

“A redemptive book of insight, grace, forgiveness, and healing.”

SCOT MCKNIGHT

You Are Safe Now

A Survivor's Guide to Listening
to Your Gut, Healing from Abuse,
and Living in Freedom

Tricia Lott Williford

with Jana Richardson, MA, LPC, EMDR

This stunning book is like being ushered into a therapist's (Jana's) office and listening to the therapist's client (Tricia), whose transparency is so lucid and articulate that you can see the feelings and hear the pulses of her heart. In *You Are Safe Now* the church is provided with one of the most important books on codependency, on spiritual abuse, on therapeutic finesse, and on a pastor who realized something was not right and was called to put an end to it. Right then and there Tricia heard, "You are safe now," and the healing began. A redemptive book of insight, grace, forgiveness, and healing.

SCOT MCKNIGHT, coauthor (with Laura Barringer) of *A Church Called Tov* and *Pivot*

An achingly raw and redemptive book. Tricia and Jana masterfully unveil the tactics of abusers and the realities of trauma while simultaneously showing the rescue and goodness of God. I hope that every pastor and counselor will read this book to learn how to come alongside victims—and that every person harmed by abuse can encounter the safety and hope in these pages.

AUBREY SAMPSON, pastor; cohost of *The Nothing Is Wasted Podcast*; and author of *The Louder Song, Known*, and *Big Feelings Days*

You Are Safe Now reads as the work of a master storyteller paired with the professional insight of a compassionate witness and expert guide. Together, Tricia and Jana have provided a significant contribution to the literature on abuse. This is a gift to all those who seek a better understanding of the complex dynamics of interpersonal exploitation and a clear, hopeful, practical guide for the healing journey.

WADE MULLEN, PHD, author of *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power*

You Are Safe Now is both a courageous and vulnerable memoir and a wise and kind guide. Tricia Williford's bravery in recounting her season of abuse and grief will both encourage and bring healing to the reader, while Jana Richardson's therapeutic narration will offer psychological explanations and tangible next steps. Someone in or coming out of abuse will find a pathway in *You Are Safe Now*, and someone walking alongside a healing victim will have a clearer understanding of how to show empathy and support. This is a beautiful and needed book.

ELISABETH KLEIN, coach; podcaster at *All That to Say*; and author of *Unraveling* and *World Split Open*

You Are Safe Now is one of those rare books that is as moving as it is instructional. Tricia is a gifted and talented writer, and the way she brings readers into her story and points us to hope and healing is inspirational and eye-opening. For those who want to learn how to travel from “victim” to “survivor” (or lead others on the journey), this book is a gem.

GARY THOMAS, bestselling author

I could not put this book down. I sat down to glance at the first chapter . . . and before I stood up, I had devoured it cover to cover. Tricia and Jana have done something extraordinary, unlike anything I've encountered before in books on trauma. I believe this honest journey about the life cycle of abusive patterns and relationships will not dysregulate your nervous system, will not retraumatize you. Instead, the authors' honest and kind words will wrap around you like a warm blanket, speaking in the voices of trusted friends guiding you through the hardest parts. Somehow, even though the truth telling is hard, the path toward healing and healthy intimacy becomes clear. I trust that when you emerge from these pages, you will find yourself stronger.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Fearing Bravely: Risking Love for Our Neighbors, Strangers, and Enemies*

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Important Note

This book contains sensitive themes, including emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, manipulation, sexual assault, and other violations by a person in a position of trust and spiritual authority. While the approach and structure aim to provide observational and empowering guidance and have been reviewed and edited with a trauma-informed lens, elements of the story may be triggering to survivors. We encourage gentleness with yourself. Feel the freedom to step away or to read this book in coordination with a trauma-informed therapist.

The material in this book presents an overview of the trauma of, treatment of, and recovery from an assault and abusive relationship. Every effort has been made to provide accurate and dependable information, and each chapter has been woven with discretion regarding which details to include from this individual account. This book has been compiled with clinical and legal professionals.

Change is unfolding every day regarding the patterns and treatments of abusive relationships, and the reader should be aware that professionals in this clinical field may have

differing opinions. Each case and individual is different, and the material in this book is not offered as a uniform method for any single person's recovery. Therefore, the authors, contributors, publisher, and editors cannot be held responsible for any error, omission, or outdated material.

The information in this book is presented for the purposes of education and healing. Reading this book is not a substitute for receiving informed professional advice specific to an individual. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a mental-health problem without personally consulting a licensed physician or other helping professional.

*There are always more survivors than
there are therapists available.*

There is always more wreckage than can be repaired.

*It is amazing how little effort it takes to disrupt people's lives,
and how much it takes to put them back together.*

*To have your time, your body, your emotional labor,
and your altruism—especially your altruism—
stolen from you for years . . . I don't
know that that ever goes away.*

*The only way that gets turned into something positive is when
that person is able to really fathom the depth of it and say,
"I'm never going to let that happen to someone else."*

MATTHEW REMSKI, CONSPIRITUALITY (PODCAST)

*People forget that their actions
not only have consequences,
but victims and witnesses.*

*People who will carry what you said
or did within their bone marrow,
your disrespect in their sinews.*

*You are chaos theory:
a butterfly who caused a hurricane
for which you refuse to take responsibility.*

*There is no goodness in that.
Still, I hope you are safe and warm
and happy wherever you are.*

NIKITA GILL, "TO THE PERSON NAMED DESTRUCTION"

This Is How It Happens



Jana

If abusers wore name tags, and if manipulators wore menacing capes and entered stage left to ominous music, then perhaps we might recognize them before they ruin people's lives.

But they do not announce their intentions before they begin, and most victims don't recognize abusers until the damage is done.

The harm caused by human perpetrators is profound, lasting, and shockingly common. We don't want to live in fear of the people around us, but we must also be alert and aware. Abuse happens all around us, and sometimes it happens *to* us. Often, the abusers live among us.

As a licensed mental-health therapist, I've seen and assessed the damage in my office time and time again. Though the voices of victims and details of harm are unique, one common denominator prevails: The victim never thought something like this could happen to them.*

I've worked with teachers, doctors, and other mandated reporters—people with training to know what to look for—who have been manipulated, duped, conned, or themselves abused.

I've counseled the self-proclaimed helicopter parent whose teenager was lured by a sexual predator online. Though the parent monitored screen time and screen names, kept passwords locked up and curfews locked down, the perpetrator still reached their child.

I've worked with a therapist who decided to try dating online and fell prey to a con artist who needed just a little cash to get out of a tight spot. The therapist sent money without ever meeting this person, and now he's a target of identity fraud and debt collections that are swallowing him whole.

I've treated the nurse who works with victims of sexual assault and does the rape kits, and who unknowingly picked up a drink spiked with a date drug, waking up to the same harm and trauma her patients had experienced.

I've seen the damage of more covert abuse as well, such as the aftermath of a controlling parent or a verbally abusive supervisor in the workplace. This kind of abuse can cause damage to a person's psyche that may take decades to recover from.

* To protect the privacy and anonymity of my clients, the following illustrations are composites of real situations.

I've seen terrible things happen to smart people. And when I say "smart people," I am referring to intelligence of every kind—book smart, street smart, multiple degrees, leadership skills, high emotional intelligence.

In this book, we are telling the story of an abusive relationship between a church leader and a person in the congregation, so let's look at what we know about this particular dynamic. Abuse in a spiritual context has layers of harm, but in every case there is a built-in power imbalance: The leader's influence cannot be separated from their spiritual practice, which means they implicitly and falsely apply God's voice, approval, and credibility to their words and actions, no matter how harmful.

The scope of this problem isn't easy to identify or discuss. Hard data and accurate statistics, particularly anything that gives a sense of the extent of abuse in faith context,¹ are difficult to find. Based on what we do know, the research doesn't include what is certainly the majority of abuse. The limited information we do have, however, is still deeply troubling:

- "Clergy sexual misconduct with adults is . . . prevalent across all denominations, all religions, all faith groups, all across the country."² While Catholic churches have been the subject of most media attention, the problem is also great with Protestant churches.³
- "In the average American congregation of 400 persons, with women representing, on average, 60% of the congregation, there are [an] average of 7 women who have experienced clergy sexual misconduct."⁴

- Further, “92% of these sexual advances [reported by women as sexual misconduct by clergy toward themselves] had been made in secret, not in open dating relationships; and 67% of the offenders were married to someone else at the time of the advance.”⁵
- Data reveals specific location types of clergy sexual abuse, including at the church, in the offender’s home, and at the victim’s home.⁶
- “You are more likely to be abused by someone in the church, than your congregation being involved in a shooting.”⁷

While these statistics can be unsettling and hard to believe, they cannot be ignored. Abusers are not tucked away in the margins of society, and the occurrences of abuse are not limited to any small portion of our communities.

I have counseled victims of abusers in schools, on sports teams, and in community groups. I’ve seen people who’ve been targeted by their employers, coaches, helpers in the classroom, and close friends. And, tragically, as the statistics show, not even our churches are a refuge from those who would harm their fellow human beings. I’ve worked with traumatized victims of senior pastors, youth pastors, volunteers—men and women alike. These patterns have reached pandemic levels even in—sometimes especially in—our churches.

We prefer to think we are exempt from manipulation and abuse because of our choices, our age, our education, our life experience. We want to think we are protected because we know

the red flags to watch for. But evil and sin do not discriminate. The brokenness of our fellow human beings exists in every part of our world. We want to believe we are smart enough to stay safe, to keep our people safe. When terrible things have been done to us, we tend to feel shame and, wrongly, responsibility.

Hear me on this:

If you have experienced harm at the hands of another person, it is *not* your fault.

You didn't need to be smarter or better or more careful.

When abuse occurs, it is the perpetrator's fault.

It is never the fault of the victim.

Abuse is about power and control, and for someone who is broken enough to harm another human being, power and control must be maintained at all costs. So this person skirts the edges of the law, hurting people in noncriminal ways that we widely regard as unethical, dishonest, irresponsible, and in violation of what is socially appropriate. Not all predators are operating in crime circles of the upper-echelon elite in big cities. They haven't all been convicted, and many of them haven't been found out. Some of them live in your neighborhood, some of them work in your building, and some of them are standing in front of the congregation on Sunday mornings.

Abuse exists on a broad spectrum, and further, abusers exist on a spectrum of their own awareness. At one end, we see manipulators who can be stunningly oblivious to the

damage of their own patterns. If they have grown up in systems saturated with manipulation, it can become the only way they know how to relate to others. Along the middle of the spectrum are emotional and verbal abusers who may or may not hurt people on purpose. Sometimes they say things without thinking, and other times their actions are cunning and direct. And at the far opposite end, we see sociopaths, abusive narcissists, and predators who target individuals and groups of people both masterfully and intentionally. Habitual abusers can be skilled at acting in ways that allow them to continue to abuse without experiencing the consequences of their behavior. Some of them have learned how to rewrite reality—even for themselves—to justify their behavior, to center themselves as the one in the right.

Predators can be virtuosos in the art of manipulation. They watch carefully, and they make calculated choices. They know how to groom, taking small steps and careful measures toward their end goal. By the time a predator has targeted you, they may know you better than you know yourself. Anyone can be targeted by a predator, and even experts can fall prey. Robert Hare, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia, writes that they “can play a concerto on *anyone’s* heartstrings.”⁸ *Anyone* can become at risk.

When I met Tricia, her husband had died just weeks before. She was exhausted and depleted, and she nearly crumpled into the chair in my office. She was grieving a horrific loss, yes. But even from the start, I sensed that something else was going on. There was an injured soul trapped inside her, wounded by more traumas than the one she’d presented.

Many people know Tricia's story. The loss of her husband was fairly high-profile in our community, and her writing has carried her story around the world. But very few people know the complex nature of her wounding, which included a second trauma that happened alongside the death of her husband. Tricia and I have invested more than twelve years of weekly sessions together, untangling the complexities of what happened to her.

I have partnered with Tricia to tell this story because we believe in the power of knowledge and experience to set people free. As she writes about the trauma she walked through, I am writing about her treatment. She shares the candid memories of a trusted friendship twisted horribly wrong, and I pull back the curtain to show you the textbook patterns that were present all along: of predation, grooming, psychological manipulation, and abuse. While the details of this story come from a unique situation, the pattern of it is universal. You may not have this experience, but you may have an experience that parallels this one.

We write this book because our best defense against abuse is understanding the nature of abusers. Our best path to freedom is being able to see and name what we're experiencing. The ability to see and know what's going on is the first step to getting help.

This book will give you a real example of what abusive patterns look like. You're going to learn to understand and identify the signs of trauma, and together we're going to walk through the journey out of abuse and into healing. The harm you or someone you love has experienced is not the end.

If you are reading this as a counselor or therapist, this book puts the language and tools of our trade alongside the lived experience of a survivor of abuse. We believe it can be a resource for you as you come alongside your clients, since our stories sometimes become clear only when we see them mirrored in someone else's life.

Some people will read this story and realize that they are victims as well. They will find words for the first time as they discover that what happened to them was systematic and wrong. And, perhaps, they will also find hope: that what has happened to them is not the end of their story. We invite you into the pages to show you how it happens, what it might look like, and how you can find freedom and recovery if you are someone—or if you are treating someone, or if you love someone—who is the survivor of abuse.

I will never not be awed by the healing process of another person. Truly, the sacredness of walking with a person through trauma, helping them heal, explore, and grow—this is an honor beyond words. It is holy and precious, and I approach each path gently and with deepest respect.

There are times when I think, *Really, God? Are you sure you want me to be the one to navigate this path? Because this is a lot.*

And then I take a deep breath, and I pray, *Okay. Then may I help them find the words and tools to reclaim what was taken. And God, may you heal what has been broken.*

I pray the same for you as you begin this book.

Together may we find the words and tools to reclaim what was taken. And may God heal what has been broken.

ONE

The Hook



Tricia

One of my college professors once told me that she didn't trust anyone who trusted their intuition. She said such illogical feelings and emotions can usually be traced back to a bad slice of pizza from the night before.

Her opinion didn't convince me that intuition isn't real. It only made me wonder what compass needle she trusted.

I know the difference between indigestion and intuition. Nausea from indigestion starts in my stomach. Nausea from intuition starts in the hair follicles of my skull.

Heightened intuition isn't always about something going wrong, but there is a specific kind of intuition for danger.

For me, it feels like the turning of dials within my nervous system, like the opening scene in the first *Back to the Future* movie, when Marty McFly is adjusting the amplifier for his surprisingly small guitar.¹ It might begin with an invisible emotional shift in the environment, a glance or an imperceptible exchange that somehow seems to affect my body temperature. I feel a tightening in my chest, then a sinking in my gut, then a racing in my pulse—loud, louder, loudest—until I absolutely cannot ignore this physiological response.

People who know me well have long joked about The Feeling, this Code Blue phrase that has always meant *Welp, hope you had fun while it lasted, because it's all about to end. Tricia is about to shut things down.*

This inner compass hasn't always been my favorite thing about myself. There have definitely been some false alarms, when I have walked away from some lit fuses that weren't actual bombs. But if I smell smoke, it's a nonstarter for me. If I sense that things are about to go sideways, I will flee the situation, the scene, the relationship—all of it. I'll scoop up my feelings and my family. Peace out.

I am telling you this because it's important to clarify: I did not get The Feeling when I first met Annie. It's important to me—and to the patterns of a story like this one—that I introduce her as the good person I thought she was.

I will give you only some basic details about Annie because you don't need to know everything about her to understand how what I went through with her followed the textbook pattern of abuse, and because—I will always be honest with you—it's risky for a victim to start talking about their abuser.

Here's what I can tell you. Annie was a Christian. She was highly intelligent and focused on community, and she had a position of spiritual authority. I had only known her from a distance for a while, the way you might know somebody who walks their dog in your neighborhood. Your paths cross, you make eye contact and smile, and you might even feel like you could become friends since it's obvious that they like the things you like—dogs and sunshine.

Annie led Bible studies, and they were refreshingly different from others I had attended. In a word, they weren't "pink." I have nothing against the actual color, mind you. But if the time together focuses on superficial small talk, recipes, perhaps "a spring fashion show" or "a Ladies' Tea"—it *feels* pink. It's the women's-ministry version of that outdated and inaccurate marketing cliché: If you want to sell your product to women, you simply "shrink it and pink it."² As though women will only enjoy the smaller, pastel versions of anything real. That's not true of this woman, and it's not true of most women I know.

These Bible studies were filled with dialogue; questions; and conversations about real life, messy people, and complex theology. Annie brought us into the words and ideas of theologians and scholars, making our conversations fertile ground for public learning. So many books, so many theories, so many thinkers, and so many of them with so many letters after their names.

Now seems like a good time to tell you that I am an excellent notetaker. It started when I was elected as "secretary" of various clubs in high school, mostly for my good

handwriting, colorful notebooks, and endless enthusiasm for pens. Just like my pen collection, my notetaking skills grew with time. I've taken minutes at staff meetings and cataloged the content of committees. I was a professor's assistant in college and took copious notes in lectures. If you've always wondered what you missed in a random English course or literature class in the late 1990s and early 2000s, feel free to check in with me. I've probably got you covered.

At Annie's Bible studies, I took notes like it was my job. It's possible some of the women in this room weren't as intrigued as I was. They had places to be, people to talk to, ideas to execute. But in that season of my life, I had none of those things.

I had two captivating little children at home, so my long days were filled with small things³: emptying the dishwasher again, reading board books again, going to the park again, folding laundry again. I so badly wanted to go back to school—but sometimes you get to do exactly what you dream, and sometimes you do what keeps the family system from flying off the rails. It was my season to stay home, to create routines and structure for two toddlers. My big ideas were on hold, and I reminded myself often: It's just a pause. It's no *for now*, not no *forever*.

But as someone who gets high on smart conversations, I walked into that first Bible study like an intern at a White House briefing. My own excitement embarrassed me. I couldn't help it. I was a fish out of water. Or more accurately, I was a fish who had caught sight of the water. The deep blue

was out there, and people were casually living in it, tossing around their splashy ideas. I wanted in.

Then Annie, from her seat of influence in the room, did something I've never forgotten.

"Tricia," she said. I looked up, my pen poised in midair, ready to capture her next words. I probably looked like an eager cocker spaniel waiting for a trick command and a treat for obeying.

She said, "I want to know what you think."

All eyes in the room turned to me. They weren't looking at my notes or my handwriting, my tabs or my filing systems. They were looking at me, waiting to hear my thoughts, because Annie had opened the door for me to speak. Surprising even myself, I didn't need even a moment to gather my thoughts.

I don't remember what I said. I just remember feeling heard.

The conversation stilled for just a moment, and then they all began to talk, to react, to interact with what *I* thought. From across the room, Annie gave me a thumbs-up. Her small gesture seemed to say she had seen a glimpse into my mind, and my thoughts had not disappointed.

All my relational roads lead back to conversation. Every single one. Thinking with someone is where every friendship starts for me. If you lead with a real conversation, I'll be your friend forever.

In the world of addiction, *gateway drug* is the catchphrase used to describe the probability of one drug experience

leading to another, of something comparatively harmless opening the door to harder drugs that perpetuate greater dependency.

Conversation with Annie became a gateway drug. She had tapped a vein.

Jana

If you do a quick search on your TV channels or podcasting apps, you'll find dozens of documentaries and human stories combining elements of psychological warfare, true crime, and the mysteries of social history. As a society, we are bingeing on this content as if our lives depend on it. Why are we so drawn in? Why are *so many of us* drawn in?

It seems that cults and circles of social control tend to swell during times of uncertainty,⁴ and this may be one factor to explain why the public appetite seems so insatiable for these stories.

During the throes of the coronavirus pandemic, when the world was shut down and quarantined, one podcaster reported her own shock to discover that she had invested more than twenty-three hours of her life to watching long-form shows about people who had fallen deep into manipulative relationships that wrecked their lives.⁵ She's not alone. Lots of us are watching.

I think what separates these shows from, say, baking competitions are our polarized responses. We might watch or listen and find ourselves thinking, *How can someone get so confused? Why would they throw their lives away for such a*

corrupt leader? But then the plot twists, and we think, *I do sort of see the appeal, though. Imagine that beautiful sense of belonging.*

After the next commercial break, we come to our senses and think *Can't they see that this person is a cult leader?* But give it just a few minutes. Soon we feel compassion again as we see the draw to live in a close community with people who share values and spiritual practices.

Our own pendulums swing back and forth. As we learn their stories, we judge them and then we understand them. We question their discernment, then we see how they got duped.

If you look at someone's choice without looking at anything else about them, you might wonder how a person could make a decision like that. How could they be so deceived? How could they become so addicted? How could they break that law? But if you consider the context of the person's whole story—their season of life, their ambitions to succeed, their desperation to numb and medicate—then behaviors and choices can start to make sense.

In the clinical world of therapy, counseling, and psychology, most behaviors make sense within context. With a little empathy, we can at least imagine how they got there.

Consider the desperation of thirst. When a woman is in labor with a baby, think about how thirsty she becomes from all her exertion. She wants water *so badly*. She'll down the whole glass because she's so very thirsty. (Speaking from experience, with the birth of my son. I tried to sip. I promise, I tried.) Wise and experienced nurses know that the woman

in labor doesn't have the awareness to limit herself to sips of water, so they might give her a popsicle, likely some ice chips. They allow a slow intake of fluids that won't induce immediate vomiting. It's the best way to help a thirsty person because their thirst is almost desperate.

Abusers typically prey on people who are isolated from their communities, separated from paths and social circles they once knew. These include college students; young professionals; older adults who live alone; and many young moms who feel isolated from their careers, goals, and social circles as they raise little children. Tricia felt starved for intellectual stimulation, communication, and every kind of community. Annie spotted that, and she fed it. Tricia was in a desert; Annie offered the water.

The emotional drive of ambition can feel similar to physical desperation. When physical desperation and emotional needs jive, it's a magic spell. A perfect storm. A match and a bomb. A shiny lure on a fishhook. Appropriately, an abuser's initial offer to meet that felt need has been called "the hook."⁶

The hook is a key part of a perpetrator's pattern of choosing their target, biding their time, and taking small steps to execute their goal. Even if they would say they didn't have a plan from the beginning, we can observe patterns that have happened before. Their behavior is often premeditated, calculated, serial, manipulative, and habitual. Their patterns have become their norm, but they may not want to look at it that way, so they lie to themselves and everyone else. Still, even if not every piece was intentional, if some pieces fell into place by accident or as a bonus, this is a habit the

perpetrator has created, has counted on, and returns to. They are accountable for what they've done.

During the #MeToo movement, when a lot of predation patterns came to light, we learned about actresses who had been sexually assaulted and abused by television and movie producers. These producers were predators who knew what they were doing: They made casting decisions while they held the women's careers in their hands.

We learned about Larry Nassar, the doctor of the US women's Olympics gymnastics team. He was a predator who knew what he was doing, systematically sexually abusing many of the women in his care while he held their futures in his hands.

We have also learned about men and women who endure abuse in their homes and the workplace, who silence their intuition and go along with their abusers' behavior because these people project power, instill fear, or seem to hold the future in their hands. Sometimes we go along with systemic problems because it's the way things have always been: It is literally the system in place.

One podcaster discusses this common denominator: "If you're ambitious, and you want your career to go a certain direction, it actually makes you vulnerable to predation."⁷

Victims are not necessarily weak, passive, or down on their luck. Often, they are ambitious.

They are not just trying to scrape together some choices. They are driven to become the best version of themselves, to change their lives and the world. And they have been fed the lie that the only way to get ahead is to take the hit.

When we consider what we think we know about vulnerability and victims, most of us would not associate these words with ambition. But people become vulnerable because they don't realize how much they are willing to ignore, how many warning signs they are willing to push away so they can stay on the path of their goals and ideals.

An abuser can spot a weakness.

A skilled abuser can get their prey to silence their own priorities, their goals, and even their instincts.

A masterful manipulator can place themselves on the path to the goal.