories we weave and the meaning we make from them create templates for how we understand God, life, others, and ourselves.”⁹

Sometimes, our stories feel too ordinary or mundane and we long for something more. Or, we find ourselves in a new season, unsure how to move forward. And then, other times, the stories we’ve been living start splintering and cracking or maybe even imploding right before our eyes, leaving us reeling and disoriented. We find ourselves living in stories that we never would have written, and somehow trying to make our way through.

An ancient parable became the first tiny thread of hope I’d find in the wake of Reed’s diagnosis. Parables are stories of very ordinary things, and this is in part why they are so compelling, and are, as James Geary defines them, “narrated metaphor.”¹⁰ Eugene Peterson writes, “Parables do not tell us something new but get us to notice something we have overlooked.”¹¹ Parables can meet us right where we are and refract light from just the right angle to illuminate the darkness.

A brief theological note before we move forward. In the following section, I am not asking you to reinterpret Jesus’ original meaning for this parable. I am not trying to commit heresy! Instead, I’m inviting you to see the richness of the metaphor in the parable and its flexibility to meet us even here centuries later.

Parables can meet
us right where we
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from just the right
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the darkness.



You Can't Pour New Wine into Old Wineskins

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the Pharisees this parable:

“No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’” (Luke 5:36–39)

Jesus is making a theological contrast between their old religious way and His new life-giving way. He’s inviting them into a new story, one that will stretch them beyond the story they’ve always known. But the reward? Knowing God in a deeply more personal way than they had ever known Him before. Similarly, I felt like God was inviting me into a new story with Reed’s diagnosis, a story so different than the one I’d known or imagined I’d have. This ancient parable helped illuminate the reality I found myself in and gave me words to begin understanding what was happening to me.

I was trying desperately to get back home to myself, to who I thought I’d be as a parent, to what my marriage was like in all its youthful optimism before this diagnosis became an unwanted guest in our lives. I wanted to patch the old me up, but there didn’t seem much of her left to put back together. All I had were just shreds of a person and a life that used to be.

I wanted to pour my new story into the old wineskin of my life, but I knew in my heart it wouldn't work. Every time I tried, the old container just couldn't hold it. What I needed but couldn't yet reconcile was who I had become in light of the loss that had marked me. If I kept trying to clamor back to who I was before this diagnosis, to inhabit my old skin, I would burst at the seams. That old skin was not built for this new reality. Instead, I needed to find a way to bridge between the person I had been and the person I was becoming, to let God dwell with me there in my new skin. To have, as Eugene Peterson says, "a realization of grace . . . [that] God was in this place"¹² even if I couldn't see it yet.

My training as an English professor helped me understand a metaphor's potential to deliver truth in a startling, profound way, bridging the gap between what we know and what we do not yet understand; of making the intangible knowable, of giving us new skin to pour new life into. But the question loomed large in front me, the same question that is asked of all who find themselves far from God: *Can we find God's presence again in bewildering places?*

In the beginning, I believed that three-minute phone call from our pediatrician had shattered all good possibilities for my life. And while it would take years of fumbling through the darkness and wrestling with difficult questions, God in His gracious, compassionate mercy would show me that phone call was just the opening to a richer, more complex, and ultimately more beautiful story. And, in the process, He would use metaphors to help me write new stories in my places of loss and suffering so that I could reconnect my heart and life back to Him.



JOURNALING PROMPTS

Instructions

When we live much of our lives on the surface (e.g., What am I going to have for lunch today? How does this shirt look on me? Did I remember to sign the form that's due today?), we may miss out on deeper thinking and awareness that is vital for healing and growth. Journaling helps us see the deeper aspects of mind and heart and cultivate an awareness that God is here.

The first two prompts can be done with just a few moments of your time. Consider doing them all in one day or completing one a day over the course of a week. The third prompt may take a bit more time, but you can always decide ahead of time how much time you want to journal for, set a timer for that amount, and then simply stop when the timer is done. For those new to journaling, timing your journal writing can be especially beneficial in reducing overwhelm.

Prompt 1

Consider spending one day intentionally jotting down the metaphors you encounter. You could even begin with some of the ones you may have noticed in this chapter. What happened as you began paying attention to the metaphors around you?

Prompt 2

Fill in each of the following blanks:

- ① A word that describes my connection to God is . . .

- ② If I named my current inner landscape as a color, it would be . . .

- ③ The unwanted guest in my life is . . .

- ④ When I think of the wineskin parable, what comes to mind is . . .

Prompt 3

Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Allow yourself a few moments of quiet and stillness, where all you hear, all you feel, is your steady inhale and exhale. Ask God to open your imagination to Him.

Bring to mind a moment from your life that you'd consider a new wine-old wineskin experience. Perhaps a moment where you knew life would never be the same. A moment where you began to grapple with who you were becoming in light of the loss or difficulty or experience that marked you. How did you experience that moment?

Then, imagine God stitching together for you a new wineskin that is strong and sturdy. That can fully and safely hold you, your experience, your pain, and all you are becoming. And while this new skin is strong and sturdy, it is also soft and easy to hold, with His presence woven into every fiber.

Allow yourself to stay in the stillness and quiet of this intimacy with God. Then, when you're ready, can you journal about this experience?

Note.

If any of this feels overwhelming, give yourself permission to stop at any point.



CHAPTER 2

The Presence of God Through Metaphor:

The Unexpected, Gentle Whisper

*God is always whispering—always.
It is my highest calling to draw near and listen.*

~J.D. Walt

Just three weeks before Reed's diagnosis, our small family moved from South Carolina to Pennsylvania, away from our families and friends to a new town, with new jobs, a new church, and now a new diagnosis.

Weeks after we made this move, an earthquake, Hurricane Sandy, and an unusually heavy October snowstorm swept through our new town. I felt like Elijah standing on the mountainside wondering what on earth God was doing.



Is it possible to find God's presence in bewildering places of lost dreams and up-ending realities?

My son was not supposed to be disabled. I was not supposed to be a parent to a child with special needs. Motherhood was supposed to be an entirely different experience than the one I was having. I wanted the experience I saw so many of our friends having with their healthy, typical babies.

As the months after diagnosis ticked by, life felt more complicated, and less and less like the life I wanted to live. It spiraled with greater intensity, and I hunkered down and plowed through months of medical, specialist, and therapeutic appointments with our son.

When Hard Gets Harder

At just over a year old, Reed was hospitalized with pneumonia. We didn't know then that these hospitalizations would become a routine part of his childhood. Over the past decade, I've lost count of exactly how many times we've walked through hospital doors because pneumonia has held a vice grip on his lungs or because he needed surgery to correct yet another way his body was not functioning properly. But by my best estimations, Reed has been hospitalized somewhere between fifteen to twenty times.

Amid the steep learning curve of being a special needs mom, a small surprise came our way. One cold December night, I shakily removed the packaging around a pregnancy test. I followed the instructions, waited the prescribed minutes, and then saw a second pink line appear. The smallest bud of hope tried to peek through my tender, raw heart, but worry and fear could not be crowded out. What if this child also had a diagnosis?

We cautiously began sharing news of another baby with family after we heard the heartbeat at our six-week appointment. We started wondering whether we'd have a boy or a girl this time and holding tentative hope in our hearts for this new life.

I vacillated, sometimes by the minute, between hope and terror. The geneticist said our chances of another one of our children having a diagnosis like Reed's was extremely rare. But when you already had one child with a *rare* diagnosis (1 in 100,000 births), the doctor's assurances seemed thin and cold.

We would never find out if the geneticist was right about that baby. At the ten-week appointment, the ultrasound was silent and still. I couldn't trust God for good endings, and now, I couldn't trust my body to do the one thing that's uniquely a woman's to do.

Moving to a new state, receiving Reed's diagnosis, and experiencing a miscarriage all back to back left me reeling. I knew how impossibly far from God I felt, and each loss and setback made it seem less and less likely that I'd find Him in the pain and confusion of our reality.

Metaphors as Maps

While pain and confusion may make us lose our way from God's presence, metaphor can be a bridge back to finding Him. Commenting on Lauren Winner's

book *Wearing God*, Jonathan Peterson surmises that metaphor “changes and deepens [us] if we pray to a God who is as close to us as clothing . . . a God who arrests our attention like flame.”¹³ The tangible nature of wearing clothes and experiencing the light of a fire can become real sign posts pointing us on our way to finding God once again.

Just the mention of flame, and my mind goes to the fire pit Ben built in our backyard. As one of my favorite places to relax and be together as a family in the late fall season, my gaze is always drawn to its flickering flames, soothed by its warm dance. What about you? Where is your mind drawn when you think about warm, dancing flames?

With just a small bit of imagination, our minds can map almost any visceral experience to our less tangible experiences of God. Maybe our souls soften to His presence, familiar to us as our favorite fall sweater. Perhaps our hearts fill as we recognize God’s sense of delight in the lilt of our children’s laughter. Maybe, like our gaze is drawn to the fire, we are drawn in by the glimpses we catch of God’s presence in the tangible. These places, these experiences, these everyday items become the directional markers, our True North, pointing us to God again and again, if we simply pay attention. What if we see that our daily experiences are the symbols in the map’s legend showing us our way back to God?

Metaphors fill our everyday realities and are also woven throughout Scripture. In the Bible, we see God’s presence in a burning bush, in a gentle whisper, as living water, and as the bread of life. Ott explains that metaphors act as “communicative bridges [that] open the door of imagination and understanding to the most profound truths of the Bible.”¹⁴ God with us—His presence—is one of the most profound realities Scripture shows, teaching us a way forward even when

life doesn't make sense. Both our everyday metaphors and the ones we find in Scripture show us how to get from where we are to where we want to be—fully alive in the presence of God.

God's Presence: Face to Face

How do we experience a presence that seems intangible? I've never heard God audibly speak. I've never interlaced my fingers through His gentle hands. I've never seen Him walk through my front door and sit down for dinner.

But Scripture threads the reality of God's presence through its ancient pages. And often, His presence arrives in metaphor. The power of metaphor lies in how simple, everyday things that we can see and touch help us understand the God we cannot yet see. Metaphors make the presence of God tangible and accessible to us.

Metaphoric language is woven even into the fabric of singular words found in Scripture. Consider the word *presence* in the Old Testament: "The most common Hebrew term for 'presence' is *panim* . . . which is also translated 'face,' implying a close and personal encounter with the Lord," according to Dr. Bryan Beyer.¹⁵ *Panim*, according to the University of Iowa, "appears anthropomorphically to describe the divine presence as in Exodus 33:11, 'The LORD used to speak to Moses face (פָּנֶיךָ) to face (פָּנֶיךָ), as one speaks to a friend,' and idiomatically like in Psalm 4:6 to convey divine 'favor': 'Let the light of your face (פָּנֶיךָ) shine on us, O LORD.'"¹⁶

Pondering the emotional connotation of this word transforms our

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understanding of God's presence. Attaching the concrete word *face* with God's presence begins to enliven this reality. Being with God is not simply occupying the same space with Him, as when a teacher calls roll, and you respond to confirm your presence among many others. Being face-to-face with God reorients our minds to the intimacy of His presence, beholding the face of the beloved. This experience of His presence shifts from one of disconnection to profound intimacy.

Can you remember the last time you gazed into someone's eyes for more than a few seconds? Holding someone's gaze is an intimate act, one that has been described as looking into someone's soul. *Discover Magazine* detailed an intriguing "modern artistic experiment," involving an extended period of holding another person's gaze:

Serbian conceptual artist Marina Abramović sat for hours on end in prolonged eye contact with strangers in the atrium of New York's Museum of Modern Art. The 2010 exhibition, "The Artist Is Present," spanned three months, with individuals waiting hours in line for a chance at an intimate gaze-off with Abramović.

After waiting hours in line for her own encounter, writer Rebecca Taylor described her anticipation this way: "I was afraid: afraid of the judgment implicit in staring, afraid of the silence." And yet, as she settled into a half-hour interaction with the artist, she found a surprising peace. Other participants sat for more than an hour, eyes locked with Abramović. Many of them wept. Others smiled or laughed. Some appeared entranced, as if swept away to some distant place or memory—and later said the exchange changed their life or revealed a love they had never felt before.¹⁷

Abramović was a stranger to those who sat with her. These strangers probably did not expect to have such strong emotional responses to this experiment. But there is something profound about being face-to-face. Imagine, then, what might happen to those of us who would look for God's presence, as if gazing into His face, in even the unlikely places of our pain and disillusionment. If mere strangers can be entranced, led to peace, enticed to laughter, or experience a revelation of love by becoming aware of each other's presence, what then, when we come face-to-face with the presence of a God who knows and loves us intimately?

The Gentle Whisper

Elijah, an Old Testament prophet, encountered the presence of this God on a mountainside. After defeating 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah fled the wrath of Queen Jezebel, perhaps upset by how the victory aftermath was playing out. Rather than celebrating this God-sized win, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" and soon after tells God, "I have had enough, LORD" (1 Kings 19:3-4). Forty days later, Elijah retreats to a cave and when asked by God what he's doing there, Elijah, focused on the negative and discouraging aspects of his circumstances, says, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too" (1 Kings 19:10).

Maybe you can identify with Elijah's frustrations over discouraging and overwhelming circumstances. Your health diagnosis has swept away your dreams and ambitions. Or a relationship has created ruptures of grief in your life. Maybe the

dream job you landed is turning to ash right before your eyes. Perhaps your care-taking role seems like a never-ending task that keeps you isolated and lonely.

If I could rephrase Elijah's complaint for those who are disillusioned, it might be, *I'm doing all I know to do, all I can with what I've been given, and now this? God, I'm done.* That's at least how I felt staring into the grief of a move, a diagnosis, hospitalizations, and a miscarriage.

God meets Elijah in one of his most painful moments and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9). Instinctively, I hear these words in a preachy lecture. But what if God's tone was gentle, quiet, and kind, like a whisper? 1 Kings 19:11-13 says:

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

In this well-known passage, Elijah experiences God as a gentle whisper, starkly contrasting the violence of the shattering wind, toppling earthquake, and blazing fire. The still, small voice of God soothes over the destruction that preceded it. The whisper of God asks Elijah again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (v. 13). God gently invites Elijah to reconsider his mental map, the one that led him to run far away to this mountain-side cave, far away from the life God had called him to.

The whisper waits for Elijah to recognize that God is with him, and godlessness and death will not have the last word. Seemingly stuck in his own narrative about the death and destruction that hound him, Elijah responds with the same complaint as the first time, “Your people are acting godless, and now I’m being hunted down so they can kill me.”¹⁸ Acknowledging the real, transformative power of God right there with him seems to have escaped Elijah.

Does it escape us too? How often do we get stuck in our own misconceived narratives? The diagnosis, the fractured relationship, the ash heap of lost opportunity, or the drudgery of the mundane seem like the central plotline being written in our lives. Hopelessness and loneliness become the leading characters in the dramas we never asked to be in.

What, though, did God gently remind Elijah of? The prophet didn’t have the whole picture in view, and his weariness was likely skewing his perspective. Elijah, who twice said, “I am the only one left” (vv. 10, 14), stands corrected by God: “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel” (v. 18). Through a gentle whisper, God invites Elijah to rewrite the mental map of his grief so that he can see that God, in His infinite gentleness, is with him—even in this unlikely place.¹⁹

We, too, are invited to experience the nature of God’s presence in our hard stories through the metaphor of the gentle whisper. His presence does not resolve all the frustrations, disappointments, or burdens we have, but He will whisper the fullness of His presence with us in the stories we are living. What if we see the metaphors of Scripture as a gateway into this place where we can meet with God?

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If we believe that God is angry or incompetent or uninvolved, our grief will shatter us. But Sarah Clarkson reminds us that “a well-woven narrative can be a way to journey through the brokenness, to traverse and map our sorrow, even to find its borders, rather than merely assent to it.”²⁰ If our mental maps and narratives can be transformed by Scripture’s metaphors of God’s presence, then we can be led to the green pastures and quiet waters of God’s good presence even in our pain.

Though the hard got harder for our family—and even more difficulties would pile up over the next several years—I did find God’s presence again by the steady practice of rewriting my mental map and narratives through Scripture’s metaphors.

My pain and loss felt isolating. Seemingly everywhere I looked, others were blessed with thriving families. Except us. I felt cut off from God, His goodness, and His presence. But when I encountered the gentle whisper of God in Elijah’s story, and began journaling about it, I was desperate to find that same gentleness from God, hear His heart for me and my family in the midst of our difficult circumstances, and be able to experience His presence again too.

As I engaged God’s gentle whisper in my journaling, here’s what I realized: A whisper implies closeness, intimacy, like the intimacy embedded in the Hebrew word *panim* we looked at earlier. And when I stilled and softened toward God’s presence, I could hear His truth: *I am with you even here, Allison.*

If you are feeling far from God’s heart and presence, let me lend you a little hope and courage. *He is with you.* Even in the most unlikely places, if you can quiet your heart for just a bit, might you hear His gentle whisper? What if you put pen to page to map your way back to God?



JOURNALING PROMPTS

Prompt 1

Can you describe one of the most unlikely places you've encountered God?

Prompt 2

Ask someone you are close to and trust if they're willing to do an experiment with you. Pick a timeframe (five, ten, twenty, or thirty minutes) that you will sit face-to-face with this person and gaze into each other's eyes in the spirit of the art museum experiment described earlier in this chapter. Find a spot where you and your partner can sit comfortably face-to-face. Set the timer for the agreed-upon timeframe and then quietly gaze into each other's eyes. Once the timer ends, set a five-minute timer and write about your experience in your journal. You can of course keep writing past the five minutes if you want, but the timer gives you permission to only write for five minutes. Here are some questions you can use to get started with your journal entry:

- 1 Did you like the experiment or not?
-

② What physical responses did you have during the experiment?

③ What emotions did you experience as you gazed into your partner's eyes?

④ Did time seem to pass slowly or quickly during the experiment?

⑤ What is your takeaway from the experience?

Prompt 3

Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Allow yourself a few moments of quiet and stillness, where all you hear, all you feel, is your steady inhale and exhale. Ask God to open your imagination to Him.

Imagine a place where you might meet with God. This could be your favorite or familiar place, a real place, or an imagined place. Of utmost importance is that

the place you imagine is a place you feel safe. In your mind, bring this place alive to your senses. Pause and really explore each of your senses:

- What do you see?
- What do you smell?
- What do you hear?
- What do you feel?

Have you fully immersed yourself in that place? Is it alive in the imagination of your mind? Be fully present in this place as you wait for God to meet you.

Imagine that in an instant, a great, powerful, turbulent wind begins to whip around you, your hair scattering in a thousand directions. Your hair whips around your face, and your knees tremble just a bit, *but* you are held steadfast.

As the great wind tapers and stills, a tremorous shaking begins and becomes so strong you think the ground might open up, *but* you are secure.

As the ground steadies once more, you see flames licking towards you, and they come so close you have to turn your face away from the heat, *but* you are unscathed.

Then, a pause, a stillness, as you brace for the next overwhelming wave.

And yet, what comes is a gentle and quiet whisper. God is here, meeting you in quiet, in stillness, in tenderness.

It's an invitation, as Stacie Poston says, to "sit face to face with the Father and let Him see you. . . . If grief, let Him share grief with you. If joy, let Him smile back at you."²¹ However you are, however you've come, sit with Him and let Him gently whisper to you.

The invitation is to stay, for as long as you'd like, in the quiet of your mind and heart and listen to the quiet whisper of God. To experience the fullness of His gentleness.

When you're ready, open your eyes and begin to write about your encounter with the gentle, quiet whisper of God.



CHAPTER 3

The Power of Journaling:

Our Mirrors Matter

*To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is
the reason for my existence, for God is love.*

~Thomas Merton

If I could go back a decade, I'd tell myself to look for God in those very unlikely places of a stillbirth, diagnosis, and a miscarriage. Like Elijah finding God in the

unexpected gentle whisper. But pain and disappointment can be very disorienting, making it difficult to lift our eyes to the One who is our help.

Pain seems to obscure our holy imagination for what God is doing right in the midst of our most difficult moments.



If I could come to you in your pain, I'd say, "Look, look, He is here! God is here in this pain, in this disappointment, in this disquiet and chaos. He is here!" But pain seems to obscure our holy imagination for what God is doing right in the midst of our most difficult moments.

I was stuck with this on repeat in my mind: *If God could not be trusted to get our story right, then He sure couldn't be trusted to help us figure out our new reality.* If He was omnipotent like I'd believed my whole life, then He was choosing not to intervene in our lives, and I couldn't make sense of that.

The ways in which I'd seen the goodness and kindness of God reflected in my life were broken and cracked by pain and confusion.

The Deception of Self-Sufficiency

If God wasn't going to change our circumstances, I would do it myself. My scraped, raw soul tried to latch onto any shard of earthly hope I could grasp to make my life normal again. Therapy and appointments and evaluations and late-night Google searches and alternative medicine became my work and my distraction, my way to numb the pain eating away at me. Honestly, as much as I was motivated to help Reed, I was trying to find my way out of a life I didn't ask for.

That self-sufficiency was an all too familiar habit and way of operating. I had, like so many of us, been raised on the all-American, bootstrapping, individualistic

mentality. Alissa Quartz defines this mentality as “getting ahead on only your energy and steam, without help from your family, government, or community. . . . [an] embrace of an individualism that shades into a brittle self-sufficiency.”²² Tim Keller emphasizes how “American culture elevates the interests of the individual over those of family, community, and nation.”²³ The cultural waters we are steeped in, without a sufficient and compelling counterbalance, skew our perceptions of how life ought to work.

We see material success and ease of life as an obvious sign of God’s blessing, and anything short of that as a personal downfall. We find it easier to slip into and out of church services in darkened rooms rather than show up in love in the real lives of the people in our neighborhoods. We shy away awkwardly from those who are grieving or less than, even though it’s a clear call Jesus gives us again and again in the New Testament. We often leave people with pat answers and generic pats on the back of “Let me know if you need anything” when difficulty and grief become part of their living reality. We leave people to sort out their pain and grief on their own. That’s the American way, isn’t it?

But what do we do when our lives look nothing like the picture of success that’s reinforced in every advertisement, sometimes even our churches, and waters the very root of culture’s values? What do we do when our lives look nothing like what we’ve come to believe means we are good and blessed? Too many of us turn to self-sufficiency.



When Reed was two and a half years old, we welcomed our second child, Lucas, into our family, and I was still in the thick of my own delusions about self-sufficiency.

As Lucas grew into a toddler and started testing out his newfound independence, he'd proudly stick out his chest and declare to me, "Mom, I do that all by on my own." His cute, determined words made us laugh. Putting on his socks, buckling his car seat harness, and serving himself food at the dinner table? He did not want my help with any of it. But also? His words forced me to look in a mirror whose reflection I didn't want to see.

The logic of "all by on my own" was my mantra as I scheduled appointments, completed physical therapy exercises at home with Reed, and checked things off my to-do list for helping my son overcome his obstacles. While this initially felt productive, I soon realized that Reed wasn't progressing as much as I thought all my effort deserved, and life still felt unbearably hard. Hopelessness settled in. My cycle became to work hard until I crashed; then work harder, and ultimately, crash harder. With each iteration, my heart became more brittle, widening the distance between me in my self-sufficiency and God.

The harder I worked and the harder I crashed, the more the grief intensified. I looked in the mirror and saw a woman who wasn't good enough in God's eyes to be given a son who was typical, wasn't good enough in the world's eyes to help my son overcome his diagnosis, and wasn't good enough to pull myself out of the despair and crippling depression I felt. My self-sufficiency became the way I tried to prove to God and everyone that I could do this, I could make it, *all by on my own*.

Like the newborn baby I described in chapter 1, I was abruptly pushed into a new, unknown world, rife with disappointments, unknowns, and mounting question marks. As I struggled to live in this new skin I inhabited, the lie of self-sufficiency became the glue I tried to use to hold myself together. Instead of *I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me*, I believed *I can work my own way*

out of any pain I experience. When that didn't work, I believed the lie that I had no worth, my son was broken, and I was unloved by God. Instead of allowing the truth that *God would grant me sufficiency for the joy of raising Reed,* I believed that achieving a good life for our family depended solely on my efforts.

Mirrors Matter

My mirror of self-sufficiency was a broken distortion of reality. When the work of metaphor is to translate and hold space between what has been and what is becoming, the accuracy and the truth of the metaphor matters. In this season, the mirror reflected *unworthy, broken, and unloved,* translating lies instead of truth into my heart and crushing the connection between my heart and God's.

As our daily life with Reed's diagnosis increasingly revolved around reminders that my child was atypical, I started to believe more and more that I *had* to fix him because the world would never make a place for him unless I did. I convinced myself that I must work as hard as I could to mend what was broken. The self-sufficiency reflected in culture was only a bid for control that led to deeper grief and brokenness because none of us are designed to bear the weight of authoring our own stories.

Self-sufficiency seems like the golden ticket to success, to the life we've always dreamed of. While God has imbued us with agency and choice, ultimately, much lies outside our grasp for control. We think doing it ourselves is the formula for

When the work of metaphor is to translate and hold space between what has been and what is becoming, the accuracy and the truth of the metaphor matters.



getting the life we want. It's the old Edenic lie that when we're in control, when we make the decisions, when we get what we want, then all will be right in our lives. Our hearts will finally be satisfied.

Or so we think.

In our limited knowledge and wisdom as finite beings, I'm not sure we'd make the best decisions even if we had total control of our lives. Control ultimately wouldn't serve us well because our decisions would be self-serving at best and self-destructive at worst.

And yet, we often live our lives bent on wrestling control away from God. We want control. But God wants a relationship. In relationship with God, we can make sense out of the pain and brokenness of our lives. In relationship with God, we can trace the lines of grace that He's weaving into our stories and find life abundant.

This cultural obsession with self-sufficiency, individualism, and success clashes head-on, of course, with Scripture, which provides the over-abundant, compelling counternarrative to this destructive, out-of-balance mindset and soul posture. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God" (ESV). As Pete Briscoe aptly points out, "*We are not called to live super-human lives through our own hidden powers. We are designed to live in dependence on God. When we are weak, He is strong. When we are foolish, He is wise. When we don't know what to say, He gives us the words.*"²⁴

But this shift won't happen magically. If it did, most of us would already have this figured out. What we need is a tool, a practice, a discipline for reorienting us away from our delusion of self-sufficiency and toward a healed, whole relationship with the God of the universe.

A Different Mirror

I was at the beginning of the long, often painful, but ultimately beautiful journey of replacing self-sufficiency with lament, depth, long-suffering, love, openness, and vulnerability. It would not happen immediately or even in a linear fashion.

Just like I needed new skin to live in after being thrust into a post-diagnosis life, I also needed a new mirror that would reflect *beloved of God, whole in Christ, and worthy of all of God's good gifts*. I needed the mirror of 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (vv. 13:1-7)

In this passage threaded with metaphor, Paul makes love the priority, the ultimate good, the highest value. The make-it-or-break-it necessity. My self-sufficiency was nothing more than a clanging symbol that drove me further away from God and others and deeper into myself. Without love, we are nothing, Paul says. The starkness of his language is intentional because the importance of love

cannot be overstated. As the Message conveys this truth, “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love” (1 Cor. 13:3-7).

Paul personifies love. He makes this abstract quality tangible so we can see Who love is. This, he seems to be saying, is love with skin on. When we look into the mirror of God’s love, we see patience, kindness, humility, deference, delight in truth, protection, trust, hope, and perseverance. In contrast, self-sufficiency looked like self-first entitlement to my own desires, ruminating on all that was wrong rather than all that was good, and boasting in my own efforts and what I could do all on my own. Self-sufficiency protected me without regard for others. I did not trust anyone, not even God, and was filled with despair. My self-sufficiency ultimately brought me to nothing.

Self-sufficiency became the grit and grime that obscured the mirror of love God was inviting me to look in to. The self-sufficiency became a distraction from how desperately I needed to know that Reed’s diagnosis wasn’t a punishment and that God still loved me. Looking back a few years later, what I would see is how patiently and kindly God loved me through all my clamoring and clanging attempts to right our story.

The mirrors we choose to look in to, to reflect back truth to us, matter so much because “for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12). On this side of eternity, we only have mirrors to see and understand our realities, and the wrong mirror distorts the truth and will eventually shatter us. But there is a day coming when “we shall see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12), and love will not be just a reflection but a real, lived experience in the presence of Love Himself.

Looking through God’s mirror of love, we will not be crushed in the midst of diagnoses. Our unloveliness, our not enough-ness, our misunderstandings are

transformed when viewed through the mirror of God’s strong, wise, Word-made-flesh love. Like mine was, is your mirror distorted? Are you gazing through the smoke and mirrors of the enemy’s lies? If so, what you need is God’s clear mirror of love and all-sufficiency.



Journaling can be a way to hold up the mirror of God’s love, a mirror that helps us trace the lines of God’s good grace in our lives. Without reflection, we become “like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:23–25).

What is this perfect law? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:30–31). Journaling is one practice that helps us live out this command. When we process our emotions through journaling, we engage our heart. When we listen for the still, small whisper of God as we journal, we engage our souls.

When we write, we neurologically engage our minds. According to the University of Waterloo, “Writing is an extraordinary process that requires a complex interplay of many brain regions. . . . the frontal lobe, hippocampus, Broca’s area, Wernicke’s area, visual cortex, motor area and the caudate nucleus.”²⁵ According

Journaling is one practice that helps us live out the command to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.



to Adam Young, “If you are able to tell your story while remaining connected to your emotions, then the neural networks in the left part of your brain will link up with the neural networks in the right part of your brain. This is very healing. It leads to what neuroscientists call integration, and what the Bible calls shalom.”²⁶

As I began to journal about our experience with Reed, I noticed that the heaviness was lifting, even if just a bit, and I could take a breath. I began to see new ways of thinking and being, that I never would have seen apart from them staring back at me from the pages of my journal. My journal became a mirror, reflecting to me God’s truth, wisdom, and love. Because writing it all down helped, I continued, page after page, as honestly as I could. At the time I only knew that journaling was balm for my soul. Writing through my pain was healing me, and I needed as much of it as I could get.

There is a reason why writing through our pain is healing. Adam Young says it most simply and profoundly: “It turns out that the practice of reflecting on the story of your life actually promotes healing in your brain . . . [because] brain health is a function of the degree to which all parts of your brain are connected with one another.”²⁷

Young goes on to point out that sharing our stories with others is also crucial for brain healing. Journaling can be the first reflective step toward this healing, especially if the idea of sharing our story out loud with someone else is slightly (or majorly) terrifying. Engaging our stories on the safe pages of our journals, just between us and God, is a safe, important first step. Journaling communities can complete the other half to Young’s puzzle, and we’ll talk more about journaling in community in chapter 7.

In the hurried, demanding lives we lead, we spend most of our thoughts on the to-do lists just to get us through our days, sprinkled in with the same, looping thoughts of regret, frustration, and the nagging thought of things we know we need to do but just can't remember. If we're going to heal our relationships with God and find hope, we've got to dig beneath that conscious clutter to find out what thoughts, ideas, and feelings are a distorted reflection of reality and God's love.

Journaling can help us honestly examine the ways we're navigating our stories, which is important for growth. Before we can change or grow, we need to see the truth of our circumstances, our perspectives, and our connection to God. Journaling functions as this mirror where we put in plain view for ourselves the patterns of our thoughts. And, then, when we journal God's honest truth back to ourselves, we make visible the often invisible, intangible work of the Spirit in us.

Dr. James Pennebaker developed and studied a four-day journal writing protocol, which he outlines in his book *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Upheaval*. Each day, for fifteen to twenty minutes per day, participants would write about a personally and emotionally difficult topic, guided by simple prompts that helped them explore their stories, connect their story to the greater scope of their lives, and ultimately find their voice within their stories. After the four-day protocol, participants showed improvement in physical health, emotional well-being, reduced visits to doctors, and improved immune systems.²⁸

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Similar to Pennebaker’s participants, I found that journaling was helping me heal from the destructive nature of self-sufficiency. I began to see that what I really needed wasn’t control but the ability to create meaning and insight from my story, which journaling is so helpful for doing.

It turned out that what Reed really needed, even more than the therapies and interventions, was radical acceptance born from love. God was already looking at my son, at our family, and the life He’d given us and saying it was good. I didn’t have to fight for the good life; *I already had it.*

In truth, what *I* needed was to learn the art of radical acceptance of this new path God had us on. I needed to see that even in my immense suffering, that the very good things of God—faith, hope, and love—were reflected even more clearly. I’d just been looking in the wrong mirror.



JOURNAL PROMPTS

Prompt 1

Hold the mirror up of these verses from Scripture and the following quote from Anne Lindbergh to your current pain or difficulty. How do these words help you see or understand your pain differently?

- ① “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23).
- ② “I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable.”²⁹

Prompt 2

Like my realization about self-sufficiency, can you remember a time when someone held up a metaphorical mirror to your life that helped you see things differently? Set a five-minute timer and write about that experience.

Prompt 3

Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Allow yourself a few moments of quiet and stillness, where all you hear, all you feel, is your steady inhale and exhale. Ask God to open your imagination to Him.

Sit in front of a mirror for three to five minutes. As you see yourself in the mirror, what comes to mind? Write down whatever comes to mind without censoring your thoughts.

Take a pause and then write down several truths about how God sees you. Possible Scripture verses to look at: 1 Samuel 16:7, 1 John 3:1, 1 Peter 2:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Psalm 139:13–16, Matthew 5:14, and Colossians 3:12.

After reading those truths several times through (consider writing down and taping those truths to the mirror), look back at yourself in the mirror. What comes to mind as you see yourself with God's truth reflected back? How does God's truth help shift your inner narrative? Spend some time in your journal writing those answers down.
