

CHUCK DEGROAT

AUTHOR OF HEALING WHAT'S WITHIN

who you're becoming

THE SLOW AND COURAGEOUS WORK
OF CULTIVATING CHARACTER
IN A NARCISSISTIC AGE



We're in crisis. Abandoning our ancient commitment to character, to integrity of soul, we are being ravaged from the inside. These pages, from such a wise, heart-full guide, are truths to heed if we want to be whole. Chuck is a beloved professor and therapist—but more, he's a friend committed to loving well and telling the truth. And God knows, we sure need the truth right now. This is a book for our disintegrating time.

WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination and author of *Love Big, Be Well* and *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson*

Chuck DeGroat is a soul cardiologist, a wise, kind, and brilliant reader of the human heart. He surgically engages one of the key issues of our era: character. Many have eschewed character for power, notoriety, and disparagement of those who differ from us. This compelling, beautifully written book calls us to become who we, at our best, long to be. Chuck not only helps us envision the glory of a good character, but he also provides clarity about the practices, conversations, and reflection needed to be a presence that manifests the face of God. You are about to embark on a journey that will restore your heart.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PhD, professor of counseling psychology, founding president, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

In the midst of our unmoored, image-obsessed culture, Dr. Chuck DeGroat offers us the grounding wisdom we so often forget: God is with us as we become ourselves. With kindness and deft insight, DeGroat leads us through the practical, courageous, and often slow work required to cultivate maturity and true character. In so doing, *Who You're Becoming* serves as a powerful and needed guide for

anyone wanting to go beyond a try-hard faith or mere surface-level change—so they can deepen into their truest, beloved selves.

AUNDI KOLBER, MA, LPC, therapist and author of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

Rarely do I refer to a book as a “must read.” But rarely do I come across a book as incisive and inspiring as this one. It is indeed a “must read” for anyone taking up the mantle of ministry and leadership. With timeless truths spoken directly to our particular age, Chuck has given us a great gift in this remarkable and healing book.

AMANDA HELD OPELT, author of *Holy Unhappiness*

At our best and truest we are pilgrims, called into lifelong journeys, which are “cultivated through faith, strengthened through hope, and embodied through love.” In his deeply imagined new book, it is clear that Chuck DeGroat is a true doctor of the soul, paying attention to what matters most in our desire for a coherence born of the reordering of our loves and longings. Drawing us into a prayerful examination of our selves, always both honest and yet hopeful, with his poetic blessing we are invited to ponder more carefully and to live more faithfully. Threaded through with the wisdom of church history and the insight of contemporary science, in their different ways addressing our disposition to fragmentation and our yearning for integration, *Who You’re Becoming* should find its way into conversations and classrooms the world over—with sons of Adam and daughters of Eve who are becoming more whole people, and therefore more holy people.

STEVEN GARBER, author of *Hints of Hope: Essays on Making Peace with the Proximate* and Senior Fellow for Vocation and the Common Good, the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust

Chuck has written a book that should immediately be required reading for all of us, whether we are in formal leadership or not; while character should be our shared concern, we are constantly being tempted to focus on presentation instead. He therefore asks us fair but too often ignored questions, helps us distinguish between personality and character, provides ample wisdom, and consistently points us toward healthy formation that pushes against fragmentation and instead toward wholeness. Please read it slowly and with the courage it requires so that you might experience the hope it promises.

KELLY M. KAPIC, author of *You're Only Human* and *Christian Life*

Character is not curated. It is cultivated. The gift Chuck gives us in this book is the wisdom of a quarter century as therapist, pastor, and professor. *Who You're Becoming* refuses performative authenticity and the fauxnerability that too often passes for Christian maturity. In their place, Chuck offers the slow ripening of the soul moved from survival to connection, from disorder to devotion, from charisma to character. Drawing on Scripture and the wisdom of the Christian tradition, he answers the crisis of character in our narcissistic age with the patient kindness of God. I need this book. So does every leader weary of the masks.

JUSTIN S. HOLCOMB, Episcopal bishop, seminary professor, and author of *Rid of My Disgrace*

In this beautiful invitation to courageous wholeheartedness, *Who You're Becoming* is a gentle and grounded companion on the journey of change. Weaving together a pastoral heart, therapeutic insight, and anchored hope, Chuck lights the way for a compelling and compassionate exploration of who we long to be, and how we long to live.

LAURA THIEN, MSW, LISW-CP, therapist and executive director of GRACE

In *Who You're Becoming*, Chuck DeGroat reclaims the lost territory of character formation and shows us a fresh path through an understanding of our nervous system response. Chuck invites us on an exploratory journey, linking our character to our unhealthy patterns of self-protection and disconnection. And of course Chuck invites us into the slow, courageous, and essential work of integration so that the deepest parts of our souls can relax into the love of God. Chuck's writings have been essential reading in my life for almost a decade, and this book is now top of my recommendation list.

STEVE CUSS, pastor and author

Chuck DeGroat has written a wise and searching book for a moment when too many leaders have been formed for visibility but not for trustworthiness. *Who You're Becoming* offers a penetrating, deeply humane, and spiritually serious vision of character formation that joins theology, psychology, and the slow work of grace in ways that many leaders badly need. I will recommend this book to my clients with enthusiasm and deep appreciation.

TOD BOLSINGER, AE Sloan Leadership, author of *Canoeing the Mountains* and the Practicing Change Series

We are living in a moment of profound and painful unveiling, and this labor of love is a gift for such a time as this. With hard-won, embodied wisdom, Chuck locates the truths of modern psychology inside the ancient systems of spiritual formation, calling us beyond the performative and into the deep waters where true character is slowly, courageously and intentionally forged. This is a book that holds a mirror to our current age, and invites us into the long journey from fragmentation to wholeness and from nervous system reactivity into being rooted and

grounded in love. Chuck so generously weaves together insights, stories, resources, reflection questions, and practices to help us locate ourselves in these pages, drawing us toward a wholeness and belonging we are meant for and will need in order to resist the perils of this day. He invites us to know even more the God of love who is tending to the restoration of all things. Thank you feels wildly insufficient.

RACHAEL CLINTON CHEN, trauma practitioner and pastoral leader with
The Allender Center at The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

Many approaches to cultivating Christian character remain curiously disembodied, overlooking how our nervous systems and hidden patterns can quietly subvert our best intentions. In this illuminating work, Chuck DeGroat brings these often-ignored dimensions into the light, drawing on decades of experience as a counselor and the wisdom of a seasoned pastoral theologian. In an age marked by restless striving and spiritual adolescence, this book offers a surprising and beautiful recovery of a slower, truer path—one that leads us to become “rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17). A gem of a book—one to savor, and to revisit.

J. TODD BILLINGS, author of *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live*

At a time when therapeutic language has become social currency and character formation has become a product rather than a practice, Chuck DeGroat calls us back to the slow, unglamorous, embodied work of actually becoming someone. Drawing on neuroscience, ancient Christian wisdom, and a keen eye for the performance culture of our time, this book refuses every shortcut and offers something rarer than technique: a genuinely integrated vision of what human

transformation looks like. What distinguishes this book is that it was written by someone whose life bears witness to everything in it.

ELIZABETH PENNOCK, PhD, LPC, associate professor of counseling, director of MA in clinical mental health counseling program, Western Theological Seminary

Chuck DeGroat's latest book, *Who You're Becoming*, is a powerful and much-needed invitation to the slow, sacred work of becoming a whole person. In a world that rewards image over integrity and platform over character, this message could not be more timely. What makes this book especially compelling is that Chuck doesn't just write about this kind of inner formation—he embodies it. Chuck is a person of deep integrity, humility, and courageous self-awareness, and that is exactly why his is a voice we can trust—and why this is a book every single one of us needs to read.

DR. ALISON COOK, author of *The Secure Soul* and host of *The Best of You* podcast

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The case examples in this book are fictional composites based on the author's professional interactions with hundreds of clients over the years. All names are invented, and any resemblance between these fictional characters and real people is coincidental.

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INTRODUCTION

can I trust you?

We often tend to select leaders in the Christian world according to their gifts rather than their character. . . . Spiritual maturity is measured by character, by the fruit of the Spirit of God in a life.

DIANE LANGBERG

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

MATTHEW 23:25

I stood beside him in the church choir.

Months later, he was arrested for murder.

Back then, he seemed like the kind of man no one would ever question—steady, respected, a pillar of our community.

Sure, he seemed a little aloof during choir practice, but I was just a teenager, not noteworthy to someone so respected. Sure, he lacked a little warmth, but I knew he had a reputation of being a loving husband and a good father.

Each emerging detail of the twisted tale—how he shot and strangled his wife amidst an affair—rocked our community and rattled me, leaving me with lingering questions. How could I reconcile the man I thought I knew with the man he really was? How

could a man of apparent character hold such contradictions? If he could do this, could I trust other leaders?



I had thought of him as one of my heroes: Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, a community in Trosly-Breuil in northern France founded to dignify women and men with disabilities. My first church office as a pastor in the late 1990s featured photographed images of several of my heroes, his face among them.

Vanier's ministry and character inspired me—his kind smile and gentle presence evident in every image and recording of him. Sometimes I'd watch his moving YouTube videos just to remind myself that there are profoundly good leaders—and profoundly good human beings—out there. Vanier's person and work would later become the defining feature of a seminary class I taught, a course I hoped would inspire another generation of kind and generous pastors.

But a few years after teaching that course, just as the world was gripped by the news of a growing pandemic, I received the kind of text I dread.

Vanier had engaged in sexual misconduct.

And not just once. An independent 2023 report would find that Vanier engaged in manipulative and coercive sexual relationships with at least twenty-five adult women under his spiritual direction. The relationships involved spiritual and psychological coercion, with Vanier justifying sexual acts using mystical and theological language to portray them as a form of divine connection.¹

This wasn't a self-serving minister or a calculating politician, but a man universally revered as a living saint. He was a mentor to the late

Henri Nouwen, whose quiet devotion to the disability community seemed untouched by a need for recognition.

Many within the Christian community were left with heavy questions: If Vanier can't be trusted, who can? How can we ever really know what's true? How do we make sense of it all?



In 2008, our family moved cross-country so I could join the staff of a thriving center-city church. Within two years, I helped launch a counseling center, a fellows program, and a missional training center—all the while teaching, counseling, and occasionally preaching.

The subtle signs of burnout became more obvious—stomach pain, sleeplessness, too much coffee to start the day and too much alcohol to finish it. During a silent retreat I was leading at a conference center, a colleague and I snuck out for a lavish meal and enough drink to leave me fuzzy and faltering as I led the next morning's session.

But awareness of my own contradictions wasn't enough. It would take another year or two and a sudden and serious hospitalization to awaken me. What should have been a straightforward gallbladder removal surgery revealed something worse—my system was septic, the toll of my own trauma and fragmentation.

How can the pursuit even of good things blind us to our character contradictions?

The Crisis of Character

I don't know the specifics of the story you're bringing to these pages, but I do know you're bringing one.

Maybe you bear the confusion of the incongruity you see and hear about each day. The neighbor down the block who kept to himself, suddenly arrested on charges of child pornography. The trusted elementary school principal, now fired for misconduct. The family doctor, who faithfully helped your children through ear infections, caught prescribing controlled substances to minors. The popular pastor of a growing and influential church revealed to be a serial adulterer.

With each revelation, you ask again: *Who can I trust?*

But after that whisper of a question, if you listen closely enough, you might begin to hear another: *What happens when I'm called to account?*

After all, you have your own contradictions too.

You long to live with Christlike character, but you're also aware of how you lose your temper, how you secretly judge people, how your eyes linger a little longer than they should. You silently wonder if you're capable of some significant moral compromise. Perhaps seeing the salacious stories, you quietly whisper to yourself, "There but for the grace of God go I."

From the fractured trust in the highest political, corporate, and ecclesial offices in the land to the fragmented places in our own hearts, we're facing a profound unveiling.

And what's been uncovered is not just an individual crisis but a systemic one. In my work as a therapist, pastor, professor, and consultant, including more than twenty-five years in the spiritual abuse space, I've noted a profound cultural shift: Qualities of charisma, charm, credentials, confidence, and skilled communication are being elevated at the cost of character.

So much has become *performative*: Behaviors or expressions seem to signal virtue, expertise, alignment, or authenticity, but they lack

genuine depth, substance, or integrity. They are done in the name of image management rather than deep formation. Metrics, branding, and platform have become benchmarks of success that must be constantly and rigorously curated. We are increasingly driven by external validation (what others think, say, or reward) rather than our own internal convictions and personal integrity. We feel immense pressure to immediately respond to complex social issues, to side publicly in disembodied disputes, to quickly signal concern for global injustices instead of engaging in difficult, long-term local work. The temptation to posture rather than to pause—to be *seen* as righteous rather than to *pursue* what is right—can feel unbearably strong.

Spiritual growth is reduced to informational note-taking and sermon-spectating under bright lights and from big personalities, trading intentional formation for a kind of ecclesial voyeurism. Embodied relational, liturgical, and confessional pathways of growth and discipleship are exchanged for a drive-through spirituality that fills the belly but fails to nurture the soul.

In recent years a further complication has emerged: the new cultural embrace of therapeutic language and theories. What once was a pervasive suspicion of psychology and therapy, particularly in ecclesial spaces, has turned into a performative embrace. Those who've mastered the language of health or awareness can readily name the books they've consulted and the tools they claim to have incorporated into their relational and spiritual practices; it can be deeply confusing and traumatizing when these same practitioners harm others, perhaps even using the very resources created to cultivate health.

It feels bleak because it is. We have more insights and resources than ever for emotional and spiritual health, but it seems that they've not reached the depths of our hearts—where character is formed.

We're becoming shaped more by perception than presence, more by applause than authenticity; this is narcissism's new face in a digital age.

The Courage to Name What's True

This is the reckoning: a painful but necessary confrontation with all the ways we've traded true character for charisma, formation for information, communion for control, discipleship for display, transformation for techniques.

We cannot paper over this crisis with platitudes, quick fixes, or superficial reforms. The way forward cannot be reactive or cosmetic. It must be a wholesale reformation, a ground-up reconstruction, a reintegration of what has been fragmented, distorted, and disguised.

As the late author and religious scholar Phyllis Tickle wrote, "About every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur." Tickle credits this idea to the Right Reverend Mark Dyer, Anglican bishop, who refers to this as the "giant rummage sale."²

For many people, the language of character may feel outdated today, overshadowed by talk of competency, health, emotional intelligence, or even spiritual formation. Others will affirm that character still matters, but their solution to the crisis in character is to focus on simple remedies. However, character formation isn't about minor modifications—a new breathing practice, a short sabbatical, a few books on spiritual growth on your side table.

This is not about retrofitting old structures but dismantling what no longer serves and rebuilding on foundations that can endure—as

reformations have done before. If we are to see a recovery of trust and integrity, it will demand a radical reorientation in how we form leaders, how we imagine success, and how we live our lives before God and one another.

In short, it's time to cultivate the courage to tell the truth about who we are and who we've become. It's time to embrace the slow, costly work of character formation.

But what is character? And how is it developed?

A Course in Character Formation

Character is revealed over time through the habits of the heart and the choices that emerge naturally from deeply rooted convictions rather than the whims of circumstance. Its understated and steady presence—seen in the quiet courage to tell the truth, the humility to admit fault, the consistency of integrity over time, and the ability to hold power without using it to harm—may be undervalued in a world that embraces the sparkle and grandiosity of charisma and credentials.

While charm and expertise have their place, I sense the need to shift our imaginations toward more substantial pathways that lead to character change. The beatitudes offer us a compelling vision (Matthew 5:1-12). These are not mere moral benchmarks or abstract blessings but descriptions of the *flourishing life*—the kind that aligns with God's Kingdom and leads to wholeness. “Blessed are . . .” is best translated as “Flourishing are . . .” to emphasize that Jesus offers a vision of the good life, a life of character shaped by humility, mercy, wholeness, and peacemaking.³ In this view, the beatitudes are formative—they describe the kind of person whose inner life and

outer relationships reflect deep congruence with the heart of God. They invite us to become who we are, at our core, as image bearers created for worth, belonging, and purpose in the world.

And of course, Jesus sums up the entire law and prophets in two commands: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). This reveals the *telos*—the ultimate objective—of character: *love*. Not love as sentiment, but love as self-giving, shalom-seeking, justice-making, relational wholeness. Mature character, in other words, is not defined by public posture or performance but by one’s capacity to love wisely, courageously, and sacrificially. The apostle Paul encourages us to aim for lives that exemplify the fruit of the Spirit—a full expression of love that is accompanied by joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

If personality is how we show up—funny, shy, pensive, charming, bold, sarcastic, reserved, talkative, intense, magnetic, awkward, or agreeable—*character* suggests something more substantial and enduring: our deep-seated dispositions, consistent traits, embedded habits, even our chronic behaviors. Imagine a sculptor carving an image into stone or a metalworker imprinting an image onto a coin. Imagine the deep, permanent grooves that hold up amidst life’s changing weather patterns.

Thus, character is the slow-formed architecture that shapes our consistent choices so that we can live in alignment with love. It reflects our capacity for inner integration—of our desires, wounds, and fears. When we are able to acknowledge and reconcile the internal patterns and motives that drive our behavior and emotions, our outer life increasingly flows from wholeness rather than compulsion.

This is evidence of an inner life reordered for the sake of embodied love.

In a world where personality pops, fauxnerability fools, and power platforms, we must be courageous enough to subversively dig deep and pursue grounded, mature, and transformed lives. The temptation to perform is strong. But the invitation of Christ is deeper—not to perform, but to become ourselves. Not to signal virtue, but to live with integrity. Not to be admired, but to be whole.

This is the journey I want to invite you on. As we grow into the kind of person whose inner life embodies love, power, and presence with integrity, we'll develop pathways not just for better health, but for deep change.

We'll do this in three parts.

Part 1 explores the *foundation* of character development. Schools and businesses have developed entire programs to encourage students and workers to treat one another with courtesy and civility. And Sunday school classes train children to live righteously. These programs have their place, and much that has been written on character speaks to behaving and acting the right way. Yet I'll ask a more fundamental question: What are the inner conditions necessary for deep transformation? While I'm all for behavior change, we've got to resist the impulse toward quick comebacks and cosmetic alterations that shortcut real, substantial change. Instead, we'll consider how to reenvision transformative change as something that must begin much deeper—at the neurobiological level.

Part 2 explores the *maturation* of character. If the architecture of our character is shaped from our first days and years, we need to think clearly and carefully about how character deepens and matures—in parenting, in church formation processes, in educational

spaces, in time-honored initiatory practices. In these chapters, we'll hear from ancient and contemporary Christian guides who offer maps we might follow on the transformative journey. And we'll also discover a surprising but significant twist on the old adage that suffering forms character.

Part 3 explores the *transformation* that enables us to live with faith, hope, and love—which is to say, to live renewed, resilient, and relationally trustworthy lives. Character change is revealed not in short-term tweaks but in long-term consistency as we become more grounded, expectant, and attuned. In the final chapter, we'll see how character is lived out within complex relational systems where, without the foundational work of part 1, our anxiety might not only impact others but harm them. Yet we'll see how, once we engage in the foundational work and maturation process, our presence has the power to transform.

The story of character formation I want to tell you doesn't pit Scripture against psychology, ancient virtue ethics against neuroscience, or sin against styles of coping. No, we need it all today. We need the philosophers and the poets, the theologians and the therapists. They'll all find a voice in the chapters to come.

The Hope of This Work

Almost fifteen years ago, I consulted in a painful church situation that involved an extramarital affair between a pastor and a staff member. The pastor's attempt at a cover-up and his failure to disclose his mistakes, even when confronted, led to further pain and harm for the woman whose trust he exploited, for the wife he betrayed, for the congregation he deceived.

To my shock, the leadership of the church took their beloved pastor's sin seriously, both as a moral failure and as an abuse of power. They committed resources, not just to their own restoration and health, but to the long-term rehabilitation and health of the survivor, the (now-fired) pastor, and his spouse. The survivor felt seen, heard, and honored, and the church followed through on their rehabilitation plan for years after.

I tracked the process for some time with hope and gratitude. But after a decade I lost connection. And then I ran into the pastor on a street corner in a city I was visiting. I asked how he was doing, and he took a few minutes to describe a process that involved reparation, counseling, challenging marital work, a reimagined vocation, and long-term healing. He seemed genuinely well.

"Chuck, you told me it'd be at least ten years before you'd ever consider letting me transition back into church work, and it's about that time—so I've applied for a church job," he said.

For the first time, I grew a bit anxious. But I listened closely.

"I've applied to be the site manager of a Presbyterian church in town," he said. "Basically, that means cleaning toilets and changing lightbulbs."

He laughed. And I followed.

"My wife and I talk about one day finding our way back into pastoral ministry, but I've discovered this is slow work. And I like how this steady and slow progress feels. It's much better than the awful and stressful pace I'd gone at before."

With that, he told me that he could hardly wait to serve the church again, one toilet at a time. In him, I saw a man who'd left the masks behind and was becoming who he is at his core.

This is how the tree trunk of character thickens—ring by quiet ring. Not with the rapid upward stretch of ambition, but with the slow growth of repentance, reflection, and repair. The outer bark may look unchanging to passersby, but beneath the surface, the core is forming anew—denser, steadier, stronger—the hidden evidence of character change. This pastor's story is a witness to the slow, subterranean grace of healing overflowing into outward fruit. What was once hollowed out by secrecy and shame has been refilled by honesty and humility.

This is the kind of growth we need more of—slow, hidden, rooted.

Less platform and more presence.

Fewer quick fixes and more deep transformation.

There are no shortcuts to this kind of fruitful life and Christlike character. It's not something that can be crowdsourced or curated, simply tweaked with a few spiritual practices, a season of self-care, or a book on your personality type. We must reimagine spiritual growth, not as the means of acquiring information or mastering techniques, but as a lifelong movement into depth and integrity, cultivated through faith, strengthened through hope, and embodied through love. It is nurtured in the quiet, often unseen spaces where no one is watching, where the Spirit meets us, not on stage, but in the shadows. It is forged slowly—measured not in weeks, but in years. Sometimes decades.

The Spirit does not rush nor relent. In hidden places, in quiet lives, in small acts of courage and truth-telling, the Spirit is already at work—deepening roots, strengthening trunks, preparing us to bear the fruit of a renewed and resilient character.

My friends, I know what I'm asking of you. I know what I'm asking of myself. It won't be easy, but it will be sacred. The reckoning will bear fruit. I'm convinced of it because I trust the Spirit who hovers over chaos, who broods over what is formless and void, who brings life out of death and calls forth beauty from broken places.

I long for this to be a resource for all who wrestle as I do, who are weary but hungry for hope and longing to trust. Hope doesn't erase the mess or stitch together the fractures overnight. Real hope, as you'll see, grows in quieter places—beneath the noise, beneath our striving, beneath the temptation to manage appearances. It emerges slowly, often imperceptibly, in the small acts of truth-telling, the humble confession of an honest prayer, the unexpected gift of being seen and known, even amidst our contradictions.

Hope asks something of us: eyes to see what God is doing beneath the surface, ears to hear the whisper we're prone to miss, and patience to stay with the slow work of becoming. Hope does not bypass reality; it illuminates it.

If you're willing to walk through the long path of character formation, hope will find you, too, my friend. So let's begin walking that path together. Here and in the chapters to come I'll leave you with a blessing—an intentionally right-brained, poetic invitation to balance my left-brained analysis. May this blessing be a gesture toward grace; something to be received rather than achieved.

And so, dear friends,

*May you read these pages
with open eyes and an honest heart,
curious not just about who you've been,
but who you're becoming.*

who you're becoming

*May the pain you've carried
find a witness
tender enough to hold it
and courageous enough to name it.*

*May the fractures you've observed in others
not harden your soul with cynicism
but awaken a longing for a life forged in truth—
honest, bold, and tenderhearted.*

*May your own contradictions
held in secret within you
become invitations,
not to shame, but to grace.*

*May you abide,
growing in trust,
gazing toward hope,
grounded in love.*

*May you mature,
shaped slowly and deeply
by the one who carves character
in hidden places.*

*And may you trust that
even here,
even now,
you are already being transformed.*

RESOURCES

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

- Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*
- Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*
- Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*
- Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*

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. Where has trust been shaken or shattered for you? What causes you real concern in this current moment of reckoning? How has this betrayal of trust impacted you personally? What questions has your own shattered trust left you with?
2. As you consider the relative health or unhealth of the systems you live in, how would you name the problem(s)? How are these impacting you right now? What assumptions, beliefs, or priorities might need to change to allow healing?
3. As you reflect on the meaning of character, what words or themes resonate? Where have you seen character shaped in ways you are grateful for, whether your own or in someone else? Where have

who you're becoming

you seen shortcuts or even an absence of character affect your life or the lives of others?

4. How would you describe Christlike character? What do you look for as evidence of strong character?

PRACTICE

Cultivating Acknowledgment, Grief, and Longing for the Sake of Character Change

Throughout the book, the practices at the end of each chapter will build upon one another, at times with some overlap and expansion so you can experience a growing healing and wholeness.

Craft a “Personal Reckoning” Narrative

Take some time to bring to mind a moment of disillusionment or betrayal by another; a moment of inner disappointment at not living up to a standard you'd set for yourself; or perhaps a growing ache amidst the larger, systemic reckoning we're facing.

1. What happened? (This could be quite personal or reflective of a larger cultural movement.)
2. How has this shaped you in both soul and body, in thoughts and feelings, in the ways in which you behave and in your relationships?
3. What has been the cost to you?
4. How do you feel you've moved through it, or how do you continue to feel stuck amidst it?
5. How would you describe the ways you'd like to grow in Christlike character?

Write a Lament

Lament is the biblical response to personal or collective pain. Laments are honest pleas before God, inviting us to name our ache as an antidote to our less-helpful strategies of bypassing, numbing, reacting, or avoiding. Scripture models this in the everyday cries of ordinary human beings like you and me. There are psalms of individual lament—Psalm 3, 5–7, 13, 17, 22, 25–28, 32, 38–39, 42–43, 51, 54–57, 59, 61, 63–64, 69–71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, and 140–143. There are also psalms of communal lament—44, 74, 79–80, 83, and 89.⁴ What we know is that amidst personal and collective reckonings, we must allow the emotion to move through us in meaningful ways. Lament facilitates this. It invites us to express our grief honestly and unapologetically.

STEP 1: REVIEW SCRIPTURE LAMENTS WITH YOUR EXPERIENCES IN MIND

Read through some of the suggested laments above and see if you might reframe some of your own experiences, emotions, and words in their ancient forms.

STEP 2: COMPOSE A LAMENT

Write your own lament, specifically attending to details of what has affected you.

Describe Your Longing

Laments were often accompanied by longings for justice, safety, accountability, hope, renewed strength, even for peace (what Scripture calls *shalom*). A deep longing of mine is that, despite what we've been through, we'll become—in time—the kind of people described by Jesus in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12) or by Paul in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).

1. As you reflect on the themes of character in both these Scripture passages, what do you long for personally?

who you're becoming

2. What do you hope for more broadly—for your family, for the church, for the culture as a whole? Write about your longings, and write specifically, allowing your heart to be moved by what emerges.
3. Despite what has happened to you, you can reshape and reauthor your life for the sake of integrity and wholeness. Honestly assess your desire to change at a foundational level. Are you coming to this work with curiosity or resistance? Humble expectancy or anxious urgency? Either way, it's all right—your honesty is what matters.

Be open to what the next chapters might reveal, not merely about other people, but about your own journey of character formation.

PART 1

the foundation of character



*Authentic character change
never announces itself with fanfare.*

*Rather, it moves like water over stone—
slow, steady, almost imperceptible,
until one day you realize
the landscape of your soul has shifted.*

*We'd like change to be swift,
like a dam breaking,
sending a rush of water
that carves a new path in an instant.*

*But more often, it commences slowly,
and with a hush,
in quiet decisions
faithfully made,
over and over again.*

*It can be frustrating,
this slow work of becoming.
Yet beneath the surface,
where we cannot always see,
the work is being done.
Character does change—
not in an instant,
but in the persistence
of grace and time.*



regulated

Building Character Through Connection (Not Perfection)

To be human is to have a heart. You can't not love. So the question isn't whether you will love something as ultimate; the question is what you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love.

JAMES K. A. SMITH, *YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOVE*

*My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure. . . .
You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.*

PSALM 16:9, 11

Sydney had worked for a nonprofit for years, and whenever someone asked her how she liked her job, she'd shrug and say, "Knowing that we're helping people is really gratifying." She never mentioned the pit that formed in her stomach when she heard Jeff, her boss, approach her desk or raise his voice in their weekly staff meetings.

One day over coffee with her friend Anna, Sydney spoke of her spiraling health and panic attacks, prompting Anna to get curious about her satisfaction at work. After Sydney mentioned how Jeff had loudly berated her that morning for letting a typo get through

in the annual report, she watched Anna's eyes grow large and her mouth fall open.

"It's fine," Sydney said. "I mean, I don't love being constantly dismissed and disparaged by my boss, but maybe I could be better at my job."

Still Anna's look of astonishment awakened Sydney, validating her pain. "I think your body's telling you something, Syd," Anna said.

Sydney knew it in her gut—*Jeff's bullying isn't right*—but she'd been ignoring the blinking lights on her emotional and somatic dashboard within. She'd been dismissing the disparities in her boss's behavior as one-off mistakes, muting a gut-level urge to take them seriously. After all, she needed the job, and Jeff was an old family friend.

On the surface, Sydney's boss seemed like a good guy—a church elder, a family man, a quick wit. He donated to charity, the team he coached won the Best Sportsmanship Award, and he taught a class on sanctification at his church.

But in her ten years with the company, Sydney had seen Jeff silencing dissent, demanding allegiance, enacting retribution on the disloyal, evading accountability, gaslighting, and more. Within a few weeks of her coffee date with Anna, the nonprofit's board launched an inquiry into Jeff's behavior after receiving multiple complaints from Sydney's coworkers and the organization's clients. The investigating team found that Jeff's aggressive behaviors were something more sinister: patterns of bullying and misbehavior. Dozens of emails and texts further amplified his tendencies toward anger, deceit, and cruelty. And Jeff's closest deputies had become unwitting accomplices, much to their shame.

Upon reading the results of the internal inquiry, Jeff exploded with fury. "That's not who I am!" he exclaimed. (That's the cry

of someone whose behavior feels completely reasonable from the inside—what psychologists call *ego-syntonic*: when our patterns fit so comfortably with our self-image that we cannot recognize them as a problem.)

But Jeff was wrong; his character was revealed in habits that had become second nature, habits that he would awaken to only through the eventual shattering of his ego.

Patterns That Reveal Who You Are

Consider this: *Who you are* shows up right here and now—in patterns of thinking, believing, feeling, working, and relating that reveal the deeper and more subtle habits of your heart.

Sure, we're all prone to occasional mistakes and misjudgments. Even people of high character will sometimes disappoint themselves and others. It's inevitable. I recall a friend losing his temper during an important gathering. We knew him to be an even-keeled, non-anxious presence, so the small eruption surprised us all. I grabbed him after the meeting and checked in.

He was embarrassed. Sitting across from me, he was hunched, his face in his hands. "My daughter was hospitalized this weekend for an eating disorder," he said. "I don't know what we're going to do."

Heaving sobs followed, his tears revealing a dad's tender heart and the shame of showing up in a way that violated his deepest sense of propriety. His authentic humility revealed the integrity of his character.

Yes, we're all prone to acting out of stress. Yet when we reflect on Jeff and Sydney, we see a key difference: Jeff's behavior was not a one-time mistake but a recognizable pattern. Calvin University philosopher James K. A. Smith notes that character is "the web of

dispositions you've acquired (virtues and vices) that work as automaticities, disposing you to act in certain ways."¹ That's a mouthful, to be sure. But what he's saying is crucial. When it comes to character, we shouldn't just pay attention to one-off behaviors; instead, we should focus on what has become second nature, revealed in the everyday habits and patterns of our lives.

And those habits didn't begin yesterday.

To take character seriously, we need to look deeper and start much earlier.

Because who you are didn't happen overnight. The architecture of your character has been shaped over a lifetime. Who you are is revealed not just in the habits of the heart, but in the hub of what Smith calls the "automaticities"—the workings of the central nervous system.

That's not a recent discovery.

Well before modern advancements in neuroscience and physiology, ancient pastoral psychologists were mapping the inner landscape—and what they discovered has much in common with what we know today about our bodies and brains.

Writing on the lived theology of the desert fathers and mothers of the third and fourth centuries, former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams notes that these cartographers of the soul were not just interested in the outward sinful behavior but in the internal dynamics motivating sin—what they called the "passions." Williams says that they named a "whole realm of instinct, reaction, [and] coping mechanisms" that drive our outward behaviors.² In other words, they sensed that the story of our habits is inextricably tied to a churning anxiety within—evidence of self-protection and survival, not safety and security.

If you want to understand character and why people are the way they are, you've got to understand what's happening at this subterranean level within the human heart. You need to pay attention to that realm of instinct, reaction, and coping mechanisms that often operates beneath conscious awareness. Or in more contemporary parlance, you need to pay attention to emotional regulation and dysregulation.

And these states are anchored in your story.

Consider this: Before you had words, your body was already asking, *Am I safe? Am I seen? Am I loved?*

Often, your present character is a direct result of the answer your body was given in those early days, inextricably shaped by these deep, embodied learnings.

If your parents or caregivers consistently responded to your needs, you likely internalized a felt sense of security, allowing you to rest in connection, to explore and take risks as you grew. Through the reliable presence and secure love of your parents or caregivers, you experienced the soothing co-regulation your young and fragile nervous system needed. Think of co-regulation as *connected* regulation—the beautiful grounding and soothing that happens when you're in the presence of another who sees you and deeply cares.

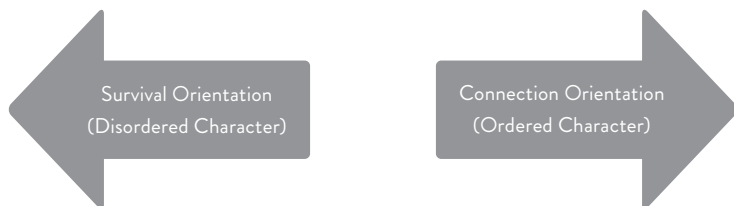
This safe connection may have led to habits of regulation, prompting healthy patterns of reflection, compassion, kindness, patience, long-suffering, even self-awareness—echoes of Christlike character. In other words, this connected regulation manifests in coherence—a life in which your inner world and outer actions sing in harmony.

Consider the beauty of it. This connection orientation means that, from your earliest days, you perceived the world not as a dangerous place that required inner division so you could survive, but as a hospitable place where you felt safe enough to be seen and known, where love

could be received and given. This offered you the possibility not just to become a healthy adult but also to become the kind of person who is wholeheartedly devoted in your relationships, vocation, and more.

Conversely, the prolonged absence of co-regulation—either through neglect or abuse—shapes the soul and body much differently. If your early needs were met with inconsistency, criticism, or absence, your body likely learned to adapt. You may have become hypervigilant and people-pleasing, performing for approval, or withdrawing to protect yourself. These early ruptures in care likely led to dysregulation, prompting patterns of reactivity, anxiety, defensiveness, appeasement, grasping after love, even acting out for attention. These are all signs of a character shaped for self-protection and survival, leading to internal division. We see examples all around us. A leader's defensiveness, a parent's relentless overachievement, a therapist's fusion with a client—each can be traced back to those early patterns of division, disconnection, and self-protection.

Such adaptations don't just disappear either; they become the soil out of which habits grow. As these early self-protective strategies endure into adulthood, they become second nature. And the capacity to love becomes *disordered*—which, from a classic theological lens, simply means that our loves are out of order. In other words, instead of learning that love is anchored in connection, we find that love is based on survival and self-protection. This impacts our capacity to love with wholehearted devotion.



Six Self-Protective Patterns

When our lives are shaped more by survival than connection and when our hearts become divided and disordered, patterns of autonomic nervous system dysregulation are inevitable. This isn't something to beat ourselves up about, but it is an invitation to curiosity because our reflexive responses do have an impact—on us and others.

At times, our patterns will be charged with the self-protective energy of what I call *Storm*, reflecting the activation of our sympathetic nervous system. Here, we might see the instinctive and involuntary response of fight, flight, fawn, and find. At other times, our patterns will reflect the parasympathetic pull to preserve energy or shut down in what I call *Fog*—with its responses of freeze and fold. Fragmented within, these responses reveal how we reflexively and unconsciously navigate a threatening world.

Although it's likely that more could be included, these six core protective patterns reveal what is happening within, beneath the surface, where character is shaped.

Storm (Activation)

In *fight*, we armor up, our bodies postured not just to defend but to attack when necessary. This stance shows up in patterns of irritability, control, defensiveness, argumentativeness, blame-shifting, moral superiority, rigidity, impatience, intimidation, certainty, a desire to win at all costs, and the use of power, words, or righteousness to stay protected. As autonomically charged patterns, they're not easily malleable. So someone might say to a spouse in fight mode, "Stop being so pushy and impatient." But pushiness and impatience have likely worked as a protective shield for that person, perhaps for decades.

This doesn't make the painful impact of it acceptable, but it helps us understand where such behavior comes from.

In *flight*, our patterns look like procrastination, conflict avoidance, distraction, addiction, and spiritual bypassing, yes—but also overplanning, constant busyness, overfunctioning, perfectionism, and compulsive productivity. When people come to me hoping to be less perfectionistic, it'd be easy to offer a cliché like, “Just give yourself more grace” or “You're doing great—you can relax.” But a bit of curiosity might reveal that this pattern has operated far longer than they knew, as an early adaptive style to remain safe and secure.

Most people are familiar with fight-or-flight, but there are other everyday patterns that are less often named. In *fawn*, there is an instinctual tendency to lose ourselves in tending to others, but not in a sanctified “self-giving love” sort of way. We may be prone to patterns of people-pleasing, appeasement, excessive agreeableness, self-silencing, overempathy, conflict avoidance, boundary-less caregiving, and anticipatory compliance. While these behaviors may earn us awards in elementary school and leadership positions in adulthood, they may also reflect a nervous system stuck in an early developmental pattern of pleasing a parent who is anxious, angry, or neglectful.

Find is yet another autonomic, reflexive response, an instinctual pattern of emotional enmeshment and dependency, seen in excessive neediness, clinginess, reassurance seeking, fear of abandonment, collapsing boundaries, overdisclosure, dependency on approval, emotional fusion, and confusing proximity with safety. And while we might want to tell someone stuck in this pattern, “Stop being so needy,” it's not that easy. This, too, is indexed into a person's overall style of self-protection, and it's not easily shifted.

Fight, flight, fawn, and find implicate the sympathetic nervous system, your body in active self-protection. This is a state I call Storm because you're internally hyperaroused.³ And because these states are physiological, instinctual, and unconscious, they're often ego-syntonic. As we saw with Jeff, that means you might not even notice the pervasive impact these states have on your everyday ways of living and relating. *This is just who I am, who I've always been*, you reason.

Even though Jeff thought of himself as a good guy, a committed Christian, and a generally self-aware leader, he needed to reckon with an internal drive to fight which had long been his most basic instinct. This was revealed not just in his harrowing work habits but later in abusive patterns within his marriage and workplace.

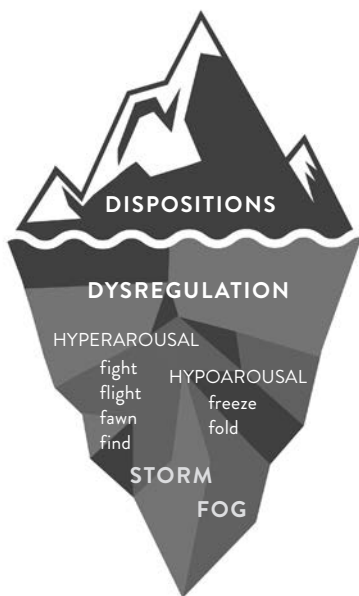
Tragically, Jeff's sense of self-awareness was largely superficial; he mistook the "fight" mask he'd worn for so long as his true self. Dysregulation and inner disorder had become "normal," and he was unaware that his reflexive patterns of intimidation, moral superiority, and need for control drove so many of his interactions. Friends even colluded with his sense of self, affirming him as a "strong leader" who was frequently misunderstood by people with "daddy issues." This is why, for Jeff and so many others, a surface-level self-awareness doesn't equate to self-regulation.

"I can't believe I've been stuck in *fight* my whole life," Jeff would say much later, a bit stunned to consider its abiding role in his life. "It became the only reality I knew."

Jeff's capacity for repentance would grow as he recognized the truth. He wasn't merely a leader who had a bad day now and then—he was governed by forces within that had been established long before, to keep him safe as he grew up amidst fatherlessness and

who you're becoming

chaos. He was animated by a fight instinct that was born out of a tough home life and an early vow to make it despite the odds. This led to relational patterns with dire moral consequences.



Fog (Shutdown)

And deeper still within this subterranean layer of the psyche are patterns of *freeze* and *fold*. *Freeze* is sometimes described as a deer-in-the-headlights sensation—an instinctual and involuntary immobility. It might be experienced as numbness, indecision, withdrawal, passivity, invisibility, learned helplessness, low affect, and the quiet belief that it's safer not to move at all. As Sydney reflected on her experience working with Jeff at the nonprofit, she realized how even though she knew it in her gut—*it isn't right*—she'd ignored her own

intuition. She froze in order to survive. Eventually she would see that her particular default patterns, including the freeze instinct, were learned under the cruel thumb of an abusive father. Her own character—often described as modest and kind but better named as muted and deferential—was fueled by self-protection rather than other-centered love. This led to what is sometimes called a chronic, functional freeze, a state in which a person remains outwardly capable and productive while inwardly numb, constrained, and disconnected from felt vitality. For Sydney, becoming aware of this would lead to her own humility and growth.

Finally, when the situation is dire, our body sometimes responds by *folding*, the quiet closing of the self when staying open no longer feels survivable. It's not laziness or apathy. It's the body's way of saying, "It's too much!" *Fold* is experienced as low energy, heaviness, depression, withdrawal, fatigue, diminished curiosity, and a wish to simply disappear as a means of surviving. And with this pattern, too, there are no clichés or quick fixes that can undo what's been functionally normal for a long time.

These six patterns—fight, flight, fawn, find, freeze, and fold—often shift from short-term survival responses to chronic and long-term ways of navigating a fraught world, the proverbial mask becoming the only face we know. And once these autonomic responses become second nature, they're hard to see, as both Jeff and Sydney discovered. We may even baptize them as righteous. Some of the typical go-to places for self-awareness—the Enneagram, the Myers-Briggs assessment, StrengthsFinder, 360 reviews, or standard leadership or church planting assessments—won't reveal these subterranean dynamics. We may even exhaust ourselves trying to fix our anger, perfectionism, procrastination, or perceived laziness, using tools, techniques, and

practices that don't address these inner patterns and don't recognize their core adaptive function within the evolving story of our nervous systems. This is a recipe for exasperation, and I see so many people here, feeling stuck without a solution.

But there is hope, my friends. Our nervous system is not set in stone; our learned automaticities can change with curiosity and compassion. Over time, it's possible to reorient ourselves away from disconnection and back toward connection, creating the conditions for the character change we long for.

Devotion and Disorder

Character, you see, is not ultimately behavioral. It's relational. In some ways, then, Christlike character, too, is more *caught* than *taught*.

Of course, a mix of factors contribute to Christlike character and wholehearted devotion: worship, discipleship, prayer, community, catechesis, and more. I'm not at all suggesting moral formation and wise instruction are replaceable. But these are actually built on a foundation of connection—and wither when it is absent.

Jesus said, “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock” (Matthew 7:24-25, NLT). A safe and secure foundation doesn't immunize us to every storm that might hit or do damage, but it fortifies us.

I know what you're likely thinking: *Don't tell me my lack of perfection is the cause of my child's struggles, Chuck! No parent is perfect!* Indeed. I've got a long list of parenting foibles. But this isn't about perfection; it's about connection. We don't have to get it right every time.⁴

The key is this: When we don't get it right, we get to circle back around and reconnect. We get to check in and re-tune. Perfection doesn't build the secure foundation. Connection does, even when we mess up. A woman I was seeing for counseling told me, "My father was anxious and angry at times, but I could always count on him to come back around and ask me about it." She experienced ruptures in connection, but her secure foundation was built on repair and reconnection. That phrase—"I could always count on him"—makes all the difference.

We can't minimize the painful reality, however, of a life built on an insecure foundation. What happens to infants who can't count on their parents to reconnect? The unreliable presence and insecure love of their parents or caregivers mean that co-regulation isn't available, prompting babies to self-soothe. To be sure, every baby comforts themselves to some degree, but imagine for a moment infants who have no one reliable to turn to, to be seen or held by. It's scary for little ones—even if they aren't conscious of it. These children do not learn coherence but contradiction, dividing the self—one part performing for connection, the other burying what feels too vulnerable to be seen. Their survival styles will likely be reflected in a single pattern or a mix of the six patterns of fight, flight, fawn, find, freeze, or fold.

But what if these patterns become so ingrained that they take over, dominating the entire personality? Interestingly, psychologists call deeply ingrained patterns personality disorders, noting that they are characterological, which means that they've come to define one's character. They represent such a heightened state of inner division that things have gotten "out of order" within, becoming disruptive not just internally but relationally as well.

It's critical to see that personality disorders are not character defects but ingrained patterns emerging over time, shaped by an interplay of biology and lived experience. Our biology provides the construction material, our childhood environment builds from there, and our resulting sense of safety (or lack thereof) determines which behaviors we rely on and which we deem unsafe. This is why a secure foundation is so vital.⁵ Personality disorders are not labels that we haphazardly apply—they're extreme manifestations of survival patterns. And while these lived patterns can be harmful to ourselves or others, requiring accountability, understanding them can lead to empathy.

I've been working with people exhibiting personality disorders for more than twenty-five years, and a subset seems to show up more frequently in churches, organizations, and leadership assessments. Looking through a trauma-informed, empathetic lens, here are some of the disorders I frequently see:

Borderline personality disorder—protection through intensity. If love has been unpredictable—offered, then withdrawn—desperation takes root. Emotional extremes become both a protest against abandonment and a test of devotion, forcing connection while ensuring no one can get close enough to inflict final betrayal.

Histrionic personality disorder—protection through performance. When worth seems contingent on attention, life becomes a stage. Exaggeration and charm secure a place in the spotlight, and being noticed substitutes for being truly known.

Narcissistic personality disorder—protection through grandiosity. If early wounds suggest one is insignificant, a

larger-than-life persona forms as armor. The pursuit of attention, admiration, and achievement drowns out the quiet terror of shame and unworthiness, securing love on external terms.

Avoidant personality disorder—protection through retreat.

If rejection has cut too deep, avoidance becomes a shelter. By withdrawing from the possibility of failure, shame, or disappointment, the individual ensures that pain is kept at bay, even at the cost of connection.

Dependent personality disorder—protection through submission. When autonomy feels dangerous or overwhelming, dependence on another becomes the answer. By yielding, pleasing, and clinging, the individual ensures they are never left to navigate life alone.

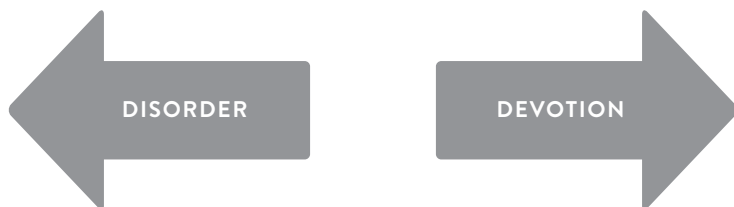
Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD)—protection through control. In a world that feels chaotic or unreliable, order becomes salvation. Perfectionism, rigidity, and an unwavering need for structure provide the illusion of mastery, ensuring that unpredictability—and the fear it brings—is minimized.

Recognizing how hearts created for wholehearted devotion can shift toward division, disconnection, and disorder is critical for our understanding of deep character change. This spectrum includes all of us, and studying it provides a growing sense of clarity around the subterranean dynamics of the human heart.⁶

While personality disorders do not equate to character defects, we can't ignore the importance of personal accountability. Living a

who you're becoming

disordered life hurts. It hurts the people suffering from it, and it hurts and sometimes harms those in their orbit.



Empathy and Accountability

Maybe you've been hurt by someone who has one or more of these disordered styles of relating. I'm not at all endeavoring to condone the harm these issues cause. In fact, if you are in a relationship that is coercive, controlling, or abusive, your priority is not that person's character change. Your priority is your own protection. So by all means, with the help of a friend, pastor, or mental health practitioner, get whatever you need to be safe.

We are each responsible for our own actions, so while our hearts stretch toward empathy as we understand the roots of relational patterns, we're also mindful of their profound impact. Jeff was elevated on the narcissistic spectrum. His unexamined survival strategies, fused with institutional and spiritual power, led to behaviors that were rightly named as abusive, requiring accountability. And while it would be easy to label Jeff's actions merely as coping techniques, they were also rightly named as sin.

When we name the dynamics of the heart through the lens of our brains and bodies, some people might bristle and say, "You are soft on sin." I've personally heard that. However, what I've noticed is

that, among those who claim to take sin seriously, there is a serious lack of curiosity and clarity around what fuels our besetting habits.

Some tend to settle for what Dallas Willard calls “sin management”—a surface-level game of soul Whac-A-Mole that represents a shallow attempt at assuaging the anxious undercurrent fueling habits and behavior.⁷ This shallow sin-management approach often leads to cheap grace in the form of quick fixes.

On paper, Jeff had a robust theology of sin. In practice, he hoped a brief sabbatical and a contrite-sounding general apology to his staff might pave the way for a quick comeback. In my experience, I’ve seen the most resistance to change from those most committed to strong theological formulations of sin. Ironically, those most fluent in the language of sin are often least prepared for the loss of control that real transformation requires. The body knows what the theology resists: Deep change threatens identity, reputation, and power. Here, primal patterns of self-protection kick in. Sadly, repentance is often compressed into statements and sabbaticals while the underlying patterns remain untouched.

Sin is not merely a behavioral violation, as some assume, but our habitual participation in patterns of self-protection and disconnection—from self, others, and God. While we might empathize as we discover the insecure roots of disordered patterns, we can’t minimize the hurt and harm they cause: addictions, abuse, betrayal, bullying, and much more.

But here’s the challenge—when disordered patterns are named, the nervous system often engages the old survival responses. In Jeff’s case, this led him to armor up. Deflect. Avoid. Blame. If this reminds you of someone you know, you’re likely aware that this internal

dynamic shuts down any possibility of transformative change, rendering most early apologies or efforts merely performative, ego-preserving, and image-managing. If you're reading this as someone who is hoping for deep change yourself, I invite you to recognize these dynamics in your own heart, not as a source of shame but as a gateway to hope.

Deep character change requires a person to step completely away from anything that seeks to preserve their ego-syntonic self-image. This might mean leaving a leadership role, not merely for weeks or months, but for much longer—long enough to reestablish regulation, safety, security, and connection, the conditions in which honest words, real repentance, and genuine change can flow. Even the apostle Paul—the chief architect of a theology of grace—needed three years in the desert for grace to deal with the depths of his pharisaic formation. Quick comebacks circumvent deeper dynamics of the heart, compromising the possibility of real transformation.

This is hard but ultimately hopeful, especially for those committed to enduring transformation.

Transformed Through Love

“You are what you love,” James K. A. Smith writes.⁸ And while Smith wasn't referring to the human nervous system, his insight into the habits of the heart is spot-on. Our capacity to love, and love well, requires a secure foundation. Absent it, we can't love fully, and we might even harm others.

That's a hard reality to swallow. It was for me. It's understandable if, at this point, you feel like you're doomed to disordered living because of a painful past. But I hope instead it invites curiosity

and compassion for yourself, even for the fraught, early formative moments you may have experienced. Consider this hopeful perspective: Understanding how your loves were shaped and your habits were formed is key to transformative character change. You are not doomed by your painful past, and there is no expiration date on the possibility of repair and reconnection.

For decades, I've worked with people who've exhausted themselves with New Year's resolutions and novel practices, strict Bible-reading regimens and high-commitment small group studies, devout devotional habits and disciplined lives. But many are left with inevitable questions: *Why am I not changing? Why do I still have such a temper? Why do I react so strongly? Why do I procrastinate so much? Why am I so obsessive?* I get the effort, but effort alone built on a foundation of insecurity and anxiety leads to futility.

Like many of us, Jeff spent years in what he thought were noble efforts at becoming a stronger leader and a better person—engaging in Scripture reading and men's gatherings, even participating in Enneagram staff retreats and personal journaling—all prior to his crisis. Yet it was his unaddressed dysregulation that fueled his rapid-fire, self-resourcing program, blinding him to the deeper forces that drove his behavior.

In addition to stepping away from his leadership role, Jeff began meeting regularly with Bill, who had retired several years before from the CEO position Jeff now held. A wise and seasoned leader, Bill became a safe person with whom Jeff could process the findings of the internal report and examine the anxious drive that compelled Jeff to be so hard on others. This was a critical part of his restoration.

Why is walking alongside a safe and wise person so critical as you seek to develop your character? Your body is designed to naturally

relax its protective mechanisms in the presence of someone you can trust. When another person offers a calm, steady, nonjudgmental presence, your defenses soften, allowing you to access the parts of yourself you normally hide or protect. In this co-regulating space, character change can finally take root in a body and soul that feels safe enough to be honest, vulnerable, and receptive to grace.

Once Bill finally helped Jeff realize that he had been bringing his fight strategy to the change process, Jeff relinquished, worn out and embarrassed. That's when he finally surrendered his futile and exhausting efforts, instead daring to be known—engaging in the vulnerable relational work that would once and for all begin to reorder and reconcile his inner divisions. In time, Jeff found the courage to get curious about this fight strategy—humbled that it had been a resource to protect himself in his earliest years, and heartbroken that it had become a harmful way of relating to others into adulthood.

The Scottish preacher and theologian Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) talked about the “expulsive power of a new affection,” the idea that the best way to break free from something that has a grasp on your heart isn't to try harder to push it away but to let your heart be captured by a stronger, better love that slowly makes the old one lose its grip.⁹ But this requires courageous vulnerability—a heart open to love, care, and delight.

In harmony with Chalmers, Rowan Williams notes that early church sages didn't remedy defensiveness and reactivity with quick fixes but with sturdy love, a “mutual gaze of love and delight: the flow and return and overflow of divine life.”¹⁰ These early Christians weren't interested in putting Band-Aids on sin—they believed that the cure for extreme anxiety and insecurity of the soul was a deeper security in God.

Here again we see that character change isn't taught but caught—in

the context of vulnerable love and honest relationship. Only a new and deeper source of love can help us break free. My hope is that you, too, can break free from the grip of old affections as your heart awakens to a pathway beyond fight and flight, please and appease, stuck and shutdown. I know no other path than this slow and vulnerable one.

I've sat with folks whose disordered patterns caused disruptions personally and relationally, and whose self-protective strategies took time to relax. Can you find the courage to stay with the questions, the reckoning, the storms within, rather than seeking a quick work-around? Can you find your way to a healing relationship where shame will dissolve and secure love will grow?

Grace isn't a race to the finish line. You can't force character change. Reckonings and reformations—personal and collective—take time. A sacred repatterning within needs to happen, and it can with your consent. If you long to change—or long to see someone you love change—it begins here, at this foundational level, as you find your way into the safe arms of divine Love, as you are held by others who want what's best for you, as your loves are reordered at the depths.

Love will help you find your way Home.

And so, dear friends,

May you find the courage to stay.

To stay with the ache, the questions, the reckoning.

To resist the quick comeback and embrace the long return.

*May you find the courage to name the storms within without shame
and befriend the fog rather than flee from it.*

*May you honor the slow healing of your nervous system
and the sacred repatterning of love.*

who you're becoming

*May you trust the wisdom of your longing,
the longing for coherence more than the charade,
for connection more than control.*

*And may you know the secure Love
that fosters lasting regulation,
nurtures honest relationships,
and grows deep roots.*

RESOURCES

- Aimie Apigian, *The Biology of Trauma: How the Body Holds Fear, Pain, and Overwhelm, and How to Heal It*
- James F. Masterson, *The Search for the Real Self: Unmasking the Personality Disorders of Our Age*
- James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*

REFLECTION

1. What are you sensing about the ways character change differs from growth in emotional health, boundaries, or spiritual practices?
2. How does Sydney's response to Jeff's managerial style—shut-down, avoidance, and silent discomfort—illustrate why it's so important to examine one's own character? Why do you think we tend to miss or ignore these dynamics?
3. What are some rationalizations or minimizations you've heard that dismiss real faults or flaws of character?

4. As you consider your own early story of regulation (or dysregulation), how do you think your body's felt sense of safety shaped your habits over time? How does understanding the source and shape of people's habits, even from their earliest moments, impact the way you understand their character and the change process?
5. Like so many people, Jeff thought he was engaging in good practices, even ones designed to make him more self-aware. However, he did not realize that he was living in fight mode and hadn't yet taken the time to get curious about the origins of this internalized, reflexive response. Which of the six F's—fight, flight, fawn, find, freeze, and fold—do you most relate to? How has your spiritual journey become entangled with this autonomic pattern?
6. Renewed safety and connection create the conditions for a regulated nervous system, which leads to growing habits of Christlike character formation. These are core realities (not mere strategies to tame sin or manage behavior). As you consider how safety and connection can change us from the inside out, do you have a story of how you've seen real, lasting change in you or someone else? How does this process expand your vision for real character change—for yourself and for others?

PRACTICE

Cultivating Safety for the Sake of Character Change

Tracking

This brief practice helps you notice your nervous system in real time—whether you're in Storm (activation) or Fog (shutdown)—by tracking subtle bodily cues and protective patterns you may not yet be conscious of. It's not merely about calming but about cultivating awareness and compassion as the first step toward regulation and change.

who you're becoming

STEP 1: NOTICE YOUR BODY

Ask yourself, *What do I notice in my body right now?* (It might be tightness, pressure, urgency, aggression, withdrawing, heaviness, numbness, etc.)

No need to interpret. Just track your internal energy.

STEP 2: NOTICE ENERGY AND DIRECTION

Now notice the direction of your energy:

Does it feel like energy is rising, pushing, bracing, or mobilizing?

Or does it feel like energy is dropping, fading, slowing, or shutting down?

This shift in energy is often easier to sense than emotion.

STEP 3: ATTEMPT TO NAME THE PATTERN

If the energy feels activated or urgent, you may be in Storm.

See if any of these feel familiar right now:

Fight—irritation, defensiveness, inner arguing

Flight—restlessness, distraction, urgency to escape

Fawn—appeasing, over-agreeing, managing others

Find—searching, clamoring, soliciting

If the energy feels heavy, distant, or collapsed, you may be in Fog:

Freeze—stuck, blank, unable to decide or move

Fold—withdrawn, hopeless, resigned, quietly overwhelmed

You're not diagnosing—just noticing what fits.

STEP 4: ADD A SENTENCE OF KINDNESS

Before doing anything else, try one of these simple phrases:

“Something in me is trying to protect me right now.”

“Something in me is trying to send a message right now.”

“This reaction makes sense, given what I’ve lived.”

Let that land in your body for a breath or two.

STEP 5: STAY CURIOUS (NOT FIXING)

End by asking—not answering—two simple questions:

- What might your nervous system be responding to right now?
- What need might this part of you be communicating—fewer demands, more space, or gentle support?

Then stop. Tracking alone is the practice.

Cultivating a Felt Sense of Safety

Character change starts with what I call the autonomic basics, the body-and-brain-based essentials that create the conditions for this crucial shift from survival to connection. We take for granted these autonomic basics like safety, connection, rest, steadiness, delight, and peace. Cultivating character change begins here, as our survival strategies are relaxed and as we discover the “still waters” and “green pastures” (see Psalm 23:2) of deep autonomic rest.

Too often, we reduce character change to behavioral change—I’ll *switch a few things around in my life, and all will be well*. But if your nervous system is in a posture of self-protection or disconnection, nothing you do will stick.

If you’re curious about how people change—or if you’re reading to engage your own change process—this is as good a place as any to begin. The autonomic basics (which foster that needed inner security) nurture a connection orientation, which becomes the foundation of new habits and

practices, and lasting change. This is true whether you're a survivor of trauma, a perpetrator of abuse, or simply someone who has sensed some inner resistance to change despite the many things you've tried.

How do you build this foundation? It begins by returning to the core needs you might have missed so long ago: feeling safe, seen, soothed, and secure.¹¹ In this exercise, you'll cultivate a felt sense of safety, and you'll return to the other three S's in future chapters.

Safety whispers to your body, *It's okay to change. Your defenses can relax.* You can begin to open yourself to the possibility of newness, connection, and transformation, not least because your body is beginning to find its way to regulation.

STEP 1: SEEK A SAFE PERSON

Character transformation doesn't depend on performance or willpower. Instead, it is rooted in safety, which begins by connecting with safe people—a process called co-regulation. The presence of a calm and nonjudgmental person provides the safety needed to soften your defenses and open yourself to change.

Is there someone (a friend, mentor, spiritual director, therapist, etc.) with whom you might be able to feel safe? How might you take the courageous step, as Sydney did with Anna, to establish a personal or professional relationship with such a person?

STEP 2: SEEK SAFETY THROUGH SELF-REGULATION

Safety can also be fostered through gentle and sustained self-regulation, which creates the internal stability needed to face hard truths without collapsing into shame or reacting from fear. When you can calm your own nervous system, you gain the clarity and courage required for honest reflection, making space for the slow, steady work of character transformation. I invite you to practice communicating safety through the following self-regulation exercise:

- Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet on the floor, placing your nondominant hand on your chest and your dominant hand on your abdomen.



SAFE

- Begin to breathe—inhaling for four seconds (expanding your belly), holding for seven seconds, and exhaling for eight seconds.
- This practice is more powerful when you also have a felt sense of God's presence within and/or around you. If it feels right to you, you might expand your breathing exercise with a foundational practice of seeking to foster felt safety with God, drawing on this passage from Psalm 4:8:

Lord (inhale for four seconds)

make me dwell (hold for seven)

in safety (exhale for eight)

As you sense your body relaxing in either of these practices, you might whisper to yourself, “I’m okay; I’m not in danger. I don’t need to control my world. I don’t need to fight or flee.” You might do this with a safe friend, allowing their gentle presence to confirm this reality for you. Slowly, your posture toward the world can change. This won’t happen overnight because your body’s self-protection systems didn’t activate overnight. Feeling safe will take time, but it will happen.

who you're becoming

Many folks I've worked with—particularly men on the narcissistic spectrum—have little idea how regularly their bodies feel threatened. This little exercise may seem silly at first. But if our earliest attachment maps left us feeling threatened, orienting our bodies and brains toward safety is crucial for change.