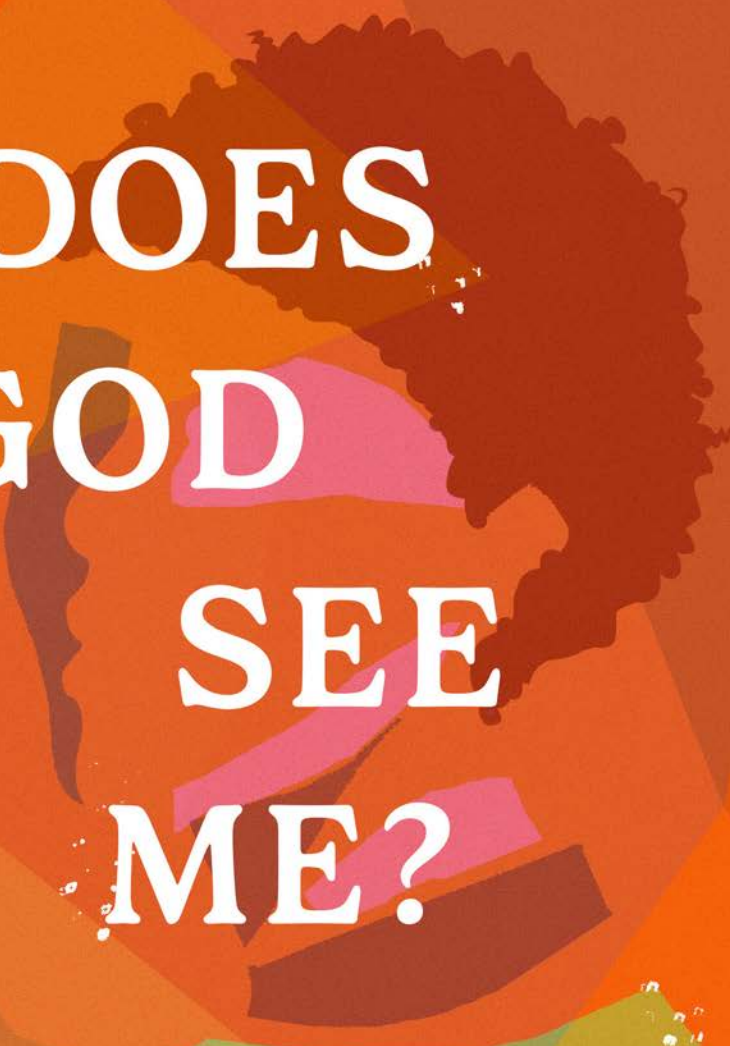


DIEULA M. PREVILON

A stylized, abstract illustration of a person's head and shoulders in profile, facing left. The person has dark, curly hair. The illustration is composed of various geometric shapes in shades of orange, red, pink, and green. The background is a warm, orange-toned gradient with overlapping geometric shapes.

DOES
GOD
SEE
ME?

*How God Meets Us
in the Center of Our
Trauma-Healing Journey*

We are living in a traumatizing world. The increased hostility, fear, and polarizing divisiveness weighs heavily on all of us. Using her years of experience, Dieula Previlon offers wise counsel and honest guidance to explore the question of whether we are loved, seen, and known by God. This timely book is an invitation to embark on a journey that leads to the joy of finding hope and healing from trauma that empowers women around the world to give birth to our truest selves. I highly recommend it!

DR. BRENDA SALTER McNEIL, author of *Becoming Brave: Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now* and *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*

Dieula is brilliant, compassionate, and wise. She pastors, counsels, and coaches throughout her rich and practical book, *Does God See Me?*, ensuring that traumatized people experience Christ's freedom. I'll be recommending this book for years to come.

KAT ARMSTRONG, Bible teacher and author of *No More Holding Back*, *The In-Between Place*, and the Storyline Bible Studies

Black communities still engage the horrific belief that if you have Jesus, then you don't need therapy. Bucking such a belief, Previlon has produced a phenomenal workbook for Jesus-loving women who want to begin the healing journey from trauma while remaining connected to their spiritual and biblical roots. Kudos to Previlon for providing an accessible book that can help women on such a journey.

ANGELA N. PARKER, assistant professor of New Testament and Greek at McAfee School of Theology and author of *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority*

Dieula offers us a cherished dual gift of vulnerable experience and keen expertise within the pages of this book—and also gives us grounded hope. Through the lens of Hagar, an abused Egyptian

whose captivity led her to the wilderness and likely death, Dieula teaches us what it is to be seen by God and to name God even after trauma. She bridges the gap between academic counseling concepts and everyday therapeutic practices, offering readers an accessible, embodied ethic of care. Like a true womanist, Dieula writes with the aim of gentle and expansive freedom for all of us, but especially for Black women, who have wrongly been presumed upon as the world's mules. God sees us as the beloved, and Dieula echoes this by showing us that trauma doesn't have the last word.

SHARIFA STEVENS, author of *Only Light Can Do That: 60 Days of MLK–Devotions for Kids* and contributor to *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*

Does God See Me? is a well-crafted body of work that conveys an immense depth of vulnerability and hope for restoration. Dieula's personal life traumas and her journey toward healing are woven into a compelling narrative, and the book is full of practical restorative exercises, demonstrating her counseling expertise throughout. This book had a profound impact on me, and I strongly recommend that everyone buy a copy.

JENNIFER M. JOSEPH, pastor of Zion Community Church

Does God See Me? How God Meets Us in the Center of Our Trauma-Healing Journey is a much-needed read, especially now that *trauma* is becoming a household word. The opportunity for readers to do healing work in the comfort and privacy of their own sacred personal space is certainly a gift. This book offers solidly resourced practices and time-tested tools that have been gained through Dieula's professional experience in trauma-informed counseling. My best therapists have been the ones who have tapped into their own lived experience; like Dieula, they offered me the hope I needed.

JUANITA RASMUS, author of *Learning to Be: Finding Your Center after the Bottom Falls Out*

DIEULA M. PREVILON

**DOES
GOD
SEE
ME?**

*How God Meets Us
in the Center of Our
Trauma-Healing Journey*

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Does God See Me? How God Meets Us in the Center of Our Trauma-Healing Journey

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Introduction

Writing a book on trauma healing certainly exposed areas in my life I hadn't yet surrendered to the healing journey. I penned the first words of this book almost a decade ago, but the project stalled. I kept hoping that God would take away my desire to write about trauma healing and send someone more equipped to complete the book. I didn't consider myself a legitimate trauma expert with the professional knowledge that would qualify me to write about this topic. But perhaps this will serve as a witness that those of us who became experts through our own trauma stories can write books like this. The other expertise I can claim is sitting in the birthing room while many like you were going through the labor pains of birthing a new self from their trauma. I thank my clients for teaching me to not forgo being present and loving during those labor pains. Every day I'm learning new techniques to treat trauma and help victims reach a place of functioning and thriving.

A Life-Changing Trip to Kenya

My expertise in trauma began to grow long before I was counseling trauma survivors professionally. I have vivid memories of the trauma I witnessed and experienced growing up in Haiti and

America. Of course, in those formative years, I didn't have the language to classify these experiences as trauma. It wasn't until my late twenties that I became more aware and started asking questions. Why didn't we talk about certain topics in our family? Why did that relationship end in divorce? Why did this family leave the church? How about this secret relationship with so-and-so that we were never to speak of? How come everyone remained silent? How come no one stepped in? Why did so-and-so leave the family and become distant? The more I learned, the more my eyes were opened and the more questions I had. I was drawn to learning about trauma and how to approach the journey of recovery.

Spending time in several countries on the continent of Africa and in my native country of Haiti brought me great clarity. Years after graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary with a master's degree in counseling, I landed a job as the missions pastor at a megachurch in Dallas. While I was there, I led a mission trip to Mount Elgon in Kenya. It was my first trip to Africa. The training focused on helping women take steps toward healing from the unimaginable traumas they'd experienced during a postelection civil war. During the unrest, many of the women had seen their loved ones mutilated or sexually violated. There was terrible loss of life.

On the first day of the training program, the trauma was obvious to the trained eye. The women communicated minimally among themselves and crossed their arms. Their entire body language communicated *We are not here to make friends*.

Our team pressed on with the training and handed out the materials we had prepared. We didn't perform any miracles during those five days, but something clearly shifted in the women. Their body language began to communicate a different message. They were joyfully singing, clapping their hands, sitting with each other, and telling stories. They had moved to a place of freedom from their trauma.

That's when I knew I would dedicate my life to helping women recover from trauma. My life's work would be to offer this kind of freedom to women all over the world. Something inside me had shifted, too, and I mumbled a few private words in prayer: *In your grace, God, please allow me to be a part of this work.*

An Unexpected Ministry

Soon after that trip, I transitioned out of my role at the church. But things didn't go quite the way I had planned. There were no obvious opportunities at the time for me to help women find hope and healing from trauma. I felt as if that private moment with God in Africa had never happened! I went through a bout of depression with no vision, no hope, no income, no purpose, and no women to minister to. Or so I thought.

During that season of waiting, something inside me said, *There are women all over the world dealing with the impact of trauma in their lives. Find out where they are, and work with them.* It suddenly became quite clear that I should do two things: start a nonprofit organization—ElevateHer International Ministries—to help women heal from trauma, and volunteer in the women's unit at the Dallas jail.

I had ministered in Haiti a half dozen times, as well as in India and Kenya, but never in a million years did I think I'd be ministering to imprisoned women in my own city. I had always heard horror stories about the prison system—and violent, unruly people who had no respect for law and order. Though I was excited and willing to finally step into my calling, I was scared to death.

My first visit to the facility was anxiety producing. I parked in a neglected gravel lot across the street from the multistory, brown-bricked jail. Outside the facility were all kinds of people. People waiting on buses. People entering and leaving the facility. People

who seemed to be just hanging around. Adults holding the hands of small children. Well-dressed people I assumed were visiting their loved ones. And a few homeless people who pitched their tents right outside the jail. I wondered about each of their stories and what had brought them to this place.

As I waited for the light to change so I could cross the street, I began to panic, wondering how in the world I had reached this point in my life. Part of me wanted to retreat to my car and forget about volunteering at the jail, but my tenacious spirit would never allow it. I could not back out of a commitment. Nothing would keep me from seeing those imprisoned women. Not even my fears. So I crossed the street and looked up at the two tall buildings in front of me. I couldn't believe those buildings were home to people our society considers the greatest sinners among us. Or that God was calling me to get to know them and sit with them through their trauma-healing journeys. But I walked into the jail and began the journey.

After my identification was processed and cleared, I joined two other women volunteers as we made our way to the women's wing. When the second steel door slammed shut behind us, I knew there was no turning back. (*Note: If you're praying about being part of a prison ministry, get rid of any traces of claustrophobia, and don't watch any movies about prison before going!*) We were buzzed into the room where we would be teaching for the night. Chairs were arranged in a circle, enough for twenty women. On both sides of the room were pods with glass doors. The women were completely exposed. I was trying hard not to stare, but I couldn't help it. Some were showering, some were using the toilet in their stalls, some were playing cards, some were watching TV, and others were in their bunks. I felt like I was on a mission trip in a different country, but I was only thirty minutes from my house.

One by one, the women walked into the room and took a seat.

INTRODUCTION

They had puzzled looks on their faces as they waited to hear what I had come to offer them. I soon learned that they were excellent profilers. They could smell a con from a mile away. They could sense a manipulator with impure motives and could recognize those who truly came in the name of Jesus. It turns out that all of them had heard about Jesus, but they were waiting silently to see which Jesus I was representing: a condemning and judgmental Jesus or the Jesus who looked at them with compassion and love.

Our team's plan for the next six weeks was to study the lives of various women in the Bible and see if their stories resonated with the women at the Dallas jail. I named the study "Her Story, My Story, Our Story" and hoped the women would see a common thread in all our stories.

After introductions, I opened the night with a statement: "We all have a story to tell. What is your story?" Unlike many who interact with those in prison, I didn't want to talk as if I knew these women's stories, because I didn't. Only they knew how they'd arrived at this place in their lives. Without much coaxing, the women started to open up. As each one shared, I noticed that it was very hard for them to keep from crying. The pain in the room was palpable. At this point I realized the commonality between the women from Haiti, Kenya, and India and those in front of me. They were all humans created in the image of God with the capacity to be hurt deeply. As they shared their stories, I realized that most of their downward spirals had begun with someone abusing or violating them. Someone who was supposed to love them. My heart broke for these women. I felt compassion for them.

After that first night, I knew I was exactly where I needed to be, doing exactly what I was called to do: help women heal from trauma through the compelling story of Jesus, who has proven his love for women and who desires for them to flourish.

In jail, I became acquainted with women I never would have guessed would be in such a place. I met a woman working on her PhD and another woman who had once worked in a church. I even met a motivational speaker and writer. I quickly learned that trauma does not discriminate.

One night as I was teaching about the healing process and the common hindrances that hamper one's ability to dream, I noticed a new face in the group. This was a transient group of women who would often come and go. I might see a woman one week, and the next week she would either be paroled or just not show up. So it was common to see new faces at our meetings.

I was immediately drawn to this new woman. She had striking beauty, flawless skin, a warm smile, and hair arranged in perfectly braided cornrows. I immediately wanted to know her story. At that point, I'd learned enough about the women in jail to know not to ask about their stories right away. I had to earn their trust first, and once I had, I couldn't stop them from talking. As I continued to teach, she continued to listen without saying a word. The group would chime in and give feedback, but there was still not a word from her.

Then, after about thirty minutes of listening, she spoke up: "When I was little, I wanted to be an Olympic gold medalist in track and field." Her face lit up as she talked about the joy she felt when she ran. She had it all planned out in her mind; the gold medal was her dream. Then tears started streaming down her face as she told how life had taken a turn for the worse. "But when I was eight, my stepfather started sexually abusing me, and he kept abusing me until I was twelve. He threatened to kill my brother and mother if I ever told." This beautiful woman had attempted suicide several times, and one attempt had been quite severe.

This is the reality of trauma for many women. Trauma can involve a single event or a series of events that tear victims to

pieces and leave them shattered. Without intervention, many are unable to function or put their lives back together. The problem with trauma is that it often doesn't end when the event has passed. Victims of trauma continue to experience it in their thoughts, emotions, and bodies. This woman who had dreamed of winning an Olympic gold medal had spent her entire life trying to escape the pain and suffering trauma had caused. And here she was in jail learning about the healing process. My heart felt her grief and the pain that hindered forward movement in her life. Again, it was in jail, hearing these women's stories, that I knew I had to be part of the healing process.

Jesus and Trauma Therapy

It was behind those prison walls that my trauma-healing ministry for women began. It was also behind those walls that the idea sprang to life for writing a book that centered on the trauma-healing journey. In that season, I started thinking about integrating therapeutic strategies and faith in Christ as a holistic model for trauma healing. Historically, the two have been at odds. The psychological world hasn't seemed too impressed with or interested in the value of spirituality in the healing journey. And in many religious circles where faith in Jesus is already central to one's life, the necessity of therapeutic resources has been called into question. But I believe that the integration of faith and therapeutics is necessary for healing. Like many others, I see great value in Jesus-and-therapy as a model for healing from trauma.

So I began this experiment with a question: What if we utilized therapeutic strategies and the principles Jesus taught to help imprisoned women begin taking steps toward healing from trauma? Week by week, the women would show up with their trauma stories, and our team would show up with Jesus and therapy. Week by

week, we gave the women space to process their trauma through the Scriptures and therapeutic strategies. The more we leaned into that model, the more we began to see the impact it had on the women. Every week we'd see a release of emotions followed by confession and repentance. We witnessed truth telling, question asking, and feedback giving, and then we'd close in prayer. For two years, once a week, that model was our process. The women took steps toward healing, and God was present.

After working with the women in the Dallas jail, I became a licensed professional counselor (LPC) to increase my proficiency in trauma healing. I also took another step in my professional journey by embracing my calling as an ordained minister. I believe these shifts in my career were God's way of positioning me to partner with him. They also reinforced and reaffirmed my belief that the most effective model for trauma healing involves integrating good counseling strategies with a solid theological foundation rooted in the love of Christ. I have used this model of trauma healing and what I learned from the women in the Dallas jail to minister to women all over the United States, Kenya, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Brazil, and Uganda.

This book is for my sisters around the world who are ready to take their first steps toward healing from trauma. I invite you to join me on this healing journey. As we travel together, you will be reminded that God is not outside the healing process. He is at the center of it, fully present and walking with each of us every step of the way.

Our stories are important to him!

PART ONE

**UNDER-
STANDING
YOUR
TRAUMA
STORY**

BORN INTO TRAUMA

Misery won't touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, *The Farming of Bones*

I was born into trauma. It has always been a presence in my life. The first story my parents ever told me, in fact, was a trauma story. As soon as I was born, I had to fight to survive. I became so ill that fear ripped through my parents and extended family. They even carved a coffin for my tiny body. My mother and other family members labored in prayer, moaning and crying and imploring God to preserve my life. To this day, I don't know what caused this illness.

At birth I was given the common Haitian name Magalie. But my father changed it to Dieula (pronounced "Jur-la"), which means "God is here" or "God is present" in Haitian Kreyol (or Creole). Because, as my mother tells the story, "if God wasn't present, you would've died." (If you took one look at Haiti's infant mortality rate, you'd know that giving birth there is often a traumatic event

for women and their babies.) I'm still known as "Maga" to family and friends in our Haitian community, but Dieula is my official name—an avenue for sharing about God's saving grace.

During my childhood years, my three older sisters and I lived most of the year in the city with my aunt so we could attend quality schools and become, as they say, "civilized and educated" Haitians, thereby escaping the nation's pervasive poverty. In the city of Gonaïves, where I was born, the roads were paved, and some communities had electricity. Life was fast-paced, and there seemed to be businesswomen and men everywhere hawking their products. On my daily walk to school, I had to cross through the maché, an outdoor market that was open from sunup to sundown where you could find just about everything you needed.

I spent most of my summers in Haiti's countryside—*andeyò* in Kreyol—where my grandmother lived, and where some of my fondest memories were made. In the country, the pace of life was slower. Quality schools and education were rare. Resources weren't as plentiful, and the roads weren't paved, which didn't matter so much because people walked everywhere. At night, the sky was emblazoned with stars, unlike in the city. *Andeyò* was where Haiti's rice farmers lived and worked. I could roam freely there because everyone knew one another and looked out for each other's children. I would spend so many hours swimming in the lakes and canals and playing with my sisters, cousins, and kin that the sun would turn my dark hair a dusty brown. Everyone in the country was related in one way or another. There was a sense of peace and calm in rural Haiti that my soul still longs for.

Ti Anne

My grandmother was my favorite person in the world. She was a little woman in stature, but she was a powerhouse. An entrepreneur,

she tended a small grocery store that sold items like Haitian rum, fruit soda, and rice. She was also a trusted leader and elder in the community who made sure that everyone had something to eat. Each day, she made sure that my sister and I delivered small plates of food to our neighbors.

Ti Anne—“Little Anne” in Kreyol—had a tenderness that was calming. If my sisters and I needed to be reprimanded, she would have a conversation with us, something completely unheard of in Haitian culture. Usually, any form of discipline required no explanation and would often be reactionary.

Gran Ti Anne was the first person in my life who made me feel loved and cared for. She doted on me and protected me. I felt safe with her. If anyone picked on me or made me sad for any reason, my grandmother would stand up for me and say, “Leave her alone! She wasn’t nursed by her mother.”

I remember first hearing these words when I was around four or five. I didn’t fully understand what they meant at the time. Ti Anne was a source of comfort, so I knew she meant well, and this was her way of showing me love and protection. As an adult, I now recognize that she was talking about the trauma story surrounding my separation from my parents at a young age.

Just a few months after I was born, my mother and father left Haiti in search of a better life. They first landed on the Caribbean island of Saint Martin, then eventually made their way to the United States. Their lives as Haitian immigrants became such a survival ordeal that it kept them separated from their four daughters for ten years. I grew up knowing I had a mother and father, but I never experienced being mothered or fathered. Those years of separation left me with wounds—feelings of abandonment and missing out, of never knowing the tangible love of a mother or father in those vulnerable early years. Even now, these feelings resurface from time to time.

Leaving and Loss

As a child living in Haiti, I grew accustomed to hearing people talk about leaving. Everyone dreamed about finding a better life somewhere else. Some dreamed of leaving the country to live in the city; others dreamed of leaving their homes to live with family members who were better off than they were. And some, like my parents, dreamed of leaving Haiti altogether. We were all raised to understand and accept the sacrifices that families made for a better life.

Leaving, however, doesn't just involve the sacrifice and pain of children being separated from their parents. It comes with trauma. And from this trauma are birthed additional traumas.

I remember visiting my grandmother in the city hospital when I was seven or eight. I didn't know that it would be the last time I would see her alive. Then, suddenly, our trips to the country ceased. After Gran Ti Anne's death, I stopped thinking about andeyò. Perhaps a child's way of dealing with the trauma.

"When Grandma died," my sister recently told me, "there was no one left to take care of us [in the country], so we never went back."

The impact of trauma was multilayered. My sisters and I experienced loss upon loss upon loss. Though we were fortunate to have an aunt who cared for us, it wasn't the same as having a mother and father. Without my parents and my wise, protective grandma, I was vulnerable to sexual exposure, abuse, and even trafficking. I remember the men in our community exposing me to the male anatomy and destroying my childhood innocence. I know now that several adult men were grooming me for sex. I also remember the cousin who made sexual advances toward me. I recall as a nine-year-old looking for safe places to sleep when we visited my uncle. For many little girls in Haiti, the sexual exposure

didn't stop at grooming. I've heard countless stories of young girls being sexually abused in circumstances like these, and my heart breaks for them. Every story of leaving Haiti or staying behind is marked by trauma.

Life in America

After a decade of being separated from our parents, my sisters and I joined them in America. Finally we were reunited. I know it sounds like a happy turn of events, but that wasn't the case for me because I was meeting my father and mother for the first time. These strangers carried a big piece of the puzzle of my existence and the key to my future, but I didn't know them at all.

I quickly realized that there were some obligations and expectations that went along with being part of a "family." I was supposed to feel connected to my parents because we shared DNA. And I felt a sense of indebtedness to them, as if I owed them loyalty without question. Therapeutically speaking, blind familial loyalty makes it difficult for people to heal from the trauma that occurs within the family. Without any explicit communication, I somehow knew that unconditional love was expected and should be reciprocated, even though there was no bonding or attachment between us to make that love real.

Though my parents had always planned to bring my sisters and me to America, it happened abruptly. There were no preparations or conversations about how difficult the transition from Haiti to America would be. And there were certainly no interventions from counselors, spiritual leaders, or wise elders. Nothing. The only thing that mattered was escaping from poverty.

I was supposed to be grateful for being delivered from a desperate situation in Haiti. I was supposed to understand that my parents had sacrificed a decade of their lives to provide this new

life for my sisters and me. I wasn't allowed to question their decision or ask for anything else. We had finally stepped into our Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, the answer to all our problems. This new life demonstrated my parents' love, and so I created a compartment in my heart where I stuffed the trauma I experienced during this transition to the United States as a twelve-year-old Haitian immigrant. I never spoke a word about my pain to anyone until adulthood.

Navigating Life in a Strange New World

I remember my first day of school in New Jersey. Fifth grade with Mrs. Reid. Class had already started as I walked with a teacher's aide to the second-floor room. I still remember the terrible anxiety I felt that morning—flushed face, stomach in knots, and so faint I could've passed out or died. I didn't know to breathe, so I held my breath and hoped the moment would pass swiftly.

The moment I walked into class, the first order of business for Mrs. Reid and her students was figuring out how to pronounce my name, an issue I never had to deal with in Haiti. At the time, I didn't realize this would happen in every new classroom and with every new person I'd meet in America.

“What's your name?” Mrs. Reid asked.

I responded in Kreyol, “Dieula.”

Mrs. Reid raised her voice and said, “Die-u-la?”

Again, I responded in Kreyol, “Non, Dieula.”

Once again, she raised her voice and said, “Joola?”

Exasperated and flustered, I simply nodded oui, because by that time the entire classroom was listening to the conversation.

I often do this thing in my head where I rank the levels of trauma I've experienced. My grandma's death was at the top of my trauma scale, and my immigrant experience in America was

probably second at that point. Someday I hope I will be able to just let my traumatic experiences be.

That season of my life brought deep feelings of loneliness. If death were an emotion, the loneliness I experienced was it. I went from being a gregarious preteen to being a mute. No one dared talk to the foreign girl, and that often made me happy, because I didn't possess the English words to respond. I hated lunchtime in the cafeteria, where I'd often find myself alone at a long lunch table. It felt as though a scorching spotlight were on me, exposing my pain and loneliness for all to see. To escape the pain, I would often skip lunch altogether and hide my twelve-year-old body behind a staircase. No one ever came to look for me. Proof of my invisibility came in the form of total isolation.

That season was also the genesis of my anxiety, something I'm still forced to manage today. Some days I would cry; other days I'd hold my breath, hoping no one would find me. I'd listen for voices and footsteps indicating when lunch ended so I could make my way to the playground. The playground proved difficult to navigate, but the other children were too busy running around or huddling with their friends to notice me, so I was relatively safe from their teasing. The playground also felt safer because of one particular lunch aide whose presence calmed my nerves. I stood close to her, knowing that nearness meant protection.

My ESL (English as a second language) teacher's presence also created a sense of safety for me. Ms. Canalas not only taught me how to speak English up through eighth grade; she helped in tangible ways as well. She even donated bags of clothes so my sisters and I could dress properly during the winter, since our Caribbean wardrobe wasn't up to the task.

But proximity to an adult didn't always ensure safety. In my tenth-grade English class, a group of boys made my life miserable. It seemed to be their purpose in life. One day stands out in

my memory. To make sure I wouldn't be bullied, I waited until my older sisters had left for school, and then I dug through the closet we shared and grabbed one of my sister's nice blouses and wore it to school. I just knew that wearing this nice red blouse with puffy shoulders would finally end the teasing, bullying, and verbal abuse.

Boy was I wrong. Those bullies came up with ingenious new material to rip into me. I sat there weeping and frozen. My teacher watched, listened . . . and did nothing.

I found out that in America, unlike Haiti, the classroom was not safe for children like me. I often replayed the incident in my head, wondering why my teacher didn't use her authority to end the abuse. I've since realized that even the adults who are supposed to protect children from trauma don't always know what to do. I never dared express such pain to my family, of course, because we were immigrants. We did hard things well, or so the story goes. Already carrying the infamous label as the sensitive one in my family, I didn't want to let on that I wasn't doing well.

Suck it up, girl. Immigrants aren't weak. We're not supposed to feel pain when people throw insults at us. We're supposed to let it all roll off our backs—the epithets, the abuse, the trauma.

I'm reminded of the words of Edwidge Danticat in her book *The Farming of Bones*: "Misery won't touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of."¹

I remember hearing this saying when I first came to America: "I'm rubber, you're glue. Whatever you say bounces off me and sticks on you." Except I didn't find that to be true. All the insults stuck to me for a very long time.

"You look like a roach."

"You African booty scratcher."

"You don't belong."

“You’re ugly.”

“You’re stupid.”

“You speak with a stupid accent.”

The reality is that many children dealing with trauma go unnoticed because they’re often silent like I was, and quiet children are applauded for behaving well. Adults don’t get close enough to create safe places for them to feel comfortable enough to share. At the time, I just knew that no one cared enough to rescue me.

My last year of high school ended with one more traumatic event that in some ways summed up everything I experienced during my adolescent years. By now I’d developed a disdain for school. It felt like a waste of time. Socially I had no hope of making friends, so I didn’t even try. On this particular day after school, snow was on the ground, and my younger sister and I were eager to begin the two-mile journey home that we often walked together.

We exited the school from the side door and joined about half the students as we all parted ways for the day, each one with their own walking group. In front of the school, I innocently bumped into a girl I didn’t know. I didn’t think that would offend her, because we were all bumping into each other. She mumbled some words underneath her breath that I couldn’t quite make out, and we both kept walking in opposite directions. But before I realized what was happening, I was face-to-face with this girl. She wrestled me to the ground, and her buddies joined her, punching and kicking me and pulling my hair. While I was on the ground getting hammered, with my sister doing her best to defend me, my only coherent thought was *Why me? What did I do to deserve this? Why is life always so hard for me?*

I often asked myself these questions, and for most of my life, there were no answers. Unanswered questions are one of the most frustrating aspects of the trauma-recovery process, because a part

of me thinks that if I knew the answers and understood why, maybe it would hurt less. But answers don't always soothe the pain.

My immigrant church turned out to be my saving grace. It was the only place that came close to feeling safe for me to be seen. People spoke decently to me and seemed to accept me on some level. This community declared that my life mattered. When I felt the cruelty of the world, the church offered kindness. When the world made no sense, the church made sense. When people around me were unpredictable, the church modeled stability. The church helped me focus, and the loving support of this community ultimately propelled me to college.

On My Own

Rutgers University was a welcome change from the trauma of being an immigrant. By the time I entered college, my English had reached mastery level, and I'd become accustomed to America and its cultural differences. Finally, America started becoming enjoyable. College was the first time I slept in a bed I didn't have to share with anyone else. And I made some meaningful friendships with people who not only saw me but also made me feel like I belonged. Though the church had been a place of safety for me during those difficult adolescent years, it had also been a culture of rigidity that had told me I'd better stay in line or else. As a college student, I enjoyed the freedom of discovering new things beyond the gaze of my parents and the church.

College was fertile ground for my growth and development. But I also threw caution out the window. I met people from all over the world, and we'd compare stories and scars. Hearing their experiences started a healing process in me; I wasn't alone after all. I learned to have fun and not take life so seriously. Okay, if you want to know the truth, I partied like there was no

tomorrow. I laughed like I'd just discovered laughter. For the first time, I was responsible for making life work. My parents couldn't support me beyond buying me a few outfits for college, so I got a part-time job. It felt great having control of my life. But having that control meant making mistakes I wasn't equipped to handle on my own.

While in college, I experienced another traumatic event: an unplanned, out-of-wedlock pregnancy. There were three things that made this event traumatic: my church, my parents, and my circumstances. My church operated by a strict set of rules, and anyone who broke them experienced rejection and shaming. That's how my church responded when I got pregnant outside of marriage. When my boyfriend and I decided to get married (since we loved each other), the church banished us to the basement to take our wedding vows. After we married, we weren't allowed to take Communion until after I gave birth. It was a punitive system, and while I believe it was done with the honor of the community in mind, the church made an example of us as a warning to other young, unmarried couples. It wasn't for the sake of God at all.

Then there were my parents. Every immigrant family comes to America to provide a better life for their children. I was the first to go to college in my family, and my parents were looking for proof that their sacrifices had paid off. So when I got pregnant, their pursuit of the American dream came to a screeching halt. The night I told my parents of my pregnancy, I didn't expect it to be the first and only time I saw my father cry. It tore me up to see their disappointment.

My circumstances at school pushed me to desperation. Living in a dorm and finishing my last semester, I had no job and no other place to live. No money, no savings. I just knew I couldn't go back home with a baby. Shame became a traveling companion. I felt that God was punishing me for having premarital sex. In

fact, one person even commented that my morning sickness was a demonstration of God's judgment.

During that time in my life, everything felt painful emotionally and physically. Spiritually, I distanced myself from my church community because they kept emphasizing how God couldn't be in the presence of sin, which meant he couldn't possibly be with me, much less rejoice with me. I believed them. I created my own rigid categories for where God could and couldn't be, and one of the places he'd never dare to show up was in the life of a young, unmarried pregnant woman.

It would take years for me to realize that God doesn't require public penance for me to be right with him. Humans may have wanted to make sure I learned my lesson, to satisfy the cultural demand for bloodletting, but praise be to God for the blood of Christ that was shed for my sin. There is no need for further sacrifice. When the community behaves in ways that shame and punish, people fail to thrive, heal, and grow spiritually. I believe that loving, gracious, and forgiving communities promote human flourishing. Years later, I realized that God had more in store for me through this pregnancy than I or anyone else could ever have foreseen. I had just reached the starting point of my healing journey.

Almighty God, we thank you for being the God who can be found throughout our stories. You created us fearfully and wonderfully. Though we don't understand why we suffer, we know your purpose for us is not to harm us but to help us flourish. We pray that through this study, we will connect with you as the Suffering Servant, and we pray that because you are well acquainted with suffering, you will lead us on this healing journey. We ask you to restore the parts of us that have been broken and lost through trauma. Amen.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

1. What attracted you to this book about healing from trauma?
2. Which parts of my story can you identify with?
3. My story has many pivotal moments. How did you feel as you read about the different layers of trauma I experienced?
4. What are some things you thought about God growing up that you later realized were false and not of God at all?
5. Make a list of the different emotions you felt reading my story. Where in your body did you feel those emotions?

FROM HEAD TO BODY

At the end of each chapter, I've included grounding exercises to help you engage your body in the trauma-healing journey. People who have experienced trauma often disconnect from their bodies out of a need for safety. They may be present physically but emotionally somewhere else. They essentially leave the present to cope with the overwhelming feelings of trauma.

The healing process requires grounding exercises to help you remain in the here and now while you work through what you experienced when the trauma took place. These grounding techniques can help you prepare for the healing journey. Here are some examples:

- Take a mental break and breathe deeply.
- Clap your hands.
- Stomp your feet.
- Take a short walk.
- Recite Scripture or poetry.

DOES GOD SEE ME?

- Put your hand over your chest and feel your heartbeat.
- Rub your hands together or rub an object.
- Smell something soothing, like a candle or essential oils.
- Taste something sweet or sour.
- Name five things you can see, four objects you can feel, three sounds you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

LET'S PRACTICE BREATHING

This book may bring up unpleasant memories at times, and you might find yourself out of breath. Breathing deeply will slow down the emotions. It will help calm your nerves, provide the oxygen your body needs, and keep you grounded and present.

- Take a deep breath from your nostrils for four seconds.
As you breathe in slowly and deeply, you should feel your belly expanding.
- Hold your breath for four seconds.
- Then release it slowly for another four seconds.
- Then pause for another four seconds.
- Try this four times.

Use this breathing exercise whenever your emotions begin to feel unmanageable.