

foreword

*I like to think of the long-term care of tending to
the depths of our souls as tending to a garden.*

A. C. SEIPLE

A. C. has become a treasured friend, not least because we share a common passion.

We're passionate about the exquisite intersections of Scripture and spirituality, and we're enlivened in our exploration of the dance between theology and therapy.

What I admire so much about A. C. is that with the grace of a dancer moving between light and shadow, she steps effortlessly between Scripture and silence, between theology's depths and the soul's tender wounds, weaving contemplation and therapy into a single, sacred rhythm.

Ironically, the sacred rhythm she commends begins with slowing down.

Slowing down. Did you hear that?

Sometimes it's hard when everything around you seems to be crying out, "You've got to do more, to be more!" Sometimes it's hard when even the books that are supposed to help simply apply more pressure, making demands of you that feel exhausting.

No, friends, this isn't one of those books that will try to convince you to exert more effort to get the results you want. Those are a dime a dozen on the self-help bookshelves.

Instead, A. C.'s invitation—seen in the three movements of her book—is to *slow down*, *tune in*, and *tend to*. Tune in and tend to what? *The lavish garden that is your own deepest being.*

Perhaps that lovely metaphor rings a bell. Five hundred years ago, another extraordinary woman reflected on the human soul as a garden that brings God great joy. St. Teresa of Ávila was a reformer in a day when religion had become ritualized; when life in God had become dull, dour, and dutiful; when powerful priests and bullying bishops were more interested in conquering and colonizing than in cultivating the garden of the soul.

Even amidst her own traumatic story, Teresa wrote a deeply personal work, *The Interior Castle*, which offers a revolutionary and healing invitation: God is at the very center of your being, offering you an opportunity to venture within, into a land of goodness and grounding, rest and refreshment. Her book, which she started writing all the way back in 1577, would be such a profound and lasting work of transformation and hope that the Catholic Church would recognize Teresa as the first-ever female “Doctor of the Church.”

Today, Teresa’s ancient vision of tending to the “garden in which the Beloved takes great delight”¹ is embodied in A. C.’s exceptional work. Perhaps the highest compliment I can give A. C. is that she is our Teresa for today. She is a physician of the soul, a gentle guide into the most sublime secrets of human flourishing.

A. C.’s garden-tending vision is not limited to the soul, however, but extends to psyche, soma, and story. As she writes, her book is a call to discover:

- the cognitive strands of our mind: our thinking patterns and the assumptions we hold, along with the ways these shape our perspective of the world around us;
- the somatic strands of our body: our bodily sensations and states, all the way down to the autonomic nervous system that is always running beneath our conscious awareness;
- the spiritual strands of our soul: the dynamics in our relationship with God, the different spiritual seasons we walk through, and the state of our soul; and

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- the narrative strands of our story: the stages of development and events we have lived through that have shaped us, including the ways we carry the past with us in the present.

A. C. wants to see you flourish at your depths, in every facet of your being.

“Every facet of your entire embodied being is sacred,” A. C. writes, “no matter how any of those strands has been forgotten or dismissed.”

Everything is sacred. Every facet.

Can you imagine it? I know, it’s hard.

The wounds within sometimes feel like they run deeper than anything else. The ache never quite abates. Sometimes we wonder if there is anything good within. Anything worthy. Anything redeemable.

In moments like this, we need prophets like St. Teresa, who see more deeply than we do. We need prophets like Jeremiah, whose ancient invitation was for a weary and wandering people longing for rest long, long ago: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will” (Jeremiah 6:16).

And we need a prophet like A. C., who sees you and me at our depths, bearing witness to profound goodness, calling us to courageous hope.

Dear reader, take a chance on the possibility that you really are a garden in which God takes great delight. And take this journey of slowing down, tuning in, and tending to guided by a woman of profound wisdom, whose roots run deep.

Chuck DeGroat, PhD, LPC

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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before you begin

For most of my life, I went about my days rushing around on autopilot. And this seemed to work just fine, apart from the fact that it didn't.

I wanted to get rid of the nearly constant current of anxiety I felt inside, but no matter what I did, it always seemed to come back. *Why didn't this knot in my gut catch the hint that it wasn't welcome here?*

I longed to find restful spaces to balance out the always-hurried and ever-busy days I pushed through. But even when I did slow down to rest, my mind kept moving a mile a minute. *Why couldn't I calm my thoughts and press into peace?*

I hated the person I became when I'd get caught up in blind frustration or defensiveness. I wanted to handle conflict differently, but under enough pressure, I always seemed to break. *Who was this version of me who would take over under stress?*

No matter how hard I tried not to be bothered by the noise in my internal world, something inside seemed to be perpetually causing problems. There was some sort of disconnect between the person I wanted to be and what stirred within, and rushing around on autopilot wasn't helping me bridge the two. Frustrated with myself, I'd wonder what was wrong with me. *Did I need to just pray harder? Put mind over matter? Get more therapy to do a better job changing my thoughts?*

Whether it's been explicit or unspoken, many of us have been taught to tune out feedback from our body, emotions that don't feel good, and

the parts of ourselves we believe complicate our life—the facets inside that can feel like they're working against us.

Maybe we wish we could simply feel our feelings less, especially those that make us uncomfortable, but no matter what we do, we can't silence them.

Maybe we're sick of living in fear and want to live more boldly, but our feet seem to be frozen, unable to move us where we want to go.

Maybe we keep trying to grow in our faith, but any mention of God prompts a surge of anxiety inside, leaving us swirling in shame.

In these ways—and so many more—what stirs beneath the surface can all too easily feel like a problem, like something to tune out or get rid of.

But what if I told you that what's happening inside of us isn't necessarily trying to complicate our life? And what if the peace, healing, and change we most long for might come not from tuning out what feels like problematic noise but, instead, from slowing down and listening in?

When we've been conditioned to ignore what's stirring beneath the surface, we've also often been taught to prioritize the functioning of our thinking brain—reducing ourselves to just one sliver of who we are.

Here's the thing though: *We are so much more than our thinking brain.*¹ We are a multifaceted tapestry of heart, mind, body, soul, and more—all *wrapped up together in one unified and embodied being.* And what stirs within has something to tell us, something to say. When we slow down and learn to tune in and tend toward what's happening inside, we can create connections between our thinking brain and all the other strands inside us. And once we start to connect with the entirety of our created being, we can begin to build bridges where there has been disconnection, waking up the whole of who we are to navigate life in new ways.

This is exactly what we're going to do in the chapters ahead. We'll play with slowing down, getting to know some of the strands of our being that we might not be as familiar with so we can work *with* what's happening inside us, rather than feeling like we're working *against* our own selves. We'll trace the depths of who we are—our heart, mind, body, soul, and more—not dividing ourselves into separate categories, but instead, unifying and anchoring within. And as we connect more

deeply within, we'll explore how we might move differently through life in new kinds of wholehearted—and whole body—ways.

Notes on Therapy and Spirituality

As we explore our internal worlds with therapeutic concepts woven into each chapter, I've attempted to offer language that feels natural and relatable. Whether these clinical frameworks seem oversimplified or too technical at different points, I invite you to first get lost in the stories throughout each chapter, connecting with what resonates at a gut level rather than trying to memorize or make sense of clinical terminology at a head level.²

In case you're curious about how I'll integrate spirituality in this space, I want to let you know what you can expect. I come from a Judeo-Christian faith background and love that the term *psychology* comes from Greek words that mean the "study of the soul."³ I understand the word *soul* to refer to a holistic sense of who we are, and I understand the depths of the soul as our innermost being—which often feels mysteriously intangible yet is intricately connected with the tangible whole of our embodied existence.⁴

As we consider how therapeutic concepts might help us tune in with and tend toward the depths of our being, I will occasionally reference body-centered language that is expressed by ancient voices in the Psalms. I know some readers will be excited to see Scripture integrated in this way, while others will be skeptical or possibly triggered by an interaction with the Bible. My hope is that our engagement with these ancient texts will feel different from what many of us have experienced before.

Rather than using Scripture to induce shame or prescribe what we should do, we'll look at language that names everything from overwhelm and distress to safety—specifically how this is experienced in the body—and openly expresses everything from frustration and disbelief to trust in God. This will create space for us to be exactly where we are, tending to all facets of ourselves, not just the spiritually shiny or have-it-all-together parts of us. As we do this, we will simply notice the psalmists' words, being curious to consider the ways they demonstrate a deep connection with all of the strands of their embodied existence.⁵ We'll also consider

how Scripture depicts God's compassion, along with the embodiment of this compassion in the person of Christ.

If any reference to words from the Bible is triggering—especially if this is related to experiences of spiritual harm or trauma—*please know this book is not intended to try to force you into any kind of religious “shoulds” or spiritual bypassing.* I have seen and experienced Scripture used to harm, and I personally know how deeply wounding this is. My heart is not to press on wounds in a way that does not yet feel safe or that feels overwhelming.⁶ Take or leave what I share in whatever ways you need to. These pages offer you permission to be right where you are every step of the way.

An Invitation

And now, as you turn the page, I encourage you to take curiosity with you as you enter and exit the chapters ahead. This book will invite you to play with a gentle moving pace, holding space for you to be present with your internal world. As you start to slow down, tune in, and tend toward, let yourself curiously notice how the internal shifts you experience might intersect with the world around you. Internal work does not, and cannot, happen in a vacuum. My hope is that these pages will draw you into new and restorative movements that will extend beyond your reading and into your relationships and communities.

May this be a sacred space for every part of you to be seen, held, and nourished in new ways.

Curious and skeptical depths of you, you are welcome here.

Weary and lively depths of you, you are welcome here.

Hurting and hidden depths of you, you are welcome here.

Let's walk together.

Anna Christine Seiple

PART ONE

slow down



slowing down to anchor in

“Your body doesn’t know that you’re safe.”

My therapist’s words jumped out at me as she sat calmly in the chair across from mine. Meredith’s office was bright, filled with natural light from a window that overlooked delicate trees dancing in a breeze.

I had started meeting with Meredith after moving to a new city for graduate school. Each week we would sit together, diving deep into pain that was too much for me to hold alone. In this season, my life felt fragile. More accurately, I felt fragile. Life as I knew it had been unexpectedly shattered a year before the move, and I was still picking up the pieces, trying to rebuild what felt like a mess of rubble around me. Week in and week out, this therapy office was a refuge, a place where I could process and sort out the sticky knots that felt tangled up in my mind.

On this particular day, I was feeling frustrated and stuck. There was some sort of disconnect inside of me that I could not resolve. On the surface, everything in my life seemed fine: I was blissfully dating my future husband, falling deeply in love with his big blue eyes and his tender heart. Beneath the surface, though, I was struggling not to feel consumed by anxiety. There was an unsettledness in my gut that would plunge me

into fear or overwhelm in moments that felt both random and specific, moments when I couldn't think my way out of what I was feeling.

As the tension in my body lifted my stiff shoulders higher, my hands gestured in frustration. I looked at Meredith and said, "I *know* I am not in the past, I *know* this is different. I *know* I'm safe now and in a relationship with a different person. Why am I still getting triggered by every little thing? Why can't I just be calm and feel okay?"

Meredith knew my story and listened with unending empathy. I knew she wouldn't judge me as I exposed the confusion inside me that I didn't know how to make sense of. I expected her to trace the tangled thoughts in my mind, helping me make sense of their origins and why they were still creating problems. My goal was to leave her office feeling more settled in my thinking, with a clearer mind and a calmer headspace.

As she looked at me, I could see that she saw my confusion, frustration, and exhaustion. And even though I didn't understand it then, I now realize she was also seeing something else, something I didn't notice just yet. Instead of explaining psychological theories or trying to help me restructure my thoughts, she held space for the tension of my pain, reflecting back to me what she was seeing.

She spoke gently, saying, "It seems like your brain knows that things in your life are different now, but your body hasn't fully caught up yet. Your body still feels like you're *back there*, even though you're *here* now." Then she paused and calmly stated the words that jumped out at me: "Your body doesn't know that you're safe."

I'll be honest, my automatic reaction was, *What are you even talking about? That doesn't help me at all. Let's get back to the practical stuff so that you can help fix me!* Even though she was speaking English, it was like I was hearing her speak a foreign language. Normally I felt like our conversations were enveloped in the mutual understanding and safety we had cultivated in a year of therapeutic work together. Now, though, instead of feeling in sync, I sensed a disconnect—a disconnect from her words and a disconnect from my body.

For years before this day, my life had been permeated with spiritual disciplines that taught me to focus on everything *but* my body—prioritizing

my thinking brain and behavior instead. In this mindset, my body was simply a means to an end for good words and spiritual disciplines. I wanted to walk closely with God, taking the counsel I was given for my faith seriously, longing for tastes of Eden, the green pastures of Psalm 23, and the warmth of Christ's compassion. And so based on the guidance I received, my brain and behavior became central to my life and my experience of being human.

I read my Bible daily and wrote in my prayer journal. I enjoyed reading through commentaries and Bible studies to learn more about the words I was devouring. I wrote Scripture on note cards and placed them around my house to remind myself of the truth whenever my emotions might tempt my brain to doubt. The way I was encouraged to practice these disciplines taught me to disconnect almost entirely from my body.

When my body was acknowledged, the most common message I received was that it was the epicenter of my sinful nature—what I was told was the core of who I was as a person. Similarly, I was frequently reminded that my heart was deceitful and sick, making emotions dangerous and untrustworthy. And so I tried as hard as I could to take control of my thoughts and behavior, attempting to force myself away from “negative” emotions and move toward what I believed was most good and true—right thinking and right behavior, which was a demonstration of a heart right with God.

As far as I knew, and as hard as I could try, I was doing everything “right,” but still, I felt stuck. Something in the formula I'd been taught wasn't adding up—*there was some sort of disconnect*. And even though Taylor's now infamous words weren't written yet, I was asking myself if the problem was me.

Why couldn't I get it together? Why did something inside me respond in fear or overwhelm when I was supposed to be resting in perfect peace? I was exhausted from riding this loop over and over. I wanted to get unstuck, but I would have absolutely never thought that the relief I was longing for might come from connecting with what was stirring beneath the surface—what was happening in my body.

So when Meredith reflected that my body didn't know I was safe, it felt as bizarre and irrelevant as telling me that the rug on the floor preferred classical music over country. Honestly, it felt made up, a little too "out there" for my comfort. I had no category for talking about my body—or any other person's body—*knowing* or *not knowing* something. What in the world was she talking about?

I wanted Meredith to help me find a solution to what I saw as my biggest problem: *How can I get out of this emotion that I don't want to be feeling?* I didn't realize that she could clearly see the actual problem in front of me: I was out of touch with what was happening inside me, which was precisely why I was experiencing an uncomfortable disconnect between my thinking brain and what was happening in my body.

Mending a Disconnect

I'm curious if you can resonate with not being able to think yourself out of certain emotions, or feeling as though something inside is working against you. Maybe you've also experienced thoughts that won't go away, even when you ignore them. Or maybe you've also felt disconnected from your body or have been encouraged to stay detached from what's happening inside you.

In whatever ways my words might resonate with you, I'd love to share the journey I've walked since that day when I couldn't yet connect with Meredith's words.

This road has taught me that the formation of our souls runs much deeper than our thoughts and behavior alone—that *we are so much more than our thinking brain, and we were created for so much more than rushing—and reacting—through life on autopilot*. And before you wonder if I'm just expressing my opinion, let me share a nerdy fun fact with you. Don't worry, I promise I'll only nerd out for a minute here!

It's easy to go about our lives thinking that our brain is in charge of things, directing our body to take us where we want to go and to complete certain tasks. And while our brain certainly does send signals to our body, there's also a lot of communication sent in the opposite direction.

In fact, 80 percent of communication through our vagus nerve—a significant cranial nerve that extends from our brain stem to our chest and abdomen—flows from the bottom up, body to brain. Said more simply, 80 percent of these signals are sent from our body to our brain, rather than the other way around.¹

In addition to regulating critical functions like our heart rate and breathing, the systems this nerve relates to are connected to everything from the interactions we have with other people, to how we experience stress, to how free we feel to relax and enjoy life—so basically, all the things. And rather than our brain solely dictating what’s happening beneath the surface as we move through everyday life, most of this internal communication starts with our body, which sends signals to our brain.

So, while we might assume that our thinking brain is fully in charge of things, that’s just not how we were created.² And if we want to cultivate holistic growth and formation in our life, working *with* this flow of internal communication—*with* the way we were created—is not only crucial, it is necessary. That’s what this book is about, slowing down to tap into that 80 percent of communication that is sent from the body to the brain so we can work with what’s happening inside, rather than rushing and reacting through life on autopilot in ways that can leave us feeling disconnected and frustrated. As we connect with all that’s stirring within, we’ll explore how this can wake us up to move through life in new ways.

Rather than seeing this as something we need to learn to do, I’d like to suggest it’s something we’ve actually always known how to do—the world around us just makes it all too easy to fall out of touch with what’s happening inside. I’ve seen this play out in front of me more times than I can count in the years that I’ve devoted to being a therapist. Time and time again I’ve savored helping people remember and reconnect with facets of themselves they’ve been disconnected from, so they can move through life in freer, more wholehearted—and whole-bodied—ways.

And more than being a therapist, I’m simply a person who only knows what I will share here as intimately as I do because none of this is solely theory or clinical concepts to me. What we’ll explore in the pages

ahead has intersected with my life in real and tangible ways that have genuinely changed how I move through my own days.

In the yearslong path I've been walking—and continue to walk—countless experiences and encounters with others have stitched together three key elements that will shape our movements here:

Slowing down

Tuning in with the body

Tending to the depths of the soul

While chapters in a book follow a linear path, our journey won't follow a three-step process to go from point A to point B. Instead, we'll walk through stories and play with new movements, taking our time to chew on and trace things we're often too busy to notice. More than a "how-to" that guides you through a specific kind of spiritual formation or therapeutic approach, this book encourages you to take a step back and connect within *before* trying to do any spiritual or therapeutic work. The invitation in these pages is to get comfortable with *being* before getting caught up in *doing*. You can think of the chapters ahead as a mosaic of therapeutic perspectives and contemplative reflections that hold opportunities for you to get out of your head and into your body, anchoring in the whole of who you are. We'll begin by getting curious about what happens when we slow down and create space to tune in with our body—along with the ways this can feel uncomfortable, risky, and even unappealing! As we play with slowing down and tuning in with what's happening inside, we'll explore the world beneath our thinking brain, peeking in to tend to the depths of our soul that might otherwise be forgotten. With every step, we'll move slowly and cautiously, not bulldozing our way to the depths of us, respecting that much of our internal world is often heavily guarded, and for good reason.

Now, I know that an invitation to connect with what's happening inside isn't always an exciting one. Sometimes it feels overwhelming or risky to really tap into what's happening beneath the surface, things we're

keeping there for a reason! Sometimes it simply isn't on the schedule, and we wonder if our life has margin to open up an emotional construction zone. Or maybe it's just foreign, and we're not sold on the idea that this kind of thing is for us. Wherever you are, I invite you to walk with me, one slow, small step at a time, knowing that you can set your own pace along the way.

Woven Together

As we explore the mysterious complexity of our internal world, we'll get in touch with different strands that make up the whole of who we are. While I hesitate to try to define something so wonderfully mysterious into neat and tidy categories—and recognize that any language and categories we use will fail to perfectly express our internal world—I'll list some of these strands below to give you an idea of where we're going. We will explore how each of these is woven together in the fabric of our embodied being, oftentimes in ways we easily tune out as we go about our days.

- The cognitive strands of our mind: our thinking patterns and the assumptions we hold, along with the ways these shape our perspective of the world around us
- The emotional strands of our heart: the ways that we feel and are moved by emotions—both comfortable and uncomfortable—including the emotions we do and don't believe we have permission to feel
- The somatic strands of our body: our bodily sensations and states, all the way down to the autonomic nervous system that is always running beneath our conscious awareness
- The spiritual strands of our soul: the dynamics in our relationship with God, the different spiritual seasons we walk through, and the state of our soul

THE SACRED ART OF SLOWING DOWN

- The narrative strands of our story: the stages of development and events we have lived through that have shaped us, including the ways we carry the past with us in the present



This list is certainly not comprehensive and simply represents one way to observe our multifaceted nature with everyday language that we often use to speak about different facets of our internal world. To help us tune in with these strands, and the ways they are connected to each other, we'll use *parts* language. When I talk about parts of us, I use terms such as *parts*, *facets*, *depths of the soul*, and *strands of our being* interchangeably.³ It's important to note that when I specify a certain part or depth of us, I never use this language to indicate an internal division that separates any facet of us from connection to our whole. Instead, we will restoratively trace the fullness of our embodied being, within which all parts of us are already intertwined together, whether we realize it or not.

More than a piece of our personality or a mindset alone, I understand parts of us to be woven together in and through the strands listed above. I like to think about the image of a tapestry to explore the *both-and* of these distinct facets that are attached together in one whole.

A tapestry is one unified entity, with many different strands that are all connected together, even though this can't clearly be seen on the surface. In one corner of a tapestry, a specific thread, or a combination of two or three threads, might be most visible. In another corner, other threads might be more easily seen, possibly weaving together an entirely different picture. Still, beneath the surface, all the threads are interlaced together into one, with all of them contributing to the tapestry as a whole.

If you cut off or try to remove one thread, the tapestry cannot stay intact. The rest of the threads, along with the whole, will be affected. In these pages, rather than jumping to get rid of seemingly problematic threads of our being, we'll consider whether these strands might actually be part of the whole that was created in God's image—threads that don't need to be cut off, but instead, need tending and care. In this way, we will orient ourselves to restorative work that honors the whole of who we are, rather than taking ourselves apart in ways we were never meant to be unraveled.⁴

Think of a stressed-out version of a person who feels anxiety tightening their shoulders or chest, along with emotions of worry, fast-moving thoughts, and fears based on memories of the past that pop up in the present. And along with each of these threads, maybe they find it difficult to pray or feel settled in their faith. They might view what's happening inside as problems that are complicating their faith or ability to make decisions, like parts of themselves they'd like to get rid of.

Trying to silence or remove what they're experiencing inside might seem to be a helpful idea, but it would likely only be as effective as cutting off the tops of plants while their root systems are still anchored beneath the surface. What I am instead suggesting here is that tuning in with what's stirring within would be most helpful so they can tend to the many threads that seem to be causing problems—which are facets of their being that are actually in need of attunement and tender care.

Rather than trying to chop themselves up to feel less—which will likely only leave them feeling fragmented or defeated when the same problems return—they can instead explore restorative care, which honors the whole person God created. And that's where we're going: getting in touch with the many parts of our multifaceted being to cultivate a restorative wholeness within, one that creates space to engage with the world around us in new and wholehearted ways.

One reason I love using *parts* language to explore what's happening inside is because we naturally talk like this even if we haven't encountered formal parts work in therapy. We might say, "*Part* of me is really excited about my new job, but another *part* of me is nervous I'll somehow mess

it up.” We even have movies like the *Inside Out* films that depict *parts* of us as embodied characters, complete with storylines of internal conflict between emotions like joy, sadness, and anxiety.

And long before these movies were written, the ancient psalmists were using language that reflected the many strands within them. We can hear the raw emotions of these ancient poets as they simultaneously hold *parts* of themselves that are quick to sing in praise, *parts* of themselves that are flattened in lament, and *parts* of themselves that don’t see God anywhere.

If parts language is new to you, I encourage you to be curious about how this concept sits with you. Simply notice what resonates at a gut level and what you don’t feel so sure about. If you are familiar with this language but are used to a specific model of parts work that’s different from my approach here, I encourage you to be curious about how your internal system responds to those distinctions.

As we trace different facets of ourselves, we will also consider how our life experiences and our wiring shape the ways that we move through life—how different parts of us can run on autopilot and react in specific ways. And even though we won’t explicitly discuss concepts like neurodiversity, I want to invite you to be curious about how you are wired. Most simply, this is how you most naturally process information and navigate life in your brain and your body, rather than how you feel you *should* function when compared to some standard that has been set as a norm.

Our disposition can establish a baseline of sorts for what we experience as normal. Tangled up with this, certain thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and more can become normal to us on the other side of trauma, wounding relationships, and losses, desensitizing us to what life was like before, or what life could be like otherwise. Whatever you have walked through, and however your brain and body are wired, I honor you as you are and hope these pages are a safe place to explore a greater understanding of what happens inside you as you move through life. There is equal space here to consider the impact of past life experiences and your innate temperament—along with the interplay between these two.

Walking Together

I'm aware that talking about tuning in with the body and different *parts* of us might sound to you as it did to me on that day when Meredith could see that my body didn't know I was safe. It can be easy to scoff at suggestions to tune in with your embodied being as though it's some sort of tree-hugging jargon that's not for you. And while I do love trees, and have maybe been known to hug one or two, here's my invitation to you: *If you have a body, then you are indeed an embodied being, and this book is for you.*

It's okay if this feels risky and foreign like it did for me. It's okay if you are skeptical, wanting to hold what I share at arm's length at first. It's okay if you disagree with anything, taking only what fits for you and leaving the rest. There's space for different starting points and paths as we walk together here.

As you step into these pages with me, I want you to know that *I so wish I could be with you beyond these typed words.* While I wrote this book, one of the hardest things for me to sort out was how different it is to communicate with fixed words on a page rather than in dynamic and face-to-face communication that includes our entire embodied selves. I wish I could see your face and you could see mine, and that your body would know you are not alone as you travel through each sentence and paragraph.

And so, even if we have never met, please know that I have poured the attunement of my eyes, the warmth of my smile, the saltiness of my tears, and a full range of hand motions into these pages. On my back porch, in my home, and in countless coffee shops I have wept while writing these drafts, drawing from the most tender depths of my being to yours, hoping that maybe, just maybe, even if I can't be with you as you read these words, you can feel my presence with you in them.

Invitations to Pause & Play

One of the ways this book will invite you into a different pace is through the Pause & Play prompts that are sprinkled throughout. I've woven

these prompts in to help us slow down, tune in with the body, and tend to the soul in experiential ways. As we'll discover, one of the most powerful ways to learn is through firsthand experience that helps us get out of our head and into our body. More than this, trying new things *with* another person is an even more effective way to create new connections—meaning, while these prompts can be explored alone, they will naturally resonate and stick differently if we explore them alongside another living and breathing person.

So, if you have anyone in your life who might be open to journeying alongside you, this is your cue to invite them to do so. Whether it's a friend, family member, small group, book club, or therapist, consider asking someone else to read through these chapters with you. More than conversation partners, they can be movement partners, walking with you through these chapters and the opportunities to Pause & Play.

Now, maybe you're planning just to skim the prompts and reflections you come across in these pages. If I'm being honest, I've done the same thing when I've wanted to get to the point in a book. In a way that's a bit different from traditional chapter formats, the Pause & Play sections are integral pieces of how each chapter is crafted—meaning there's no way to move through the book as a whole without them. So, even if it's literally for just sixty seconds, I encourage you to play with each of the prompts in this book.

Whatever time you have, be curious to notice *how* you interact with them. Notice what feels silly, what feels comforting, what feels uncomfortable, and what feels off-limits. And if all you sense is a disconnect, simply notice that. There's no need to try to force anything other than what naturally stirs within as you read through them.

If in your reflections you become aware of a spiritually anxious part of you that feels unsettled about connecting with your body and everything swirling inside, notice how it feels to gently remind yourself that God created all the facets of your being that you're tuning in with. We sometimes forget that the first words about our embodied being is that we were created in God's image and it was very good.⁵

If you feel overwhelmed by any words or prompts ahead, there is a

detailed list of ways you can move with what's coming up inside at the end of this chapter. Those pages are there for you to bookmark and come back to at any point.

Lastly, while I hope that your experience of journeying through this book is therapeutic, it's important to say that this book is not a substitute for therapy or mental health services. If you notice that you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed by any thoughts and feelings that come up as you read, consider seeking a safe therapeutic space to process what you observe. PsychologyToday.com has an extensive directory of in-person and online therapists that can be filtered and searched through.

And now to begin, let's play!

PAUSE & PLAY:

INITIAL CONTACT

If it feels comfortable, place one hand over your heart and the other over your abdomen, taking a few deep breaths before continuing. If breathing deeply does not feel comfortable, don't force yourself to shift your cadence of breathing. If you prefer, explore placing your hands on your shoulders, neck, or legs as you take a few breaths, or simply hold your hands together. Any of these options is a simple way to start connecting with your body, helping you touch and feel the reality that you are an embodied being.

Without trying to analyze anything with your thinking brain or filter what comes out, notice what naturally pops up inside when you read over the following questions:

When I consider connecting with what's happening beneath my thinking brain in the depths of my soul, my gut reaction is _____

_____.

The messages I've received about my body that most impact how I think about my body include _____,

_____, _____, and _____

_____.

THE SACRED ART OF SLOWING DOWN

When I contemplate what slowing down might look like in the midst of my present life circumstances, I envision _____

Take a breath and pause to consider what it was like to read through those questions. Did you like what came up inside? Did it feel embarrassing? Do you wish any of your answers were different?

Before moving on to the next chapter, read through the list below that provides ideas of how we can move with what's coming up inside rather than trying to escape it. As you continue to notice what's stirring inside, choose one option to play with before continuing on. See what it's like to feel what you're feeling, or think what you're thinking, while trying out one of the bulleted prompts below.

Moving *with* what's stirring inside⁶

- Go for a walk or stand barefoot on some carpet or grass. Wiggle your toes and let the soles of your feet play with the textures beneath them. Notice the sturdiness of the ground beneath you. If you'd like, place your hands on the ground, or consider lying flat on your back to simply breathe and be. Feel the sturdiness of the ground beneath your entire body. If it feels more comfortable, lie flat on your back with your legs resting up against a wall.
- Feel five different surfaces around you and notice their texture and temperature. For example, pay attention to the feel of the different fabrics of your clothing or the material of your shoes and jewelry. Touch a book, the ground, cold water, carpet, furniture, or a pet.
- Play with breathing at different speeds and volumes. Listen to how loudly or quietly you can breathe. Feel the difference it makes when you breathe quickly or slowly, allowing your body to settle into the cadence of breathing that feels most natural and anchored for you.
- Grab a journal or a piece of paper and draw or write whatever you are experiencing inside. Draw a comic strip that depicts what's

SLOWING DOWN TO ANCHOR IN

happening and moving inside you. See what it's like to externally express what's happening internally, whether it's with words, images, colors, or symbols.

- Standing up or lying down, stretch your body out as long as you possibly can. Then contract your body to bring your hands to your feet, allowing your fingertips to touch the tips of your toes. Next, watch your fingertips as they slowly move away from your toes, again extending your body as far as you can. Bring your fingers back to your toes, tracking this movement with your eyes.
- Imagine placing a pen in the hand of a part of you that's feeling strong emotions or wanting to cry out in some way. See what it's like to give this part of you a voice to express what they are feeling. Similarly, imagine writing or speaking to a part of you that's feeling strong emotions. You can do this by writing out dialogue, sketching stick figures and speech bubbles, or sitting across from an empty chair, engaging in a dialogue with this part of you.