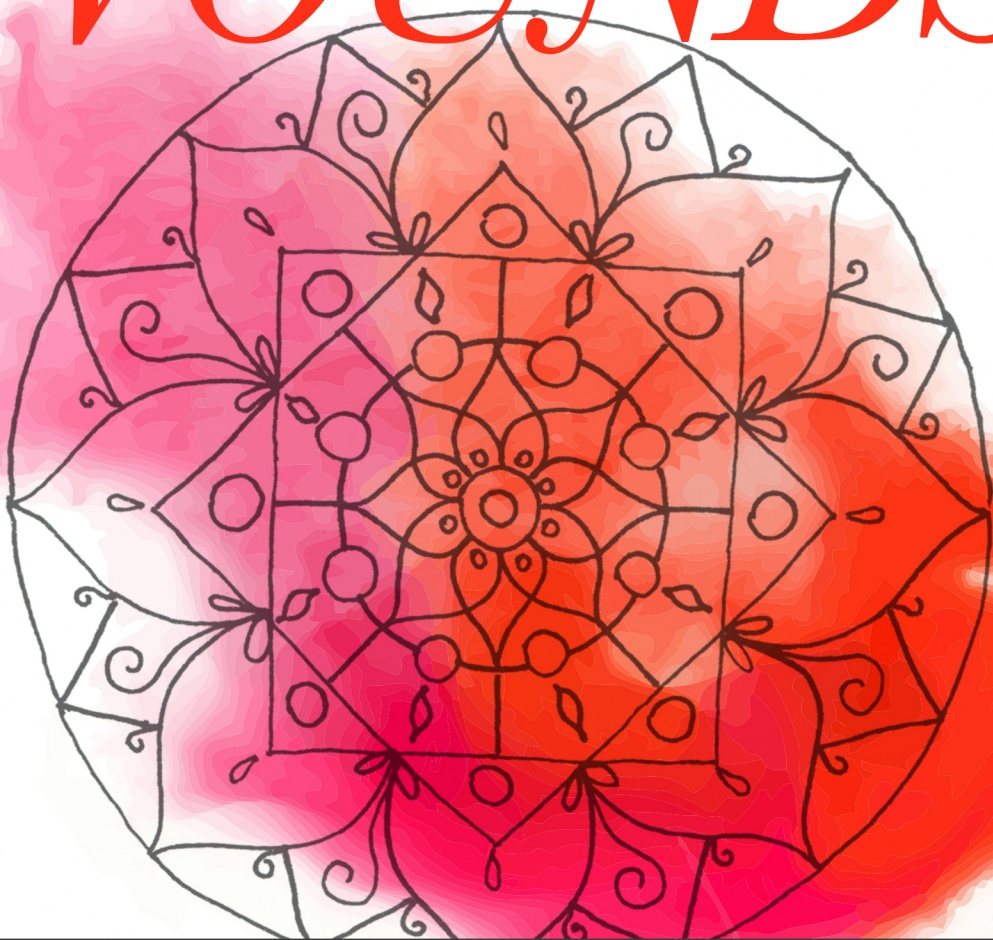


FOREWORD BY FR. RICHARD ROHR, OFM

# SACRED WOUNDS



*A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*

TERESA B. PASQUALE



“So many people have been wounded by religion. So few understand the personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of these wounds. As a pastor and a professional therapist, Teresa Pasquale is the first person I would go to for help in processing spiritual pain. Now, her gentle wisdom is available widely through *Sacred Wounds*. It is beautifully written and pastorally rich. Highly recommended!”

—**Brian D. McLaren**, Author/Speaker

“In the changing landscape of faith, there are so many men and women across ages, demographics, and faith traditions, lying on the side of the road bleeding. Scarred and hurt from unhealthy systems, many often don’t know where to turn or how to find their way toward healing. *Sacred Wounds* is an incredible tool of hope! Teresa Pasquale is an amazing guide, tender and wise, and offers her own experiences, other’s powerful stories, and practical, gentle, and meaningful exercises for healing. I will be sharing it with the many people I know longing for hope after experiencing religious trauma.”

—**Kathy Escobar**, Co-Pastor of The Refuge and Author of  
*Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart*

“*Sacred Wounds* is a literary liminal adventure into the holy terrain of trauma, healing, brokenness, and openness. In these pages lie a call for us to be wounded healer-warriors in a fear-ful trauma-saturated culture. May it be so!”

—**Anthony Smith** (Postmodern Negro); Pastor, Mission House (Salisbury, NC)

“Teresa Pasquale’s gentle voice of wisdom has never been more needed than it is today. With clinical expertise amplified by a personal journey from victim to survivor to victor, Teresa is the perfect wounded healer, and her words are exactly the balm that all those with Sacred Wounds need!”

—**Reba Riley**, Author of *Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome: A Memoir of Humor and Healing*

“This is the book you need if you or someone you know has survived religious trauma. A definitive guide to the origins of religious trauma, effects on the body and mind, and most importantly, how to heal, *Sacred Wounds* is written by a sensitive therapist and survivor with a full cache of honest, loving, insightful, and creative ideas for how to feel better. Offering illustrative vignettes, therapeutic guidance and practical suggestions for healing processes Pasquale elegantly illuminates the imminent path to recovery.”

—**Michele Rosenthal**, Author of *Your Life After Trauma: Powerful Practices to Reclaim Your Identity*

“The author speaks from both personal and professional experience, and her ideas are well grounded in academic theory. Her writing is both compassionate and full of humor, and tying healing from trauma to the twelve steps of addiction recovery is brilliant.”

—**Gail Horton Chewing** [waiting for credit line info]

“*Sacred Wounds* is not merely an academic exposé on church abuse. It is both personal and poignant, reaching deeply into the souls of those who are still haunted by the abyss between what we expect church to be and sometimes what it is. This book offers a balm of healing, sacred and pure. Teresa B. Pasquale has heard us. She sees us. She knows us. And she offers us the tools we need to rebuild our lives, our hearts, our souls. This is a brilliant and safe guide through our anxiety, our triggers, our panic attacks, and our nightmares. Reading the stories of those whose wounds are still open, I found myself among them. Each one who so generously shares their stories of healing brings light to all our dark places and reveals the God with whom we are safe. Beautifully written.”

—**Daisy Rain Martin**, Author of *Juxtaposed: Finding Sanctuary on the Outside* and *Hope Givers: Hope is here*

“Teresa Pasquale looks deep within religion’s wounded shadows and, like Christ the wounded healer, finds grace and hope there. Her project in *Sacred Wounds* is twofold: to name the traumas in which religion is complicit and to provide a map of the healing pilgrimage. Among the unique features of this compelling work are: individual stories, including Pasquale’s, of religion’s role in perpetuating wounds;

a sophisticated awareness of body-mind healing modalities; and an application of the twelve-step recovery tradition to articulate a positive way forward for transformation. Pasquale believes the end result of our wounds does not have to be cynical rejection or wounded avoidance of religion, but a maturing ability to ‘transcend and include’ even the most painful stages of our lives. This compassionate, wise book will help many people.”

—**Mark Longhurst**, Pastor and Writer

“Teresa B. Pasquale takes us on her own brave journey—and ultimately, intimately, into ourselves. The spiritual traumas are most sacred. No more averting our eyes. We are gently challenged to look, see, sense. Teresa teaches us to remember and trust our instincts once again. She gives us hands-on applications we can use in our lives. Her book is our guide. Take this pilgrimage with her and emerge transformed.”

—**Sharon Daugherty**, Sexual Assault Outreach/SART  
Co-Facilitator; Palm Beach County Victim Services &  
Certified Rape Crisis Center

“If one of the definitions of trauma is ‘any experience less than nurturing,’ then life on this planet is daunting, risky business for us frail humans. While the Church can be an agent to bring healing to that trauma, more often than not our religious experiences end up less than nurturing and typically at the hands of well-meaning, yet misguided folks. Teresa B. Pasquale shares with brutal and refreshing honesty her journey in spiritual healing. Hers is not just a story of ongoing restoration, it is one demonstrating that in the midst of the pain, the Divine is there weaving all things into the fabric of a new garment designed to give us and others protection, shelter, and life. As a clinician and healer, the insights she presents bring a bright ray of hope where light is more than ever needed. I am grateful for her voice to those inside and outside of the Church. She is a refreshing change agent who speaks from both clinical expertise and deep, personal experience.”

—**Jonathan Benz**, MS, CAP, ICADC, CDWF; Author, *The Recovery-Minded Church*

# SACRED WOUNDS

*A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*

TERESA B. PASQUALE

FOREWORD BY FR. RICHARD ROHR, OFM



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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Some names and details have been changed in the anecdotes of the author as well as in the stories of others hurt by church to protect identities. The content as a whole has been kept intact so that no essential material has been altered.

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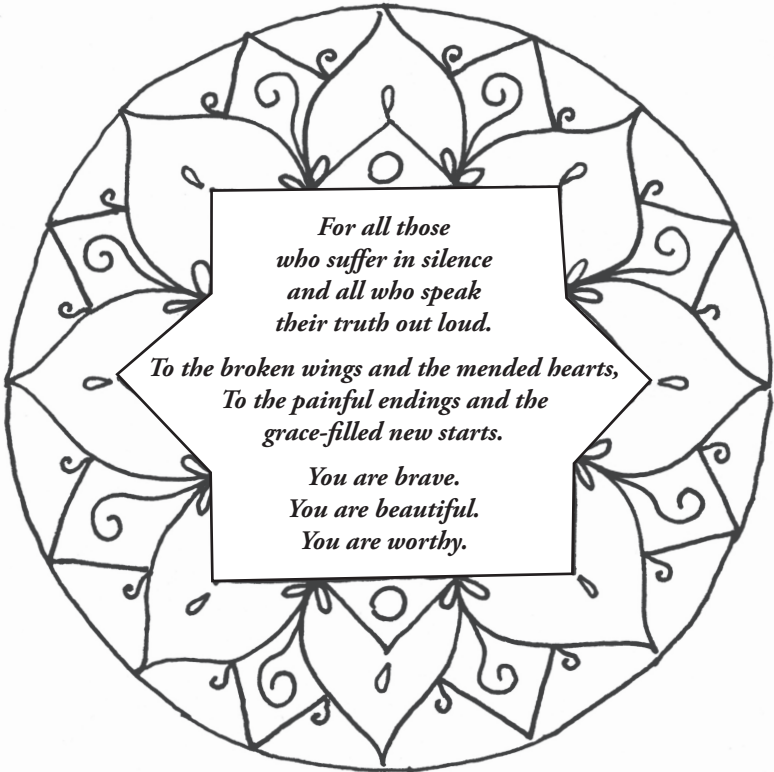
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*“Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place.”*

—RUMI



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by Richard Rohr

Spirituality. Trauma. Openness. These three are so rarely taught together, and so desperately needed. In *Sacred Wounds*, Teresa Pasquale is giving us a gift to weave these together in a three-stranded chord that is not so easily broken.

As a therapist, priest, and contemplative teacher, Teresa Pasquale is vitally in touch with the power of paradox: the downsides of spirituality, the up-sides of trauma, and the beauty and pain that comes from a life of openness in heart, body, and mind. Her work reminds me of my life's vocation as a Franciscan working to reflect some small measure of healing to ourselves and our world.

To keep the *heart space* open, we almost all need some healing in regard to our accumulated hurts from the past. It also helps to be in nourishing relationship with people, so that others can love us and touch us at deeper levels, and so we can touch them. In addition, I think the heart space is opened by "right-brain" activities such as music, art, dance, nature, fasting, poetry, games, life-affirming sexuality, and, of course, the art of relationship itself. And to be fully honest, I think our hearts need to be broken—and broken open—at least once in our lives to have a heart for others...or even to have a heart at all.

To keep our *bodies* less defended...to live in our body right now...to be present to others in a cellular way: This is the work of healing of past hurts, many of which seem to be stored in the body itself as memory. It is very telling that Jesus often physically touched people when he healed them; he knew where the memory and hurt were lodged, and it was in the body itself. Eckhart Tolle rightly speaks of most people carrying a "pain body." Sometimes I fear that most of humanity has suffered from some form of Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD), which reverberates painfully in our legacy of war, torture, abandonment, and abuse.

To keep the *mind space* open, we need some form of contemplative practice, or what those in more Eastern paths call meditation. This has been the most neglected in recent centuries in our Western paths, substituting the letting-go release of genuine contemplation for the mere “saying” of prayers, rote recitation that is a poor substitute for the contemplative mind, often merely confirming us in our fear-based systems.

One could say that authentic spirituality is invariably a matter of *emptying the mind, filling the heart, and engaging the body* in one fluid daily practice. It’s only befitting a faith that proclaims God inhabiting human flesh, renewing the mind and living from the heart, having a first-person encounter with God and humanity, refusing to settle for second-hand religion.

When Jesus speaks of “the narrow path that leads to life,” we want to make it into a dogmatic point about the afterlife. In my experience, it’s more of an existential observation of *this* life: wise teachers and reliable paths are *so* hard to find. In *Sacred Wounds* and in Teresa, you have both. Reflecting on her personal trauma and the psychiatric field with tenderness and pastoral concern, Teresa demystifies the mystics, invites us to join in the lineage of contemplative action in the Christian tradition, while finding ways to express hope and healing in our hurt places.

Hurt people hurt people, I’ve frequently observed. *Sacred Wounds* shows us how to honor our hurts so that we become healing people healing people.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is first and foremost for all the voices—the voices of the hurt, the unheard, the invalidated, and the discarded. It is for the forgotten, the neglected, and the negated souls who have been given a false myth of a vengeful God-face and a hateful or vengeful manifestation of divinity. It is for everyone who has survived these experiences, and for those voices in this book of those brave enough to vocalize their suffering for the sake of offering others a resonant story and a hopeful future. I want to pay homage to those voices.

Thank you to everyone who has been brave enough to live his or her own story of suffering and survive it. Thank you to all those persons whose stories populate this book, and the many, many more whose brave stories of hope populate the world—standing in opposition to hate, neglect, and diminishment. Thank you for living your story, for surviving, and, when you can, thriving despite the negative myths of faith.

I want to also thank those wisdom teachers I have found in my own life who have informed my own spiritual journey and sacred wounds healing—and offered me tools and resources to light my own path and help me hold that light up for others. Specifically, a deep thank you to the master teachers of the Living School for Action and Contemplation, including the founder Fr. Richard Rohr (also the generous writer of the foreword for this book), Dr. James Finley, and Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault. They are mystic wisdom teachers and I am grateful for the years of study at their feet and the lifetime's worth of teachings I have yet to unpack from their knowledge on spirituality, the mystic path, and healing.

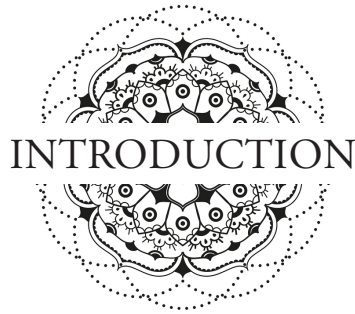
Thank you to all those who helped bring this book into being—from those who had late-night conversations with me about the

content to those adept hands who helped bring the book into being, from editorial support and investment to cover design and publication. Especially thank you to the wonderful team at Chalice Press—namely Steve Knight, Brad Lyons, Gail Stobaugh, and Mick Silva—who walked through the process of bringing *Sacred Wounds* to life, each and every step of the way.

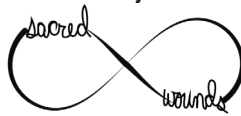
Thank you to my friends and family who have been amazing supporters, readers, and morale boosters during the late-night writing and editing sessions. Especially thanks to my mother, Patricia Bennett (always my editor-in-chief), and my husband, Christopher Pasquale, who is able to motivate my writing and my life like a shot of espresso whenever I need it, and even more so when I don't know that I need it.

Additionally, I send an immense thank you to my soul sister, Holly Roach, who championing this book before it was even a book, and has been one of the greatest advocates for the *Sacred Wounds* work.

Finally, thank you to my soul mother, Teresa of Avila, who has been the voice in my head that I needed, when I wanted to listen and when I didn't. She walks with me every step of the way, each and every day, and I am forever grateful for her inspiration.



## The Human Story, Ad Infinitum



The sacred wounds infinity symbol illustrates that our wounds are inextricably linked to the sacred, and the sacred is inextricably linked to our wounds. Our hurt is the origin of our transformation. As Rumi once reflected, “The wound is where the light enters.”

As someone whose life has been peppered with wounds, I can say, definitively that hurt has been the birthplace of the greatest and most transformative places of light entering my life. Most of the time it didn't look that way on the face of it—it always felt like death. But if we study any myth or religious origin story since the beginning of time, we will see over and over again that death is also the midwife to new life. Like the infinity symbol, the journey of life and the spiritual life is not a period or an exclamation point—it is a winding figure eight that constantly feeds back into itself, ad infinitum.

The cracks are where the light gets in.

The pain and suffering of life at its peak can transition to joy. Much like real childbirth, only when the pain reaches a crescendo do we burst into a new place of our own possibility, of infinity, and that crack is where the light gets in.

In therapy, I don't over-divulge about my pains with clients, and in life I don't spend a lot of time ruminating on them. I think part of the benefit of moving through suffering is leaving a trail behind, the crumbs of hope and healing, so others can see it is possible to

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get better—not just in theory but in reality. I think there is value in exploring our pain and sharing when it is appropriate, so that others can see there is a trail to follow. By no means do I have it all figured out, but I know there is a path to wholeness and healing through trauma, the pain of spiritual disappointment, and other areas of life that disappoint. This book is meant to be a roadmap to that hopeful place—not just created by my own tales of woe and reconciliation, but with the bravery of a multitude of voices who have walked the path of pain and found hope. Let them be a lamplight to the unending journey, so that we might be able to see what is possible for us all.

We are never-ending. We are warriors and creators. We are divine and sacred and worthy. You are worthy without caveat or exception.

Let the story-making and the hope-mongering begin. It is not just the story of me, but the story of us. Welcome to the shared and sacred journey.

Oftentimes, it has been those moments where pain intrudes when I really listen. I've begun to realize a personal paradigm shift is about to happen. I had such a moment standing in the dimly lit room of the yoga studio in Hoboken, New Jersey. I had spent Monday nights there for the last year. Huddled in the small basement with a room of eager 20-and-30-somethings seeking enlightenment from our Buddhist teacher, I sought respite from the painful hypocrisy of my Catholic youth. It wasn't a conscious thought, but it was something like, *If anyone can avoid absolutes and platitudes it's got to be the Buddhists.*

Unfortunately, I was headed for a different kind of awakening—one more akin to the “rude” kind. Yet surprisingly, it freed me from my illusion that only my faith tradition could be hurtful.

I loved my Mondays spent in the candlelight on mats and meditation chairs. The first half was always an exploration of foundational Buddhist teachings, which we all scribbled in our notebooks ravenously. Although many of the students were also students in the yoga teacher-training program, we were all seekers on a quest. The second half was always guided meditation practice. This was where I learned the power of visualizations in meditation to quiet my mind and calm the chaos of thoughts cluttering up my daily life.

So when I bought my ticket to go see the Dalai Lama speak at Lehigh University, nearly a year into my studies with my monastic nun teacher, I thought it would be a proud moment as I asserted my

commitment to move into a deeper place of study and investment in the lineage. I remember clearly that we were standing face-to-face in front of the shoe cubby that always sits by the entrance of every yoga studio, and I was taking my shoes out of the cubby to leave.

I had been absent for a few weeks, so she came up and gave me a hug, saying, “It’s so good to see you back. We have been missing you.”

Feeling guilty for my absence, I said, “I know. Work has been so busy, but I wanted to tell you, I just bought my ticket to go see the Dalai Lama next week in Pennsylvania.”

As I completed my sentence, I saw the furrowing of a distressed brow appear on her usually contemplative expression, and she replied, “We will actually be there too. We will be protesting him and his actions. Our tradition disagrees with his actions and engagement in politics. Be careful of his teachings.”

Yes. The man who is an international symbol of peace. She was warning me about the Dalai Lama.

I am pretty sure I smiled and nodded and said something that appeared like agreement. I stumbled out of the basement onto the chilly spring sidewalk of Hoboken. As her words settled into my brain, my internal response was something like, “Damn it!” That thought was quickly followed by, “Seriously? No. Not again.”

I have since learned, in subsequent years, that the tradition my fairly innocent group of Buddhist, non-Buddhist yogi students were enamored with at the time, the New Kadampa Tradition, seems to be a fairly aggressive and revolutionary group—outside of yoga studio basements in Hoboken. I read an article that went into detail about the tradition and its aggressive actions and for the first time in my life, I felt something akin to a trigger outside of my childhood religion. It was fascinating, but it showed me my church wounds were still fresh, and I was still extra sensitive to fundamentalism, even of a different color—saffron to be exact. So interestingly, the closest I ever came to a cult was in this seemingly benign lecture and practice series in a New York metro-area yoga studio. The irony abounds.

This is not meant to point a negative lens at Buddhism. This experience left me open enough to return to explore my tradition anew, and most importantly, to begin to forgive. This started would bring me full circle and back to the Christian contemplative practices and teachers of my roots. What I found is that no religion is immune



to fundamentalism. Religion is made up of humans, and our humanity can be the best of us, or get the best of us.

But this opened my eyes to my sacred wounds and became one of the most profound and powerful moments in my faith journey.

It was like returning to a relationship ended on bad terms to find some kind of closure. I think I knew I would never be Roman Catholic again, but when I went back with a compassionate forgiving heart, it let me explore the good elements of my tradition, rather than throwing them all away as poisoned fruit from the hurting tree (the opposite of *The Giving Tree*). I could see what I loved of my Catholicism with new eyes. By returning, I was granted so many amazing gifts—contemplative prayer, the work of Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and mystic, as well as the work of my namesake mystic, Teresa of Avila.

I now think of Catholicism much like a great uncle—it contains wisdom and I love it, but we disagree on a lot. But that disagreement does not diminish my love, and for that I am grateful to my sacred wounds—those that pushed me away and forced me to ask difficult questions of myself and my faith, and those that brought me back to my spiritual home to repair the pieces and begin a healthy, if long distance, relationship.

This is not everyone's story. I have not had the extent of religious trauma many have had, and some of my most acute traumas happened outside of church contexts, so my experience as depicted is just that—my own. I don't expect everyone to go back to their sect or tradition of origin, and I don't expect that to be the healthy choice for many.

We have the choice and the chance to heal our wounds when we want to. It looks somewhat different for everyone. However, hopefully in these pages you will find some space for resonance and understanding, as well as compassion for yourself and others.

### **The Frontlines of Faith: Suffering, Learning, Loving, and Leaving Religion**

I hope this is the beginning of a larger conversation about religious abuse and healing on the other side. The other day a colleague of mine was asked to speak before a domestic violence nonprofit organization. Prior to speaking, she was mingling with people in the gathering crowd, telling them that her area of expertise was trauma

and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many responded to this statement with, “Oh, so you worked with veterans?”

As someone who treated veterans for the better part of 10 years, I know the potent suffering of those who’ve gone to war. Sadly, much of what people know today about trauma is limited to a fairly archaic understanding of trauma and PTSD. Many people still think trauma only applies to war or violent crime, and very little beyond that.

As a trauma therapist I have worked with those suffering from the impact of religious or spiritual trauma. Recent stories of such wounds have come out more extensively. Fingers might initially point at the Catholic Church, yet it is much more widespread than that.

I hope to address abuses in religion where they lie and explain their origins, nature, how they grow, and how we work our way back. Like life, trauma is both more complicated and simpler than we tend to think. Religious and spiritual trauma requires speaking about it. It is pervasive and must be recognized as trauma. The nature of trauma, of religious trauma, case examples, and finding healing must come through a variety of resources and practices to slowly move from hurt into wholeness.

Whenever someone tells me it is *easy* for people to leave church, I think, “You have never met or fully listened to the story of someone wounded by church.” People don’t leave for a lack of caring. Rather, it’s usually caring too much that makes many leave. Most leave with broken hearts. Most leave in mourning. Not all, but enough that it is the rule and not the exception.

These are my people, the spiritually wounded, the soul warriors. If you meet some, be gentle with them. If you are one, be gentle with yourself.

There is no magic secret to faith inside the walls of churches; the people make or break the institution. And sometimes the people in the institution make or break human souls.

The world is sacramental and always unfolding, *ad infinitum*. Some days finding anything sacred in this hard world is excruciatingly difficult.

I have been ravenous for it all my life—for the sacred in the profane, the glory inside the mundane. There were times in my life I couldn’t eat the bread, and so I ravaged a sunset instead. Isn’t all food of and from and by God? We must not diminish the sacred in anything; don’t diminish the seeking in anyone. This, in itself, is

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ending an abuse, perhaps one subtler than the overt abuses of religion, but often painful nonetheless.

How many of us truly realize all the ways the sacred has been reduced for us by those who deny it in and around us every day?

This book is my call into the sacred wounds and into the orbits of faith; it is my plea for light in dark places and unconventional lights where more conventional ones have flamed out.

Let us learn the curves of religious trauma; learn the shape of this pain. Abused and abuser, religious and secular, whatever your angle of receiving this information, let it penetrate your mind and search your memory. Let it find your own tiny scars, and trace the outline of their markings to see the world through the lens of this *sacred pain*. Together we can feel it and heal it. Because we heal in community. There is no other way.

I hadn't even finished my first book before this book began demanding to be written. I intended to write it, just not yet. But then the overwhelming need came booming in the midst of everything, everywhere. Wherever I went, I found more people disclosing the stories of their suffering at the hands of Christian communities, church leaders, and faith institutions. The stories resonated with one another like a symphony of suffering. I have studied trauma as a therapist, and the nuances of each story carried a cadence in tune with the one before it, and that story with the one after it.

The stories of suffering could not be swept aside. Soon the book garnered the name *Sacred Wounds*.

The Bible is full of desert wandering and arid landscapes; these are the places of deep suffering and also the most profound transformations. Moses and Jesus, the rock stars of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (or as some call them, the Old and New Testament), did some of their best work in deserts. The symbol of deprivation, spiritual testing, and excruciating doubt deserts remind me of my darkest moments in faith community. The causes of my own spiritual brokenness were much more palpable in recollection than I thought they could still be, as palpable as sexual traumas in early adulthood (which I talked about in my first book, *Mending Broken*).

To be honest, I had forgotten how painful it was to be without a faith family or home. I had removed myself from the desert and misplaced my visceral understanding of the journey through sacred woundedness.

We are hearty stock, those of us that wander, partially lost, desperately seeking. We cannot be extinguished completely. We understand that deep in our hearts, in a place we may not recognize, the mirages will become real one day and we will find our destination.

I did. For me it was in the Episcopal Church and a community that was safe and means what it proclaims when it says “All are welcome, just as they are.”

The way forward looks different for everyone, but I believe at the edge of each spiritual desert there is some place of spiritual redemption, where the hurt is mollified by grace in whatever form it takes. Tonight, in spiritual deserts around the world, there are desert flowers subsisting and sustaining, but without the abundance of full acceptance of love.

The call to the Church and faith communities in the 21st century is to begin intentionally to answer the call of desert flowers—to acknowledge the suffering and the source, and admit that broken people of faith speak to broken faith. There are fissures in our foundation. It may not be in your church; it may not be in your heart, but people in churches are wounding and traumatizing people in churches, and for this we all carry some accountability and some call to respond today.

People inside and outside of church walls are calling to the church to be heard and understood, and for the explanations of why faith hurts as much as it heals.

Not all religious communities, leaders and institutions are hurting people, but enough are that we are all called to respond. We must find our own complicity in this problem. Sometimes it is in our silence, and not hearing or saying the truth. Sometimes it is in blindness, not wanting to see the hurt in others for fear it will touch something that is hurting in ourselves. Sometimes it is in being a hurter because some part of ourselves has brokenness we don't see, and untapped wounds not addressed. Sometimes it is in complacency.

Whatever our complicity, we have to be willing to see and explore that to change the story. We have to change how we are doing things as individuals first and communities second. We must address the spiritual hurts perpetrated every day, or the faith of today will evaporate tomorrow.

The answer to the mass exodus of people from churches into spiritually unaffiliated categories is not better music, marketing, or

branding. The answer is deeper than that. The longevity of Christianity as community and institution does not rest on *branding*; it rests on healing.

The answer is less expensive, but more taxing. It is “the pearl of great price.” How we respond to this issue today will shape the future of Christianity. This is the prediction (predicated on increasing statistical data that illustrate the same details of religious exodus) of this trauma therapist, lay minister, and crooked mystic.

What is the positive side? We can take back the reverberations of the hurts that haunt us. We can transform the misinformed, angry Father God or denigrating faith community and/or family systems of our origins. We can bring light into the darkest spaces and transform suffering into the kind of hope that only comes on the other side of deep suffering. The bitterness of acute pain impacting the soul changes us. We cannot go back or deny the dark places. What we can do is swim through the murky waters of darkness and into the depths of suffering, face the pain, and come out into a new place—one that we could have never found without pain—one that looks like grace. This doesn't mean the pain is good. It doesn't mean we would have ever chosen it. It doesn't mean we deserved to hurt because we were divined for this particular kind of ache. It doesn't mean it isn't more than we can handle. It just reminds us that we are creatures born for unimaginable resiliency and an unending capacity for hope. It just means we will find our way to the deep sacred center of all things faster than those who have not experienced the acute pain of sacred wounds; and in that process we have been given the secret access to the beauty that is only available to those of us who have lived through pain and know what it is like to be deprived of light, life, and grace for far too long. We stretch toward the sun with an earnestness that comes from knowing how dark the darkness can be. We lean into joy with more urgency because we know the density of a guttural and deep lament. We are a blessed few.—a band of brothers and sisters who do not take grace for granted.

### **A FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICE: Breathing**

When we explore the painful places it can be unnerving. In my work with trauma survivors, as well as in my own life experience, I want to begin with a way to center and ground before I delve into the

hurt and broken places. This way if there are tough moments when I feel I might lose my footing, I have a reference point to return to, in order to get my bearings. This grounding practice is like a compass out of the difficult moments and into the present reality of what is in the moment—outside of hurt or overwhelming emotions.

This simple breathing practice is something I offer every person I work with—in both sacred and secular contexts. It is universal because it begins and ends with breath.

Three-part breath is taught in the yoga world, but is inherent to the way in which we are intended to breathe. As babies we breathe in our natural route. When we inhale, our lungs fill with air and expand; when we exhale we pull our stomach muscles in toward our navel, wringing the air out of our lungs. Watch a baby—it happens naturally in infancy. As we grow, learn, and hurt, we begin to absorb a sort of strangulation and reversal of our breathing process. In some form or fashion, most of us adopt a reversal of breath. We begin to inhale and suck inward, and breathe out and push our bellies out. Many, if not most of us, flip-flop breathe at some point in life. There are probably a lot of reasons why, but the many little stresses begin to divert us off our natural breath and into a more constricted way.

For those who have experienced severe stress and trauma, this breath reversal is much more acute. In this way, we begin to feel breathless in much of life. Specifically, in trauma we either hold our breath or hyperventilate. To return to a relaxed place we must begin with the baseline of breath, the anchor of our life. Untethered, we float. Tethered, we are grounded and balanced from the inside out. Soothing and calming three-part breath is the simplest way to correct our learned breathing and return us to the breath of infancy.

1. Sit in a chair or lie down on your back—whatever is most comfortable.
2. Place your hands on either side of your belly.
3. Inhale deeply and imagine that you are filling up your belly with air like a balloon.
4. Feel the balloon filling as your abdomen presses into your belly.
5. When your abdomen is full, pause for a moment then exhale out your nose or mouth.
6. After a few deep breaths, move your hands to either side of your rib cage.

## 10 *SACRED WOUNDS*

7. Take an even deeper breath, filling your lungs as your belly expands, then your rib cage.
8. After a few deep breaths, move your hands to either side of your upper chest with fingers on your collarbone.
9. Take an even deeper breath, filling your lungs, belly, rib cage, and chest like a wave rising until your lungs are full.
10. Release all the air in a sigh through your mouth.
11. Continue slowly for a few minutes, noticing what it feels like to increase the length of your inhaled and exhaled breaths.

Use this breath practice whenever you feel anxious or triggered. You can do the same practice in any situation without the hands to help calm any anxiety or stress in the body, then the mind.