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Foreword

I NEEDED *HEALING WHAT'S WITHIN* about twenty years ago, when the neglected fragments of my soul almost cut me from within.

To get some idea of my situation, picture a church with stained glass windows. If you look at them from the outside, those windows seem dull and unremarkable. Yet from the inside, as sunlight pours through them, they are spectacularly transformed. Each fragment of brightly colored glass glimmers and shines, dancing harmoniously with the others to illuminate the interior—a sanctuary that is warm, inviting, whole, *holy*.

Those stained glass windows illustrate how I presented myself back then—only in reverse. For years, I worked hard to maintain a calm, capable, and pleasing *exterior*. But internally, I battled chronic loneliness, anxiety, and pervasive self-doubt, often feeling sidelined in my own life. I felt unseen and disjointed, even as I worked to appear vibrant and put-together to others.

It was as if I lived as two different people: the capable Christian woman visible to the outside world, and the inner

me, where painful emotions were walled off, buried, and pushed down.

I had excellent coping tactics to maintain this divide. I would rationalize or logic myself out of hard feelings, telling myself, *You have Jesus. You shouldn't feel this way. Focus on others.* When those mental gymnastics stopped working, I turned to numbing. I sought solace in binge-watching television, diving into the problems of others, or seeking comfort in food.

Then one day both strategies stopped working, and the untended shards of my soul burst to the surface in the form of a debilitating series of panic attacks.

I was a therapist and a doctoral student studying both psychology and theology. I sought genuinely to follow Jesus. Yet I had no clue how to take all that light I was working so hard to shine outwardly and redirect it to illuminate the fragments of my own soul. I had no clue that God longed for that light to radiate inside me too.

I didn't have the voice of my friend and spiritual brother, Chuck DeGroat, to guide me back then. But thankfully, I have it now. And so do you.

It takes an extraordinary person to courageously travel beyond these stubborn protective layers—the outer (often religious) armor of having it all together, the self-berating armor of shame and criticism, and the numbing armor of systematically checking out. It takes a brave person who—from that place beyond those defenses—turns back to help the rest of us find and heal what's broken and hurting within ourselves.

Chuck DeGroat is that person. And *Healing What's Within*

is the beautiful guide he's gifted us as we take this journey. Books like this aren't just written. They're lived, embodied, then revealed by someone who has traveled ahead and then stopped to illuminate the path for those of us still wandering. Chuck has already taught us to name and understand the reality of narcissism—not only in our leaders but also within ourselves. It's fitting, then, that he would now be the one to guide us on a journey of returning Home to ourselves.

Healing What's Within is more than a book—it's an encounter, an invitation, a mirror through which you will begin to see yourself. With fierce kindness and deep tenderness, Chuck skillfully redirects your gaze to the powerful questions God has been asking all along:

Where are you?

Who told you that it had to be this way?

Where have you taken your hunger?

You may feel vulnerable as you encounter God's loving presence through these questions. I did. But you won't feel shamed. Instead, you'll encounter a God who is patient, kind, and gentle, a God who sees, but never shames; who asks, but never manipulates; who invites, but never coerces. A God who seeks, above all else, to heal.

If you, like me, have exhausted yourself maintaining the facade of having it all together; if you've been harshly self-critical, judgmental, or shaming; if in desperation, you've numbed, avoided, or distracted yourself to your own or someone else's

detriment, I am so glad you are here. I'm so grateful that you get to take this journey inward with my friend Chuck's kindness, compassion, and hard-earned wisdom as your guide.

Linger as you read these pages. Take your time. This is such good, important work, this endeavor to discover and sustain a Home within yourself—a beautiful inner sanctuary, where the stained glass windows of your soul are radiant in both directions.

Dr. Alison Cook

Therapist, coauthor of Boundaries for Your Soul, author of I Shouldn't Feel This Way, and host of The Best of You podcast

INTRODUCTION

THE BETTER STORY

*We who follow Jesus are working in wounds,
working with wounds, and working through wounds.*

WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

TWENTY YEARS AGO, I WAS FIRED.

After six years as a pastor on staff at the church where my daughters were baptized, where deep friendships were formed, where I founded a counseling center, and where I walked people through the dark nights of their lives, I was thrust into my very own dark night.

If I were you, I'd want the dirty details. Why was I so unceremoniously fired? Who was to blame? What was the fallout?

This isn't that book.

Because the thing is, what happened *to* me isn't as important as what happened *within* me in those months and years after. On the outside, I appeared resilient; people told me I was

“strong,” that I seemed to be bearing it all well, even praising the way our family was able to graciously pivot and cobble together an income in the aftermath. It appeared that I took it all in stride: I was fine—*better*, even—for the experience.

But on the inside, I stewed and stormed, feeling a constant churn that left me with daily stomach pain and heartburn, simmering anger and searing shame. Vital and happy just months before, I now hardly recognized myself, so consumed was I by the injustice of it all. I'd write and delete emails by the dozen, the rage welling up within me in great waves. I'd obsess about disappointing others, terrified of being rejected again. I'd nurse a constant nagging anxiety. In an attempt to rebuild my sense of worth, I'd work to the point of exhaustion.

I wondered: Were people quietly talking about me behind the scenes? Would the shame follow me wherever I worked or moved to? Did anyone care about what really happened? Was there anyone who'd have my back?

I felt utterly alone.

Overwhelmed by the deafening silence of so many people I had once considered friends, fear swallowed me—fear that I'd run into a leader from the church at a grocery store, fear that those who fired me would sabotage my chances for future jobs, even fear that I would be caught in the truth that maybe I wasn't as fine as I appeared. I did all that I could to ignore the festering wound growing within me.

And yet it continued to chafe.

For five years, I couldn't admit my overwhelm, my powerlessness, my loneliness. Our family moved to a neighboring

town, I worked several jobs, I kept myself busy trying to keep it all together, trying to keep the pain of my loss away. The mostly unprocessed shame, anger, and grief continued to simmer within, my body tense and vigilant, defenses always up, fearing I'd again be hurt. "Something deep inside of you has already tightened up," Henri Nouwen once wrote, musing on our tendency to self-protect. "Watch out, plan your tactics, and hold your weapons in readiness."¹ And indeed, my body was postured for the possibility of more pain. Insulated with activity and thick layers of self-protective defenses, I lived chronically disconnected from any real source of care or love.

I wasn't myself, and somewhere deep down, I knew it.



We're all prone to do this, no matter the extent of harm or hurt. We toss and turn at night, remembering and even rehearsing what happened over and over again, its pain palpable. The storms within churn constantly. The thick fog doesn't let the light through. We may go for months or years fixated on the past, even trying to rectify the wrong—and then, we learn the survival skills to get by.

In our effort to pursue justice for what happened *to* us, we begin to hinder any chance at healing what's within. We cope alone, in isolation. We ignore our pain. We suppress our agonizing emotions. We disregard core needs. We distance ourselves from others. We normalize our grumpiness and our shame, our lonely and abandoned feelings, our numerous numbing tactics,

our simmering anger. We normalize distracting ourselves from the everyday ache that haunts us, content to scroll through our phones with buzzing envy, looking for some dopamine hit of pseudo connection. Eventually, we lose touch with ourselves. We succumb to a sense of dulled desire. We stop noticing that we feel out of sorts a lot of the time. Even our faith feels dry, relegated to simply going through the motions.

There are a hundred reasons why we choose to cope instead of confront this ache—this *disconnection*—inside us. In the wake of being fired, I rehearsed a litany of reasons why I was just fine, why I, of all people, didn't need help, didn't need to reach out for care. I've said some of them, and in my counseling practice, I've heard them all:

- Far worse things have happened to others.
- It's not as bad as I think.
- I don't have time for arduous introspection.
- I can deal with this on my own.
- I just need to be more positive.
- God wants me to focus on others, not myself.
- I'm just the way I am. It's my personality.
- People don't really change.
- I'm strong, and I've gotten through harder things.
- If I look into my past, I'll just open up a whole can of worms.

Left unchecked, this inner sense of alienation eats away at the core of who we are, wreaking havoc on our relationships

with others and with God. At worst, it's *traumatic* to our hearts, bodies, and souls, leaving behind a hidden wound that can't heal without intentional care.

Yes, it can be traumatic, indeed. "Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering," psychologist Peter A. Levine writes.² And while the word *traumatic* is undoubtedly misused by those who call their team's Super Bowl loss or a phone dropped in the toilet traumatic, many of us who do the work of caring for souls believe that we don't name the ill effects of trauma in our lives quite enough. Because at the heart of trauma lies profound disconnection.

And disconnection is a story as old as time itself.



I still remember the dark and damp church classroom on Long Island, New York, where I'd see the epic Bible stories come to life on flannel board. The vivid greens, ocean blues, and brilliant yellows provided the landscape backdrop to flannel figures of the great heroes of Scripture. Noah smiling atop his boat (even as people drown in the waters below). Abraham brimming with pride before his son (even as his knife lies nearby). Ruth and Naomi cheerfully walking side by side (even as the stench of death lingers). Adam and Eve standing together, rosy-cheeked grins on their faces, grass skirts covering their privates (even as they vigilantly scan to see if God is coming). All flannelgraph images that fail to convey just how traumatic a life exiled from God and ourselves can be.

The Bible may begin in connection, just like your story and mine, but the tides quickly turn; by the third chapter, rupture manifests in shame and exile—a profound disconnection. The full account of Genesis 3 is too brutal to fit into that flannel-graph faith; Adam and Eve may be filled with shame and hidden behind fig leaves according to the ancient story, but on the flannel board they're posing with smiles on their faces, a snake grinning nearby.

What's more, I was taught that Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree and going into hiding was the *central* story of how everything went wrong in the world, even what was wrong with me to the core. And God's anger proves it.

Where are you? God asks, fuming from the ears.

Who told you? God demands to know, finger pointed at Adam and Eve.

Have you eaten from the tree? God compels them to answer, forcing them—and us—from the Garden forever.

The heading at the top of that third chapter of Scripture—“The Fall.”

Indeed, we return to the story time and again because it resonates so deeply with what's within us, with *our* story, even who we suppose God is. It's a story that begins in intimate union and communion but too quickly turns to shame and alienation. It's a story of disconnection from ourselves, disconnection from

each other, disconnection from our bodies, disconnection from God. The serpent's lie inflicts a wound, shattering trust and manifesting in a frantic search for a self-remedy in the fruit of the tree. This primal wound—this traumatic estrangement—continues to whisper within us the awful lie that God can't be trusted, that we're on our own, that our only hope is in grasping for the fruit, the enticing elixir that will quell the ache.³ Yet as a longtime pastor and therapist—one who knows too well how such trauma can pervade a life—I've learned to read the story in Genesis 3 through a different lens. Yes, it's a story that reveals how we cope in ways that self-protect and sabotage. Yes, it's a story that reveals how we experience profound disconnection—with each other, with God, even with ourselves. Flannel boards can't cover up the facts.

But what if it is also a better story than we've been told, a story that shows us how we can acknowledge what's happened to us *while also* compassionately healing the wounds left behind? What if God's response to us is, in fact, kinder than we imagined?

Even as Adam and Eve are doused in shame, riddled with anxiety, and hidden behind fig leaves, God shows up in compassion and with curiosity, reconnecting even amidst the radical rupture, his voice a homing beacon. And the questions God poses hold the possibility for healing what's within us, for us to become ourselves again.

Where are you? God asks with heartache, longing to find us.

Who told you? God asks with compassion, curiously pursuing the story.

Have you eaten from the tree? God asks with gentleness, tenderly bringing our eyes to where we've chosen to cope—to numb, to soothe, to avoid—instead of abiding in his care and compassion.

Indeed, that's a much better story—a more hopeful story than the flannel boards ever revealed. If we dared to read it this way, perhaps we'd reimagine a better heading than “The Fall” at the top of the chapter—“God Longs for Us Even When We're Lost.” Or perhaps more simply, “Found.”

You see, these core questions provide a path to our true healing. Not a surface-level healing that looks good on the outside, but the healing of each of our souls, the deepest place within us. These questions invite us to come home to ourselves when we're wounded, weary, and wandering. As God says later through the prophet Isaiah, even after Israel suffers its own profound trauma and engages its own addictive strategies, “In returning and rest is your salvation” (Isaiah 30:15).



In this book, we'll take these three questions, one by one, in three parts, framing our journey together, our path to greater healing forged by God's pursuit. As you're asked to attend to the healing within you, you'll learn how to consider your own

wounds, to acknowledge the possibility of a disconnection within that is keeping you stuck and blocking the path to joy and flourishing. You'll then be invited to discover real rest and renewal as you reconnect with God, others, and yourself.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find additional resources, reflection questions, and next steps to practice. As you read, some of what I say may stir discomfort or raise questions, prompting a bit of internal resistance or even some confusion. But, as you are able, continue on. Remain curious. Come home to yourself and to God, and to a conversation within that your heart has needed for a long, long time.

God's kindness meets us right where we are, and God wants us to become curious about what's happening within, in our "inmost being" (Proverbs 20:27). "Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness," physician and trauma expert Gabor Maté writes.⁴ God longs to be *your* empathetic witness, to attend to the wounds within you, to reconnect with you, to help you return to yourself. He has—quite literally—designed you to be known.

I get it if you're just not sure. Maybe you've been languishing in disconnection for so long that your desire is dulled. Maybe numbing is easier. Maybe this just feels too complicated. For moments like this, the wise novelist and nonfiction writer Anne Lamott has some modest advice. She counsels you to offer up to God a one-word prayer: "Help!" Lamott says that this is the simplest and most authentic prayer you can pray.⁵ For a long and lonely season, it was the only real prayer I could muster.

Yes, it may feel like too much. It may even feel like it's too late. You may look back over the years, wondering where the time has gone. You may even look at some of the hurt you've endured and inflicted, wondering whether it's worth crying out for help. Whether it's worth going on this journey.

It's worth it. You're worth it.

PART 1

WHERE

Coming Home to Ourselves, Befriending Our Pain,

ARE

and Attending to Its Imprint Within

YOU?

WHERE AM I?

Awakening to Our Disconnection

We all long for [Eden], and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of "exile."

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

"I'M JUST NOT MYSELF," Rebekah tells me, grabbing a pillow on my office couch and pulling it toward her body. By all accounts, she should be happy. Or so she thinks. Rebekah and her husband live with their three young children in a newer home, they drive nice cars, and they take fun family vacations. She serves as a deacon at a church they love. She is the first person people call for parenting or budgeting tips, the first person people want to talk to at social functions. She is living the life she dreamed of, the life her teenage self thought she wanted.

Except, somehow, it doesn't feel like the dream she thought it would. "I should be grateful," she says, breaking eye contact with me for a moment as she looks out my window, her head shaking no, her face revealing hints of disgust. She tells me that when she

scrolls through social media, she feels a vague ache as she clicks on photos of other women her age—some who've started businesses, others who've written a book or refinished a dresser or gone back to school for a graduate degree. Scrolling is soothing, for a time, but it eventually leaves her even more dissatisfied.

For a while, she tried to make sense of her discontentment through the latest personality tests and various self-help tools. She couldn't pinpoint when it had happened; she just knew she'd lost a sense of vitality and hope. Did she need therapy? A spiritual director? Maybe just a few days by herself? She wasn't sure. But she longed to find her way back home, to herself, to God, to a life of fullness and flourishing. "This is all just so typical of your Enneagram type," a friend insisted, handing her a new book to read. "I wouldn't worry about it. Just try to be more present. Start a gratitude journal or something!"¹ But her friend's advice didn't help, and the ache didn't abate. By day, the kids' routines would keep her busy—until that hour when the house would be completely quiet, the two oldest at school and the youngest napping. In the quiet her intrusive and often self-critical thoughts would get loudest, muted only with a bit too much food or drink in the evenings.

Unable to put her finger on the root of the void she felt, she doubled down, committed to embodying the perfect picture of her life she had sold to the world. She signed up for more events at church; she posted more pictures of her family on Instagram, all smiles and adventure; she picked up a couple more self-improvement books for her nightstand, just for good measure.

But in the therapy room with me, the facade breaks, if only

for an instant. Showing me a picture of her daughters, she tears up. “They’re everything to me, and yet a part of me wants to disappear from the world. What kind of mom would think that?” Rebekah feels completely lost, unable to enjoy the life she had so carefully curated, overshadowed by sinking shame: What is wrong with her that this isn’t enough? And what does it mean about *her* worth as a mom, as a wife, as a woman?

East of Eden

Perhaps you, like Rebekah, feel like something is missing or off within you or your relationships. Maybe you, like so many of us, have scrolled in search of it, or self-soothed in ways that elicit shame. You’ve looked for it in the gym. Or in a bit of flirtation with a coworker. Or perhaps the wearying search for it has left you hopeless, resigned to never finding what you’d hoped for. Your heart aches as you recall a time when you felt more alive, connected, and free. *Where am I?* you wonder. *And how did I get here?*

We’re tossed amidst the storms of life and mired in the fog, and yet we’ve been conditioned to ignore our struggle, trained to smile and say, “Everything’s fine.” I’ve long wondered if the sanitized flannelgraph storytelling of our youth subtly communicated to our souls that we, too, need to button ourselves up, gloss over the hard stuff, and pretend we’re living our best life in Eden, even when we’re still faced with the heartache of exile.

Too often, we’re sold cheap, three-step plans to the happy life, asked to believe in the power of positive thinking rather

than invited to pray potent laments. Not long ago I sat for a week of intensive therapy with Jeff and Johanna, a couple who'd birthed a stillborn baby years before. They'd known for a couple of weeks that their daughter had died in utero before Johanna went into labor. "I wanted to scream," she said. "It felt like God was playing a cruel joke on us." But the hospital chaplain who visited them wanted to tidy up the story, offering a biblical rejoinder: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NASB). Soon after, their pastor reiterated this, even telling them that God orchestrated all of this for their good.

After her husband, Jeff, heard this advice, he told me that he "walked away feeling a bit crazy, like, I couldn't be angry, I had to be grateful, even amidst what felt like a senseless death." The couple couldn't bear the disorientation, the vast canyon of ache between the pastor's answer and their reality. So their pain went underground. Johanna never did scream. Instead, she shut herself off from her honest emotions, relegating her heartache to the shadows, believing this to be the way of faith.

Neither one allowed themselves to feel grief or anger for a decade. Jeff became a workaholic, busy from the moment he got out of bed. Old addictions reared up as he became more and more cut off from himself and his own feelings, let alone Johanna's. She became emotionally numb, lost in a fog. Depression would wax and wane, but even on her best days, life seemed like an endless slog.

On the outside, Jeff and Johanna lived like a contented Christian couple, full participants in the life of their church.

But on the inside, utter disorientation and disconnection, even despair, ravaged whatever joy they had left.

I wonder what would've been different for Jeff and Johanna in the wake of their loss, or for Rebekah in the midst of her dissatisfaction, if instead of pushing away their pain they had learned to acknowledge it? What if God was inviting them to name how far from Eden they felt? How far from themselves they felt?

Navigating through the Fog

The morning temperature was 46 degrees, and the summer San Francisco fog was thick at 7 a.m. as I started my car for the drive to my therapist's office in Marin County. As I made my way north, I could hardly see the stoplights in front of me or the verdant greens of Golden Gate Park around me, an apt metaphor for how disoriented and disconnected from myself I felt in my second year back in pastoral ministry.

Now years after being fired, I lived in a new city and worked at a vibrant church that embraced me wholeheartedly, offering me every opportunity to thrive. But my body remembered what had happened six years prior. Within, a boiling cauldron of shame, self-doubt, fear, vigilance, anger, and unresolved grief threatened to bubble over. I could hardly remember the joy I once felt in the same work. And I worried about my growing reliance on ways of coping that only stirred the simmering pot within.

I wasn't myself, and I knew it. Like Rebekah, Jeff, and Johanna, I'd lost a sense of vitality. I was wandering in inner exile. I sought Eden in a new geography and in a fierce

commitment to my work, proving myself indispensable and securing my sense of worth in the admiration of my colleagues and congregation. But the harder I tried, the further from home I felt. The further from myself I felt. And the God I'd commend to others in teachings and talks felt a million miles away too.

Every Tuesday morning, I'd navigate the labyrinthine drive north to my therapist's office, crossing the Golden Gate Bridge and winding my way through the Rainbow Tunnel, the fog finally dissipating before me to reveal Mount Tam in the distance. And this, too, felt like a metaphor for the slow work of returning to myself and rediscovering joy. It was on this foggy commute when I first heard the gentle whisper of God: "Where are you, Chuck?" The whisper was a homing beacon that awakened longing within me. I simply hadn't realized how exiled we could become from ourselves, from each other, and from God.

1,185 chapters

The Bible begins in Eden, a word that means "delight." The story begins in joy, in goodness, in connection. This is God's first home for us, and its memory abides deep within. But by chapter 3, disorientation, division, disorder, and disharmony make their appearance. We find a slithering serpent with lies on his tongue, his deceit dealing a blow to Adam and Eve's hearts, shattering trust and rupturing connection. Adam and Eve are enjoying union and communion with God and each other before the serpent slithers along.

His question is subtle, seeding their hearts with doubt and shame. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree

in the garden?” (Genesis 3:1). Imagine Adam and Eve’s confusion. In a moment, the serpent twists the only script they have ever known, calling into question God’s goodness, stirring doubt about their worth and belonging. *Can I trust God? Is God holding back something that I need, a fruit that will make my life better? Am I missing something?* As Sean Gladding writes, “The subtle serpent taps into our deepest anxiety as humans: the fear that what I have, no matter how good it may be, is not enough. The haunting suspicion that someone else has it better than me. That someone else *is* better than me. So, not only do I not have enough, I am not enough. I am less than.”²

The serpent’s lies shatter shalom and usher in traumatic disconnection, the disorder that captures headlines from then on:

Deceit
 Shame
 Blame-shifting
 Enmity
 Alienation
 Murder
 Adultery
 Rape
 Rivalry
 Genocide
 Heartache
 Betrayal
 Incest
 Homelessness

And that's just in the first five books of the Bible!

This upheaval continues for 1,185 chapters before Jesus returns to make his ultimate home among us in Revelation 21 and 22. That's 1,185 chapters squeezed between two at the beginning and two at the end.

These 1,185 unavoidable chapters represent the story of our lives, the everyday ache you and I know east of Eden.

Through much of Scripture, the lived experience of God's people involved alienation and exile. Their strategies for coping were devastating.

My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

JEREMIAH 2:13

And their heartache—every time they remembered home—
was palpable:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

PSALM 137:1

This story places each of us in a tale of trauma and disconnection that no one is immune to.

Life amidst the 1,185 chapters we live within invites us to

reckon with the bitter realities we've avoided, including the depths of our disconnection from ourselves, from each other, and from God. Curt Thompson writes, "We are all born out of preludes of beauty and tragedy, each of us with our own ratio of both."³ And while the beauty compels us to a life of restored relationship, the tragedy can't be ignored.

Attuning to the Healing Within

People who've seen me for soul care over the years know that I sometimes begin a session with a simple question: "Where do you find yourself today?" The question varies and shifts, but it's an echo of that very first question God asks in Genesis 3. It's an invitation to become curious about what's happening within. It's an invitation to return and retune, to awaken to the ancient whisper of love amidst the ache of alienation.

Some will tell me that it's been a good week, but after a bit of reflection, they recognize that they've merely been distracted from what's been simmering within. Others might share that they just don't know, that life has been a blur, that they're not entirely sure where they are or what's stirring inside of them. Still others have not had time to consider where they are because they've been attending to everyone and everything around them. Many of us don't know how lost we are. We've become habituated to a life of disconnection. We've developed a tragic case of amnesia, forgetting our original goodness and glory, far from home and without a map to guide us.

Indeed, it's true that we're disconnected, in part, because

we've walled ourselves off to what's happening within. But it's also the case that we've lost track of who we were created to be, our divine design, God's unique image within us with its possibility for fullness and flourishing in our lives.

And to understand how we've lost track of ourselves, we need to be reminded of where we began.

The Bible begins in connection, two chapters offering a glimpse of the glorious joy and intimacy God enjoyed with Adam and Eve. This life of goodness, this overflow of divine love, this is what we were made for, the imprint of God's image deeper than any traumatic imprint we'll ever encounter. To bear the image of God (Genesis 1:27) is to experience, at your core, an irrevocable inheritance of worth, belonging, and purpose.⁴

To live freely and fully from here is to know that you were created for deep *worth*—that you've been uniquely designed for dignity, that God delights in you, that you are enough, at your core.⁵ It is to know that you were created for *belonging*—God the Trinity creates you for union and communion, for interdependence and intimacy with God, each other, and creation. And it is to know that you are created for *purpose*—stamped with God's image, which means that wherever you go, you go in the name of God, called by God, as an ambassador of God's shalom. This is your divine imprint, your deepest core, your impermeable identity, your irrevocable gift. This is the better and more hopeful story you've been designed for.

The Bible begins here, and this is where your story begins too. God has always longed to walk with you, even to make his home within you, closer to you than you are to yourself,

as St. Augustine once said.⁶ He's always wanted more for you than what you too often settle for. And our age-old dilemma is rooted in our inability to trust this goodness. It all goes back to that ancient tale.

"Every man has forgotten who he is," wrote the great English writer and philosopher G. K. Chesterton. "We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are."⁷ Rebekah, Johanna, and Jeff forgot. And so did I. Sometimes the fog is so thick and the storms so intense that we lose our bearings. That's what the trauma of life within these 1,185 chapters can do.

But God goes looking, longing for us to come home.

Amidst Adam and Eve's ruptured relationship, God's first move is toward reconnection. "Where are you?" comes a voice, kind and longing.

At first glance, the question might seem silly to you. Of course, God knows where Adam and Eve are. But perhaps God wants them to recognize how hidden they are and how far they've ventured away. Perhaps God hopes they'll awaken with a new curiosity and maybe even a new hunger for home. And perhaps God wants the same for you.

God goes out looking for you, like any parent of one who is lost, like a compassionate father heartsick for his prodigal child. God's kind "Where are you?" invites you to pay attention to what's happening within, to attend to the storms that churn and the fog that dulls, disorienting and disconnecting you. And this requires courage. Too many of us grew up being taught to evade and avoid our ache, to be strong, to suffer alone. Too

many of us are offered a flannelgraph faith story that minimizes the pain, that ignores our sense of alienation from ourselves and one another, that even cheapens the reality of God's compassion in our profound need. But God's "Where are you?" also invites each of us to remember who we are, at our core.

"The world is not served by those who are alienated from themselves and others, nor by those who in their pain bring pain to others," writes psychoanalyst James Hollis.⁸ And yet many of us remain alienated for far too long. We lose track of how long because we're so busy, distracted, preoccupied, far from God and far from ourselves. We need to be reminded of a better story—that home is nearer than we imagine, that God is whispering from within, "Where are you?"

The Practice of Coming Home to Yourself

Many people admire Rebekah because she is so capable; as we talk, she recognizes that she'd been subtly trained in the ways of independence since she was very young. "No one told me I was on my own, but I knew I was," she says. Left alone for hours each day with younger siblings, she learned to cook, even do laundry. Later, she married a man who was aloof and distant himself, a recipe for a lonely life and the stirrings of despair. She feels adrift, longing for someone to really see her and, in so doing, help her find and validate her truest self.

Perhaps you, too, have been traveling a long, lonely road with too little presence and insufficient resources. You've been tugged by the old voices, taxed by too many obligations. You've

pushed hard, trying to be strong. You've too often felt like you've had to keep it together, for yourself, for others who count on you.

You don't have to tread the impossible terrain alone anymore. It's time to long for more. It's time to unburden yourself. It's time to come home. To come to yourself.

What sounds a bit like a modern therapeutic cliché is actually ancient wisdom. St. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century North African bishop, wrote: "Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth."⁹ And another revered saint of the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote that God "restored to me the self that I had lost."¹⁰ They heeded the homing beacon of God's kind voice calling them home, back to themselves. And so can you.

They, and many other saints, poets, psychologists, and sages through the centuries, believed that you and I get lost at times. The good life—even life in God—is already ours, but we go looking elsewhere, eventually losing not just God but ourselves in the process. "And where was I when I was seeking you?" Augustine writes. "You were before me, but I had gone away even from myself; nor did I find myself, how much less you!"¹¹

Augustine's questions are ours, too. *Where am I?* We can go on for years ignoring our inner ache, numbing ourselves with Netflix, perfecting ourselves to the point of exhaustion, all the while out of touch with ourselves, alone in our suffering. We can go on for years emotionally and spiritually malnourished, out of tune with the ancient song of worth, belonging, and purpose being sung over us. As one pastor said four centuries

ago, “There are some men and women that have lived forty or fifty years in the world, and have scarce had one hour’s discourse with their own hearts all that while.”¹²

“Our own depths frighten us!” Ronald Rolheiser writes. “And so we stall, distract ourselves, drug the pain, party and travel, stay busy, try this and that, cling to people and moments, junk up the surface of our lives, and find any and every excuse to avoid being alone and having to face ourselves. We are too frightened to travel inward. But we pay a price for that, a high one: superficiality and shallowness. So long as we avoid the painful journey inward, to the depths of our caverns, we live at the surface.”¹³

We know today that the numbing distraction that Rolheiser names is pervasive, but we’ve normalized it. We seldom wonder what more might be rumbling within our subterranean layers. We relegate our more painful emotions and experiences to the shadows. But, as we’ve seen, Rebekah’s avoidance of her inner ache along with Johanna and Jeff’s avoidance of grief disconnected them from vital parts of themselves. After being fired, I spent years working tirelessly to never, ever have to relive the shame and pain, which left me suffering alone, profoundly disconnected. And I’ll be honest, the process of coming home to myself was painful. How do you return to a self you really don’t like?

Physician and trauma expert Gabor Maté asks, “Why do we get disconnected? Because it is too painful to be ourselves.”¹⁴ And when you choose to turn from what happened to you to what’s happening within you, it’s likely you’ll experience some

inner resistance. You've been living disconnected for a reason. You were not born separated from yourself, and it's not your native state of living and thriving. That's why it's going to be important to explore how and why you've become disconnected. And it's going to be vital that we chart a course toward home, where reconnection, reunion, and restoration are possible.

Sandhill cranes, monarch butterflies, sea turtles, and many more of God's wondrous creatures have a homing instinct. And so do you. Coming home to yourself—"homing" for short—is a part of the divine design. It's probably why so many of our favorite stories in Scripture are homecoming stories.

God loves to celebrate a return. The Prodigal Son was stuck in his own self-contempt, too, feeling like he was "no longer worthy to be called . . . son" (Luke 15:19), prepared to ask his father for a servant's role. But just as God went out to Adam and Eve, so the father runs to his lost son to celebrate his return:

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him
and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his
son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

LUKE 15:20

And so God runs to you, to show you compassion, to offer you the ring, the robe, the sandals, and the feast, all reminders of your irrevocable, image-bearing inheritance. All reminders of your deep worth, belonging, and purpose. All beckoning you home. Can you imagine it?

Would you open yourself to the possibility that God longs

to meet you in whatever experience of disconnection you know? That God longs to celebrate your return? That God longs to call you to a life of freedom and flourishing? If so, there's a journey ahead waiting for you.

RESOURCES

Throughout the book, recommended books are offered as trusted wells of wisdom from which you can draw even deeper resources for your ongoing journey.

- Alison Cook, *The Best of You: Break Free from Painful Patterns, Mend Your Past, and Discover Your True Self in God*
- Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*
- Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*
- Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey*

Reflection

Throughout the book, these reflections are offered as something you can do on your own, with a friend, or within a small circle of trusted companions.

1. Is there a particular story in this chapter that resonated with you? A sentence (or two) that describes your current experience? If so, write it down and/or share it with someone you trust. Spend some time reflecting on what

WHERE AM I?

stood out to you and what invitation you might sense emerging from this recognition.

2. Did you sense any inner resistance to anything you read? If so, can you track it to a particular thought or theme? Is this something that you can sit with, pay attention to, even share with someone else?
3. We all experience some form of disconnection. What is one unique characteristic of disconnection in your life? And how might you articulate your desire for reconnection and flourishing? What would that look like? What would your inner experience be like? How would your relationships look different after reconnection?
4. How does it feel to consider your God-created worth, belonging, and purpose as evidence of your image-bearing inheritance? What is your inner experience of each of these? What do you need to be reminded of most?

Practice: Come Home to Yourself

Throughout the book, these practices will build upon one another, at times with some overlap and expansion so that you can better experience a growing healing and wholeness.

Intentional breathing

When we're disconnected, we're not grounded—in our breath, in our bodies. Ancient Christians understood this embodied

reality and believed the breath to be an access point to God, a place of reconnection. God breathed life into us in Eden (Genesis 2:7), and when the storms of life overwhelm us and the fog devours us, our breathing often becomes shallow. We lose our connection to home. We may even hold our breath. So when we find our way back to our breath, that can also help us find our way back to ourselves, even to God. When you're ready, take some time to breathe in order to reconnect with yourself, with your body, and with God.

It can be helpful to find a quiet space where you can sit down with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight. Take a long, deep breath—in through your nose—then hold it for a few seconds before exhaling slowly through your mouth (as if you're fogging a mirror in front of you, even exhaling audibly with a *haaahhhhhhh*). At the end of your exhale, pause before beginning again. Try this for five to ten minutes at first.

Connecting a prayer to your breathing

There are a variety of prayers you can connect to your breathing exercise as you experience both greater grounding and a return to yourself. I will share two below.

The first is from Psalm 46:10. See if you can't hear the whisper of God's "Where are you?" as you return and reconnect:

Be still (*in-breath*)
and know (*out-breath*)
that I (*in-breath*)
am God (*out-breath*)

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The second is a prayer of St. Patrick dating back to AD 433. This adaptation is a favorite for me because it offers both a spiritual and physical sense of God's presence to you, around you, and within you:

Christ with me (*in-breath*)
Christ before me (*out-breath*)
Christ behind me (*in-breath*)
Christ in me (*out-breath*)
Christ beneath me (*in-breath*)
Christ above me (*out-breath*)
Christ on my right (*in-breath*)
Christ on my left (*out-breath*)
Christ when I lie down (*in-breath*)
Christ when I sit down (*out-breath*)
Christ when I arise (*in-breath*)
Christ in everyone I meet (*out-breath*)