



spiritual practices

for the broken,

ashamed,

anxious &

afraid

*holy
vulnerability*

KELLYE FABIAN

Foreword by Scot McKnight

With disarming vulnerability, Kellye Fabian points those willing to own their woundedness toward intimacy with a God who heals. The pathway? A “surrender in our bodily life [that] leads to surrender in our spiritual life.” Fabian gently encourages us to draw near to God by “engag[ing] with the world physically” through reframed classical practices like embodied prayer and sharing a meal. But she also winsomely introduces the reader to fresh, inviting avenues of healing, like laughter (our “protest against suffering”) and “digging in the dirt,” which helps us humbly “ground ourselves” in the sovereign arms of the God who created it. There’s no shame and guilt here; only a grace-filled invitation to the arms of a Father who loves us freely and forever.

J. KEVIN BUTCHER, executive director of Rooted Ministries, author of *Choose and Choose Again* and *Free*

Whenever Kellye Fabian has something to say, I listen. Her wisdom and pastoral guidance shine brightly in *Holy Vulnerability*. Immerse yourself in these beautiful words and practices, and let the Holy Spirit teach you how to be both fully human and deeply loved.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Long Days of Small Things* and *All Shall Be Well*

HOLY VULNERABILITY

spiritual practices
for the broken,
ashamed,
anxious &
afraid

*holy
vulnerability*

KELLYE FABIAN

NavPress 

A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit NavPress.com.

Holy Vulnerability: Spiritual Practices for the Broken, Ashamed, Anxious, and Afraid

Copyright © 2021 by Kellye Fabian. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NAVPRESS and the NavPress logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. *TYNDALE* is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Ministries. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team:

Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor; Elizabeth Schroll, Copy Editor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Julie Chen, Designer

Cover photograph of hands by Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash. All rights reserved.

Author photo by New Branch Films, copyright © 2016. All rights reserved.

Author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version. Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-63146-932-9

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For the broken, ashamed, anxious, and afraid . . .
for all of us.*

Contents

Foreword *xi*

Introduction *i*

PART I: Noticing Our Absence *19*

CHAPTER 1: Noticing Our Need *23*

CHAPTER 2: Recognizing Our Coping Practices *47*

PART II: Practicing God's Presence *69*

CHAPTER 3: Surrender Your Body *77*

CHAPTER 4: Pray Common Prayers *95*

CHAPTER 5: Laugh Out Loud *119*

CHAPTER 6: Dig in the Dirt *133*

CHAPTER 7: Encourage Others *147*

CHAPTER 8: Eat Together *163*

Epilogue *181*

Acknowledgments *183*

Notes *187*

Foreword

One time, Kellye invited me to speak to her small-group leaders. Kris and I sat comfortably at one of the tables as Kellye spoke to her leaders. While sitting, I had what many at Willow Creek Community Church call a “prompting.” These are not common experiences for me, so I knew I had one. I told Kellye that evening that she should go to (our!) seminary, so Kellye and I met not long after at a favorite coffee shop, and we talked. I should say Kellye—ever the lawyer—asked me questions, good questions, questions not normally asked by future seminary students. Her questions were about what goes on in classes and why she should take classes and what she would learn. I don’t remember details, but what I have said to many is this: “You will like seminary not for what it will do *for* you but what it will do *to* you.”

The book you are holding in your hands, *Holy Vulnerability*, reveals in part what the Lord has done *to* Kellye in the last four years as she has pondered the Bible

and theology. I cannot tell you what an honor it was for me when she asked me to write the foreword. In reading this book, I see through her clear-as-glass prose to her vulnerable heart before God and now vulnerable before all of us. Kellye sat in classes with alert eyes, taking notes but pondering (in her inimitable manner) what was said. She was a quiet student, but when Kellye spoke, students listened. She spoke out of an authentic life, out of a deep pondering of the Lord at work in her life, out of a clear mind with compelling arguments, and out of a holy concern for the church where she found faith and where she is nurturing the faith of others. Willow Creek has a gift from God in Kellye.

Kellye's authentic vulnerability percolates in this book in a disarming manner. She speaks from her own brokenness, which she has at times confessed to me. She speaks about shame and about anxiety and about fear. Because she's been through so much, she speaks almost fearlessly and unself-consciously about her own struggles. She doesn't thunder with prophetic words about how wrong these are, nor does she offer any simplistic solutions. No, she disarms us by explaining how she lives with these kinds of experiences as she prays and walks with the Lord and communes with her husband and with friends. Many will find in Kellye, simply by reading this book, a mother-confessor because she gently leads others to see their own reality. Our class flew to Istanbul and visited, with a couple more flights, biblical sites in Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Kellye explained to me with a disarming honesty her dread and fear of flying. She

didn't back away from it, she just moved forward into yet another experience of trusting God in the midst of anxiety and fear. Her persona is put together, but she knows what's in her heart and she will tell you—honestly, vulnerably.

While this book is personal, it is not at all self-absorbed. One of the gifts of good writers of familiar essays is that they tell their own stories in a way that tells our own story too. This book does this on every page: Her story is the story of others. Time and time again as I read *Holy Vulnerability*, I thought of the Psalms, by far the most vulnerable and personal book in the Bible. In the Psalms, there are more than fifteen hundred uses of first-person pronouns: I, my, and me. That's not counting first person plurals: We, our, and us. The Psalms map for us a path into a personal experience of God as well as our personal experiences with God. Our experiences with God are often discovered in the presence of others, a major focus of Kellye's book. Spiritual formation that is entirely individualistic fails the basic test of the Bible: The *I* of the Psalms and the entire Bible is an *I* that is one part of a *We*.

One of the highlights of *Holy Vulnerability* comes to expression in the many, varied writers she quotes. I know some of them were from readings in her classes. They show that she didn't read them for the assignment or the paper but to suck the marrow from each writer for how they could feed her faith. Reflective students take in more than the rest.

Scot McKnight

Introduction

*O God, you are my God;
I earnestly search for you.
My soul thirsts for you;
my whole body longs for you
in this parched and weary land
where there is no water.*

PSALM 63:1

The words of this first verse of Psalm 63 expose a deep longing within me. I feel it in my body—a sense that something is missing . . . but also that the desire can be met. Much of the time, I struggle to know what to do with this thirst. It’s like the psalmist describes—I’m searching, hands grasping and eyes darting in desperation.

Jesus gave us the answer. He said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink” (John 7:37, NIV). But how? How do we come to him? How do we allow him to satisfy our thirst?

For centuries, spiritual practices have been an intentional way Christians have quieted their hearts and sought to draw near to Jesus. Let's be honest, though—spiritual practices can sound like an invitation to the elite, those who have “made it” spiritually. They have hours to reflect and pray. They burn candles and have easier access to God's presence. They think only of God and never watch silly television shows or read novels. There's nothing wrong with any of these super-spiritual-seeming things, but they can seem a bit unrealistic to most of us. After all, we have demanding jobs, aging parents, rambunctious toddlers, ministries in need of our time, relationships to build and sustain.

Now, don't get me wrong—I long to be spiritually mature. I love candles, and yes, I struggle with the ultimate meaning of seemingly mundane tasks and entertainment. I can find myself envying the image I have of the people who seem to have it all together spiritually. But when I return to the Gospels, I am struck again and again by the truth that Jesus (while inviting all) didn't really come for the spiritually elite. Instead, he took great care to seek out the broken in body and mind. He looked for those who had no honor, the ones who were shamed because of their social position or physical condition. He met at night with the afraid. He had eyes to see and words to share with the anxiety-ridden. Jesus even said, “Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. . . . I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are

sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13). So, I guess without putting too fine of a point on it, he came for me and you. In fact, have you ever noticed how the spiritual elite of Jesus’ day didn’t really like him, primarily because he hung around people like us? You know, the broken, ashamed, anxious, and afraid.

And . . . I’ve got to be honest—I’m all of those things.

I am a chronic worrier. The experts call it “generalized anxiety,” which means I am anxious about everyday things most of the time without any discernible reason. You wouldn’t necessarily know this about me because I come across as calm even when things around me are in chaos. But my insides are usually roiling with worry. Often I couldn’t tell you what is causing my anxiousness. I haven’t been able to sort out the original source of my worried soul, but in some ways, my anxiety has become like that friend you can’t quite cut ties with. Even though you don’t enjoy their company, they’ve just been around for too long to do anything drastic at this point. I’ve been aware of this anxiety issue for years, but I have always thought it was associated with particular experiences or situations. It turns out, though, that worry is a pretty constant state for me. In fact, I’ve become so used to this friend that I thought what I was experiencing was just a normal part of being human. Turns out, this isn’t totally true.

Along with my anxiety, I also suffer from a healthy dose of fear. Anxiety about flying transforms easily into fear during the flight. Fear can come along all by itself, too—like when I’m running on the treadmill in a hotel gym by

myself, and before a minute passes, I'm thinking of the guy who died in a hotel gym by himself while running on a treadmill, leaving his wife and kids behind in a pile of grief. *I probably shouldn't be here running alone.* Then a different kind of fear springs up a few minutes later when a man walks by the glass doorway of the gym. I'm a woman in a closed space with no one around—my whole body jumps. Adrenaline pours into my bloodstream, my heart races, and sweat slicks over my hands. Several minutes pass before I am convinced I am safe. As with my anxiety, I can't quite trace the origin of the fear I experience. I figure there is a lot to be afraid of in our world. Bad things do happen to women running alone, and people have died running on treadmills. It's not like my fears are unfounded.

And then there's shame. Shame is sneaky and pernicious because it gets me questioning my own worth and worthiness. I have shame around body image, and just my image generally—not being able to respond quickly in an argument or debate, being un-"liked," making mistakes, and perhaps most insulting and ironic, struggling with anxiety and fear. I've had a hard time recognizing where I experience shame because, of all things, I didn't want to admit that I experience it at all. As a friend recently shared an encounter with shame, I listened and empathized—then told her that my struggles aren't really with shame, but in other areas. She is wise enough to know this wasn't true but gracious enough not to point that out in the moment. I have shame about feeling shame.

Also, something in me—something that is pretty fundamental—is broken. I certainly learned early on in life about sin (I went to a Catholic grade school and high school, after all). But when was it that I realized that despite my best efforts—best intended, best executed—sometimes I simply couldn't help but make hurtful decisions? I have made and continue to make so many choices that arise out of this brokenness I carry around. And this doesn't even include the harmful things I say and do without intention. When did I break? How can I be mended and made whole?

I suspect I'm not alone in living in this tangled mess. There's something profoundly human in all of this, a universal experience of holding ourselves together in the midst of falling apart. And if it's true that Jesus came for the likes of you and me, how exactly does he seek to heal all this anxiety and fear and shame and brokenness? What did he come to do, and how do we get in on whatever that is? I know for some this question must seem super basic—the kind of thing you'd learn around age five in Sunday school. Jesus died for our sins, and when we believe in him, we have eternal life. Yes, yes, yes. And—there is so much more. Believing certain things about Jesus is, of course, part of it; and generally we're pretty good at working on and expressing what we believe. But, again, when I look at the Gospels, what I see first is an invitation to walk with, to watch, *to participate*. We don't save ourselves—but once we are saved in the most fundamental of ways, Jesus invites us to join him in the larger healing of our brokenness.

These invitations from Jesus, in fact, are far more common than the invitation to believe. Those who sought out Jesus did so not for eternal salvation, or even forgiveness, but for some kind of physical or mental healing. In our day, we seem to think we're supposed to do the opposite. First, we are to believe certain things about Jesus, and then we look to him to answer our requests for healing. We've been taught that Jesus cares more about our spiritual state than our physical well-being. This may seem true given the way we emphasize the state of our hearts and souls as a barometer of faith, but perhaps by focusing only on the spiritual side of things, we have missed something crucial in how Jesus heals. Perhaps the only window we have into our true spiritual state—our rebellion against God and his ways—is our physical and mental brokenness, our shame, anxiety, and fear. If we listened to our addictions, shame spirals, panic attacks, and disabling fears instead of trying to flee from them . . . those very things could lead us to a healing encounter with God. In other words, recognizing our physical and mental ailments in God's presence leads to a spiritual turning around (repentance) and healing. This participation is Jesus' primary invitation, the most intimate and revolutionary way we get to encounter him in our lives.

When I first cried out to Jesus, I wasn't looking for eternal salvation. I wasn't looking for forgiveness. I needed help in my temporal, physical life. Something was wrong. I was doing things I didn't want to do, but I felt helpless to turn things around. I was desperate and would do

almost anything to find a way out. We see this pattern in Scripture, too. Luke tells the story of a paralyzed man who was so desperate to be physically healed so he could walk again (and be welcomed into community instead of shunned because of his condition) that he had his friends carry him on his mat onto the roof of the building where Jesus was teaching. They devised some kind of pulley system, dug a hole through the roof tiles, and lowered him into Jesus' presence (Luke 5:17-19). There is no indication in the text that the man or his friends desired anything other than physical healing. Here they were before God incarnate, and their minds and hearts were focused on the temporal—the man's broken body. What he needed was healing. And it was worth going through the humiliation he must have felt being lowered through a roof in front of a gaping crowd to get it. He would do anything.

A woman who had a disorder that caused constant bleeding for a dozen years had a similar compulsion to bring her broken body near to Jesus (Luke 8:43-48). We can imagine that as she trained her eyes on Jesus with the hope of getting close enough to touch his robe, she was thinking about finally being cured of the thus-far incurable. There is no indication that she was seeking eternal help. She needed help with her broken body. And she would endure venturing out before the public, those who believed she was unclean, shameful, and even cursed, to be healed. She would do anything.

While we read many stories of physical healing in the

Gospels, people with internal brokenness, invisible shame, disabling fear, and disquieting anxiety also sought out Jesus. Zacchaeus, a tax collector, felt trapped by his own greed and desire for power. Something in him continued to allow him to rip off his own people to get rich. Indeed, the people in his neighborhood referred to him as a “notorious sinner” (Luke 19:7). When we read of his repentance, he seems to be longing to get out from under the shame associated with his actions and make those he had cheated more than whole again.

In each of these encounters with Jesus, the person involved sought Jesus out. In none did Jesus barge in unwanted or uninvited. He did offer more than each was seeking, it seems—eternal healing as well as temporal. But they had to present themselves before him and acknowledge their need for help. They didn’t come quietly—theirs were desperate cries, demanding calls, longing prayers.

What I have discovered in the last few years (and of course this is no real revelation to those who have walked this road before me) is that God longs to be invited into my brokenness, anxiety, fear, and shame. It is in these very sensitive, hurting, and sometimes bleeding wounds that I experience God’s real presence and my thirst is relieved. Not to mention, God transforms us in these places and begins to mend what’s broken and heal what hurts. I can only be helped in his presence.

These wounds hurt, though, and I have become practiced at protecting them from perceived harm. I have

developed many ways of coping to avoid dealing with and facing these wounds. I have built strong walls, and they withstand even the most sincere and gentle attempts to get in. For the most part, my resistance has been unintentional and reflexive. These areas are so sensitive. I don't want anyone seeing them, moving around in them, or trying to change anything. It will hurt!

But—the presence of Jesus awaits me on the other side of the wall. Healing and freedom are only possible on the other side of the wall. If I am to meet Jesus there, I must begin to dismantle all of the ways I keep him out and open myself to ways to let him in.

Something lingers in the back of my mind, and I suspect it might linger in all of our minds. Jesus is not physically here. When we live in the first half of the twenty-first century and desperately want to follow his plea to come to him, or to go to him for healing as those alive in the first century did, what do we do? We can't make an appointment with him on our day off. We won't run into him at the grocery store after work.

This is where spiritual practices come in. They open us, help us lower the walls, and bring us into Jesus' presence. Now, spiritual practices have been around forever, so this idea is not new. However, many of the traditional spiritual practices tend to be exercises for the mind alone and discount or even disconnect us from our bodies. If we look at what Jesus taught and the ways the early Christians engaged their bodies in their faith, we see

that our bodies—and how we surrender and meet God in embodied ways—are important to him. Jesus touched bodies. He healed bodies. Our bodies matter in the living out of our relationship with him.

Absolute and final healing awaits us when God's Kingdom has fully come. After all, even those who were healed by Jesus' own hands eventually died and may have suffered again from bodily breakdowns and illnesses. In the same way, the healing we find now will be partial and temporary, and it may not look the way we want or expect it to. But we can trust that what God begins in us—transformation, healing, and freedom—he will complete (Philippians 1:6). So what we're going to do together, in pursuit of what his healing looks like here and now, is explore some spiritual practices that seek to bring our whole selves—and particularly the things we're not proud of—into Jesus' presence.

Perhaps you resonate with some or all of these very human conditions—brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear—or maybe you've picked up this book to help "a friend." Either way, you might want to get under a blanket, curl up in your most comfortable spot, and wrap your hands around a favorite mug. You are receiving, right in this moment, an invitation into holy vulnerability.

Holy means set apart for God's purposes. *Vulnerability* means susceptibility to harm or attack. To enter into holy vulnerability, then, is to intentionally open ourselves to the possibility of harm in order for God to heal and mend and

transform. Think of the humiliation which the paralyzed man and the bleeding woman decided to open themselves to. When we choose holy vulnerability, we present ourselves to our loving Father without our walls, protective gear, usual defenses, or bandages and allow him to begin to mend the broken parts of us, replace our fears with love, expose our shame for the lie that it is, and fill us with unshakable peace.

In normal life, we seek to avoid vulnerability at all costs. In fact, as author Daniel Taylor notes, “the great bulk of human activity of every kind aims at lessening [our] vulnerability.”¹ Quite often, this is because we haven’t let God come into the deepest parts of ourselves, where the imperfect and dark and hurt parts of us hide. Richard Rohr, writer and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, calls this “‘the inner room’ where Jesus invites us, and where things hide ‘secretly’ (Matthew 6:6).”²

Why do we guard this inner room with such vigilance? It’s vulnerable, and vulnerability reminds us of our mortality, our inability to sustain ourselves, and the reality that we are not as indestructible as we pretend to be. In our culture, vulnerability equals weakness, and weakness exposes us in ways we find unacceptable. Indeed, we have all already been hurt in our lives back when we had no ability to protect ourselves and, for whatever reasons, those charged with our care could not or did not keep us from harm.

At first, holy vulnerability is a scary place. You might

feel alone and exposed. Few people are willing to dip a toe in these waters, let alone dive in headfirst. So, why would we allow ourselves to be open to such harm? And why would we do it intentionally?

We each have hurts that are so far down, so embedded, so delicate and sensitive that we can hardly bear the idea of ever allowing them to surface. And this is to say nothing of the pain that is so buried we could not name it even if we tried. But when our wounds are unbandaged, exposed, and examined in the presence of our loving God—Father, Son, and Spirit—they can be healed. Jesus is beckoning you into a place where you will ultimately come to feel at home, safe and cared for, loved and whole.

To say yes to the invitation into holy vulnerability requires emotional courage. As you walk around in it, you may feel a need to escape and return to where you feel it is safe. Reliving traumatic experiences, confronting failures, and sitting in the discomfort of shame, anxiety, and fear can be agonizing and exhausting. And so, as you enter into holy vulnerability, let me be the first to say, “It’s okay. Take a break.” Be gentle with yourself as you would with a close friend. God’s invitation doesn’t expire.

The alternative to holy vulnerability is unholy leakage. You know, that thing that happens when you are afraid, ashamed, or anxious, and instead of facing the reality of what you’re experiencing, you just kind of spill it on everyone around you—usually your spouse, kids, or closest friends. Words intended to be lighthearted strike a sore

spot, and an intimate dinner becomes a battlefield. An impending trip to your childhood home or family triggers anxiety that turns into unexplained impatience with your kids. An encounter with your scale or mirror or pair of jeans sends you into a spiral of withdrawal and self-hatred. An unknown hurt compels you to engage in well-worn destructive behaviors that you end up regretting.

Together, we're going to map a path out of unholy leakage and into holy vulnerability—and that path is through intentional spiritual practices that open us to God's work. I'm hoping that when you hear "spiritual practices for the broken, ashamed, anxious, and afraid," you feel something deep within you nodding in agreement, saying, *Yes. That is me. I want to meet God in the middle of my pain. These practices aren't for the spiritually elite—they're for me.* But I also want to clarify: When I say "broken, ashamed, anxious, and afraid," I am pointing to the aspects of these things that we all experience as part of the human condition. Many people are dealing with more severe manifestations that require significant professional help or recovery programs; I myself have needed counseling and medication for anxiety at various points. Needing that kind of intervention in no way reflects weakness of faith or determination or anything else. I'm not offering medical opinions; I'm speaking to the struggles that run through all our lives and where God longs to meet us in them.

So here's where we're going in this book. In Part I, we'll start by learning to notice where it seems God is absent

and brokenness is breaking in. Where is anxiety occupying our hearts and minds; fear hindering our relationships, faith, and joy; shame causing us to question our self-worth? We'll gently examine the ways we have come to cope when we experience anxiety, fear, shame, and brokenness—and how these coping practices affect us and our families and friends.

In Part II, we'll explore six different spiritual practices intended to open us to God's healing and transformation. These practices may not be what you expect or what you envision when you think about intentional spiritual work. But I assure you—as we step out in holy vulnerability, God will meet us there. These practices aren't for those uber-mature people who have it all together and have gaping holes in their daily schedules. They are for us, people in the middle of stuff with families and jobs and difficult stories. They are designed to help us penetrate the illusions we have and get in touch with what is real.³

As I mentioned briefly above, one thing to know about the practices we're going to explore together is that they are bodily—in other words, they require something more than thinking. They require action, and as you go along, the amount of action they require increases. This is on purpose because the more our bodies are involved, the more fully we are offering ourselves to God for his healing and transformation. All the practices may not hold equal weight for you. Some may come more naturally than others—in which case, I'd say move on to those that feel like you're

writing with your nondominant hand because the stuff that comes naturally doesn't stretch us much. But when you feel weary, return to the ones that feel more natural. Also, depending on the season you're currently in, some of the practices may seem really helpful, but almost like they're for a later time. I once attended a retreat that began with the question "How many of you are exhausted?" Every hand in the room but mine shot up. I happened to be in a season that felt manageable and restful. The practices we learned were about recuperating, making space for rest, and learning to be content in silence and solitude. None felt particularly relevant to me at the time, but I knew I'd need them at some point, so I dove in and reminded myself that these were going to come in handy one day. The practices I learned during that retreat have been bringing me life and peace in God's presence ever since.

If your soul thirsts for God and longs to be taken into his presence, join me. The journey into holy vulnerability and away from unholy leakage is not easy, but it's what we need. We were made to be in and can flourish in God's presence, so even in this time in history where sin and hurt still abound, there is goodness and healing and rest when we open ourselves and accept Jesus' invitation to come and drink.

Father, our healer, we need you. Allow us to know your presence as we move into the places of deep vulnerability in our lives. We hold so much in our

Holy Vulnerability

bodies and hearts and minds. Give us the courage to walk with you and expose these places to you for healing. Be gentle and kind to us—and most of all, grant us the privilege of encountering you.

PART I

NOTICING OUR ABSENCE

Dentistry has come a long way since I was a child. Back then, in search of cavities from all the Mike and Ikes I ate, my dentist would probe my teeth for soft spots with a scary metal, hooked tool (which I've since learned is called a sickle probe). Then, based on his experience and best guess about what he was feeling, he would decide whether I needed a filling. These days, dentists are a lot more precise. A laser tool measures density and weakness in the tooth, and a sufficiently high reading indicates that there's enough decay to warrant a filling.

No matter the method, the reality is still the same:

Living with decayed teeth is painful. But we can't identify the decay, remove it, and insert a filling ourselves by the power of our will, with the help of a dentistry book, or with our own set of tools. There is no do-it-yourself fix. We have to go to a dentist to remove the decay and find relief from the pain. Only a dentist can drill out the bad parts and fill the gap with something better so that we can still use our teeth.

Even though dental decay can be debilitating, we're not naturally inclined to go looking for decay and proactively root it out before it becomes a huge problem. So many of us hate going to the dentist—most commonly because of the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness that come from having someone using sharp instruments near our life-giving airways as we sit motionless in a chair, unable to participate in any way in our own care.¹

But if we really think about it, dental care isn't the only part of life where we're apprehensive about allowing ourselves to be probed for decay. Anytime someone points out our weaknesses, especially those we don't seem to have much control over, we feel attacked. We feel vulnerable and helpless. We're tempted to avoid the conversation, to shut down and decline the invitation to look closer at the decay.

We've all got places of decay in our bodies, hearts, and minds—and we all are tempted to turn to avoidance tactics and coping mechanisms to avoid the vulnerability of addressing them. We may see the signs of a problem, but we close our eyes, endure the pain, or find ways to work

around it. But the thing about decay is that when we don't address it, the pain just gets more intense. The damage gets worse. We don't have a chance of getting healthy until we decide to face where things are rotting within us.

How can we begin to notice when our brokenness harms us or others, when shame tears apart our insides, anxiety preoccupies and distracts, and fear inhibits and prevents the fullness of life Jesus came to bring? How can we slow down enough to discover the places within us that are full of decay? We must start with our need and then be willing to face the painful ways it manifests itself in our lives.

NOTICING OUR NEED

*We are infinite souls inside finite lives and that alone should
be enough to explain our incessant and insatiable aching.*

RONALD ROLHEISER

*B*efore I met Jesus, I thought I had everything pretty much together. I moved from high school to college to law school to a successful legal career with aplomb—a very astute manager of my world, in my opinion. I wasn't perfect, sure, but I considered myself fairly capable of navigating around anything that would keep me from being the kind of person I wanted to be, living the kind of life I wanted to live.

But then, unexpectedly, my well-worn ways of controlling my own particular idiosyncrasies and temptations, as I would have called them then, stopped working. I began

to see what I knew to be wrong as necessary for my own well-being, the only way to emotionally survive. This subconscious shift was immensely destructive. And I wasn't living in this place of desolation for a few weeks. I spent *ten years* trying to make what felt like a broken life work. It took me ten years to realize I needed help.

When it seemed I had no personal capacity left, nothing more to draw on within myself, I cried out to God—and as he does, “he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along” (Psalm 40:1-2). This is not an uncommon human compulsion—to cry out to God when we are desperate, when we have no other options. As Richard Rohr says, “until and unless there is a person, situation, event, idea, conflict, or relationship that you cannot ‘manage,’ you will never find the True Manager.”¹

When I turned to God, I stepped down as manager, as best as I knew how, and gave my life over to Jesus. At the time, this looked like a complete turnaround. My interests changed, the kinds of books I read shifted, my thoughts became less self-focused, and the people I wanted to be around reflected the values of this new life. God gently showed me how and equipped me to turn away from the destructive habits and behaviors that had plagued me. During this time, I had very little fear or anxiety, I did not seem as tempted as I had been, and I was sure that whatever had been broken was (mostly) healed. I seemed to be

hearing from the Lord on a daily basis. I was emboldened to love and serve, to give my time and my money. I encountered God in tangible and unforgettable ways. As far as I could tell, God had full access.

But then, after a number of years, something changed. Not all that was broken within me, I realized, had been fully healed. Some cracks still existed. Some old susceptibilities still presented themselves from time to time. Fear found a place again. Anxious thoughts returned. My brokenness seemed less dramatic and obvious than it had been before I called out to God—and in that way, perhaps more difficult to identify—but still there. My destructive patterns became subtler and less obvious, something that is common according to spiritual writers who call these more disguised sins “the faults of those already advanced beyond first conversion.”²² These are the sins we excuse as “not that bad” or “just part of our personality.”

Over time, God’s voice, once so clear and ever-present in my days, had quieted. With each passing year, I feel a deeper longing for the old days, the days just after my conversion when I felt so alive and on fire. I think I may have stepped back in as manager, resumed my position as CEO, and then found myself having closed God out. I didn’t decide to turn away from God or wrest control back. This change happened over time, as I slowly turned inward and became undisciplined about practicing my faith in an outward sense. My faith became primarily an internal, intellectual endeavor. My perspective, outward

and others-focused in my early days of faith, had turned back toward myself. And when I stopped to pay attention, I realized that this self-focus coincided with (caused?) my resurgence of anxiety and fear.

That is the first step in inviting God into our places of brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear: noticing. Where are we sensing an absence, that feeling we've taken back control and subconsciously asked God to step aside? Where are we experiencing unholy leakage, the spilling over of attitudes and behaviors that eat away at our hearts and our relationships with others?

We've got to open our eyes to these conditions we carry. We cannot make ourselves available to God as healer and Savior without acknowledging that we are in need, and that our need has a name. And remember, *our needs are not our identity*. Noticing the reality that I am broken, ashamed, anxious, and afraid doesn't mean I am only those things. Our God-given self-worth holds even when we acknowledge our need.

NEEDY AND BROKEN

Not long ago, my husband and I cared for a little girl named Mary³ who had been removed from her home because she'd been abused and neglected by her parents—the people entrusted to care for and love this gift they'd been given. She was in poor health, having neither gone to the doctor since she was born nor visited the dentist in her life. Her parents were addicted to opioids and left their

apartment dirty and dangerous. Mary talked about things like going to jail, getting into trouble, and feeling pain in her private parts. Her body was covered with scrapes and bruises. She couldn't return home and had no one related to her that could take her in.

Things are not as they should be. Thousands upon thousands of children have stories like Mary's. Children are abused, exploited, neglected, trafficked. And while we may say we aren't as bad as those who abuse the innocent, darkness lingers within each of us. We feel rage toward that coworker who is dismissive toward us; we are tempted to lie to cover our tracks; we get angry at that one commentator on our Facebook posts or the driver that cuts us off; we resent people who require our time and attention; and we grow bitter and envious when others succeed. We know that something is fundamentally wrong with both the world outside of us and with what is going on inside of us. I don't think this proposition is truly in question, though it seems, as theologian Cornelius Plantinga notes, "where sin is concerned, people mumble now."⁴ Indeed, even saying the word *sin* today can provoke both confusion and accusations of judgmentalism. But we can't get very far in our quest to open ourselves to God's presence and healing without talking about sin.

In our post-postmodern world, however, the word *sin* no longer carries immediate understanding. I like using the words *broken* or *brokenness* instead, not because they remove culpability but because few people, even in our

secular world, can claim to not understand what it means to be broken. We all know when something is not working as it was intended.

Brokenness encompasses wrongs we commit, rights we omit, and the general state of a world in which children get cancer, tornadoes and landslides kill entire communities, and famine destroys an entire generation. Brokenness doesn't mean those things that seem to impinge on our well-being or mental health, like being unable to find a parking spot, walking the grocery cart all the way back to the store's front door, or having our opinion go unheard. The fact that we must exert effort or even fail at certain tasks does not reflect that sin is at work or that the world is not as it should be. But our reaction, whether internal or external, to the situations and obstacles we face may indeed provide evidence of this reality.

Of course, brokenness is more than things that happen to us; we are quite culpable much of the time. There's no end to what our pride, selfishness, and wounds can motivate us to do, say, or think. And we can really be hard on ourselves when we see our sins. We are good at self-condemnation. We are great at heaping shame on ourselves to the point where we close God out, not wanting to be seen in our messy state.

Cornelius Plantinga defines sin as “culpable shalom-breaking,”⁵ and being far more experienced in committing sin than defining it, I find his definition the best to use here. By shalom, Plantinga means “the way things ought

to be,” or more richly stated, “universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight.”⁶ So if sin is culpable shalom-breaking, brokenness is the absence of shalom inside or outside of ourselves, whether we specifically are blameworthy or not.

It’s certainly easier for most of us to see what’s wrong “out there” and point the sickle probe at others than it is to allow ourselves to be open to God (or others) and identify our personal areas of decay. Jesus spoke directly to this human tendency: “How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:4). Also, we humans tend to live with an everlasting optimism (naïveté?) that we are capable of fixing what’s wrong if only we can find the right book, program, practices, or steps or if enough good-intentioned people participate. We think that if we try hard enough, we can will away (or even explain away) our rebellion, selfishness, and defensiveness. These thought processes are a denial of the reality in which we live. No objective arbiter would look at the evidence of human history and conclude, “Yes, if they would just try harder, all the problems of the world would be solved.”

I recently watched a movie about a couple who moved from a small city apartment to a large piece of land, intending to start a “traditional” farm where all would be in harmony. What they discovered instead was that with each positive introduction to their farm—peach trees, or chickens, or a pond—a new pest or problem would arise. Solving one problem (growing ground cover in the orchard

to ensure softer, more productive soil) led to a new problem (snails thriving in the ground cover and devouring the peach trees). As I watched, I couldn't help thinking, *This is what we do!* When a problem creeps up, we seek to solve it—and our solution only causes another problem. I take medication for my generalized anxiety, and the medication has worked so well in helping minimize my anxiety that I want to write a letter to the manufacturer. But there are side effects—one of which is night sweats. Solve one problem, and another finds a foothold.

We may feel a bit hopeless in the face of this idea that our brokenness is unsolvable by us and that, while we may make great progress toward wholeness, something else will always creep up. Yet here is the greater hope: Throughout Scripture, God invites us to turn to him in our brokenness (and sin), not away. Jesus said more about forgiveness, healing, and life than he ever did about sin and brokenness. As C. S. Lewis explains, what God often “first helps us towards is not the virtue itself but just this power of always trying again. For however important [a particular virtue] may be, this process trains us in habits of the soul which are more important still. It cures our illusions about ourselves and teaches us to depend on God.”⁷ So what if we took God up on his invitation? What if we said yes to his help and his gracious and restorative presence?

At the end of the day, God's intervention in our brokenness is why we're Christians. We realize the direness of our situation and find our only hope in Jesus Christ. So yes,

let us observe our brokenness and sin with sorrow. But what if we also examine it with curiosity instead of self-condemnation? What if we could view ourselves with the graciousness we might offer a friend under similar circumstances? What if we could turn to God even in the midst of temptation and in the depths of our brokenness?

NEEDY AND ASHAMED

Shame is often tied closely to our brokenness. We tend to feel it based on immoral or hurtful things we have done or awful things that have been done to us that we feel, wrongly, responsible for. I should be an expert on shame. I have a lot of it. Shame causes me to almost hate myself for merely being human—for being imperfect, saying the wrong thing or something unkind, being incapable of overcoming my fear of flying, getting older and changing shape, making mistakes, wanting to blame others for my own failures or insecurities, and on and on. Instead of seeing mistakes or imperfection as part of the human (and thus my) condition, I see them as evidence that I am fundamentally and unchangeably defective.

Brené Brown, an actual expert on shame,⁸ defines shame this way: “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”⁹ To be honest, when I read this definition for the first time, it didn’t really resonate with me. At the time, I would have said that shame isn’t a struggle I have. But here is what I have learned: Shame is something

we all have, just in differing degrees and under different circumstances. Brené Brown identifies twelve categories of shame that she has seen in her research: appearance and body image; money and work; motherhood/fatherhood; family; parenting; mental and physical health; addiction; sex; aging; religion; surviving trauma; and being stereotyped or labeled.¹⁰ We've probably all had shame around some or all of these categories, though it seems it's usually one or two that can really send us into a downward spiral.

In the Bible, shame first comes to life in Genesis 3:7, when Adam and Eve's eyes are opened and they realize they are naked. Some translations specifically say they felt shame (NLT), and commentators argue that awareness of their nakedness brought them shame.¹¹ Why? They did what God, who wanted only their ultimate good and flourishing, specifically told them not to do. This sin forged a rift between them and God, causing them to discover the vulnerability and weakness of being human apart from God.

When we are ashamed, we feel this same relational break with God and others. Shame makes us believe there is something fundamentally wrong with us that will cause others to reject us. It makes us believe we are bad and unworthy of love and belonging. But sin and shame are not the same. When Adam and Eve sinned, there were consequences. Their intimate communion with God had been broken. Yet they were not unloved or unlovable. After all, God made them garments to cover their nakedness,

blessed them with children, and sustained them (Genesis 3:21–4:26).

The foundation of shame is this: When we act or speak or think in a way we shouldn't, the accusing voices we have in our minds—the shame “gremlins,” as Brené Brown refers to them¹²—don't stick with the reality of “you did a terrible thing.” Instead, they accuse, “You're a terrible person.” Shame picks us apart and makes our lack or failure our identity.

But shame doesn't just limit itself to personal, internal attacks. I also encounter what seems to be a subtler, maybe more insidious kind of gremlin: the one that says “*she* is a terrible person” or “*he* is the one that's not parenting well.” One of my most prominent areas of brokenness is that I am judgmental—way more than I feel comfortable admitting. I tend to keep my judgmentalism out of sight, silently berating myself for the unwelcome thoughts, but every now and then it sneaks out in a sideways, snarky comment or in a look.

Lately I've been exploring where this tendency comes from and if it rears its head at certain times more than others. My husband asked me a question that has stuck with me, one that I think explains a lot: “Have you always been this critical of yourself?” I don't remember what I'd said to prompt his inquiry, but it was obviously some kind of veiled (or not) criticism of myself. Something in that conversation made me realize I *am* really critical of myself. But I take this self-criticism—my own shame—and project

it onto others. Let's say I think, *I never see so-and-so read her Bible. I bet she never does.* But really, I've hit a slump in my own Bible reading. I've told myself I "should" read the Bible every day. And, the logic follows, I'm a bad Christian because I'm in a slump. To avoid feeling the pain of this reality or extending myself compassion, I project this judgment onto someone else. Brené Brown notes,

What's ironic (or perhaps natural) is that research tells us that we judge people in areas where we're vulnerable to shame, especially picking folks who are doing worse than we're doing. If I feel good about my parenting, I have no interest in judging other people's choices. If I feel good about my body, I don't go around making fun of other people's weight or appearance. We're hard on each other because we're using each other as a launching pad out of our own perceived shaming deficiency.¹³

The undercurrent of shame in many of our lives is so common we don't always notice it. But shame does not have to rule us or become our identity—if we are willing to open ourselves to God's presence in the midst of our shame. After all, Jesus came into the world to save it and release us from the hold of sin and shame. At its core, shame is the fear that we are flawed and unworthy of love or belonging. In Jesus, though, we can call shame what it is: a lie. As Paul says so powerfully in his letter to the

Christians in Rome: “So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

NEEDY AND ANXIOUS

Anxiety is an old, very loyal friend of mine. I’m not sure exactly when we met, but it was early in my life. On my first day of kindergarten, when I was five, the school-bus driver dropped me off by myself at my own empty house instead of at the babysitter’s. I don’t remember much, except that I was crying and made the decision to walk to my babysitter’s house, miles away. As I walked along the side of the street in our neighborhood, tears streaming down my face, a man pulled up in a car and asked if I was lost. I refused to speak with him and continued walking. He was persistent and told me where he lived (he was a neighbor) and that he wanted to help me find my parents. After a lot of coaxing, I agreed to follow behind his car to his house and to stand at the bottom of the driveway so he and his wife could call my mom. (There were no cell phones back then.) I didn’t know the name of the company where my mom worked, but I knew she worked for a lawyer named Jack. Since we lived in a relatively small town, the neighbors were eventually able to get ahold of my mom using the yellow pages.

About a year later—in a series of events unrelated to this incident—my parents got divorced. And, although anxiety may be a result of many factors (such as heredity, biology, family background and upbringing, conditioning, recent life changes, and environmental stressors¹⁴), I

feel confident that my terrifying first day of school and my parents' divorce have played a major role in my life with anxiety. Since those early years of my life, I've lived with a sense of instability and worry about whether things are fundamentally okay in the world and whether I am safe. My general operating system tells me that nothing is secure and that anything is liable to fall apart, shift, or disappear at any moment. I have an ever-present sense of dread or foreboding, and I tend to catastrophize in my own mind. All of this comes so naturally that I didn't realize until recently that it was out of the ordinary or had a name (generalized anxiety disorder or free-floating anxiety).¹⁵

Anxiety is a whole-being experience—"it is a physiological, behavioral, and psychological reaction all at once."¹⁶ Physically, I'm rarely at ease. My stomach is almost always tight, my jaw's natural state is tense, and my hands sweat. I have frequent headaches, and when my anxiety is at its worst, I hyperventilate. As I write this, I feel ashamed that my mind and body are defective in these ways and am worried about what you think of me, how what I'm writing may influence any future jobs I seek, and what effect my words could have on insurance coverage down the road. (See what I mean about catastrophizing?) Another thing: Shame only magnifies anxiety.¹⁷ If ever there were a place I need God, it is here, in this anxiety-shame-more-anxiety cycle.

But the most frustrating aspect of my anxiety is that I have a hard time connecting with God in the midst of it.

I can't seem to raise myself out of my spinning thoughts, gain a broader perspective, or even open myself to the possibility that God can be present with me during these panicky moments or seasons. Anxiety causes a kind of tunnel vision and self-focus that can feel impossible to get out of. I have tried to follow the advice of the apostle Peter, who said, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7, NIV). But I don't know how to get ahold of my anxiety in order to then cast it elsewhere. I have internalized Jesus' words not to worry and his reminder that a single day can't be added to my life through worrying (Matthew 6:25-34). Unfortunately, as true as I know these words to be, I can't seem to follow them. Deciding not to worry or willing myself to stop feeling anxious doesn't work. As philosopher Dallas Willard observed, "No one can succeed in mastering feelings in his or her life who tries to simply take them head-on and resist or redirect them by 'willpower' in the moment of choice."¹⁸

Still, I don't think Jesus or Peter (and others in Scripture) were asking us to do the impossible. When they gave these instructions, they had a whole-person experience in mind, one involving the mind and the body, one bound by relationship and trust. Jesus spoke his words about worry in his Sermon on the Mount, a teaching that illustrates a life devoted to God and marked by complete trust in his care and provision. Peter tells us to cast our anxiety on God only *after* he tells us to humble ourselves under God's mighty power.

NEEDY AND AFRAID

I'm sure you've heard or read that in Scripture, God tells us not to be afraid 365 times—once for every day of the year.¹⁹ Whenever someone posts this on social media or shares it in a group setting, I can't help but wonder at its helpfulness. Or, to be more direct: I don't find it helpful and, in fact, find it shaming. Fear doesn't magically turn into peace upon the instruction, "Do not be afraid." And being afraid isn't something we can control by simply thinking differently: Our bodies have built-in mechanisms that kick into gear before our minds even know we're afraid.

There are a lot of things to be afraid of these days. As I write, virtually the whole world is "sheltered at home"—required to stay home except to get essentials like toilet paper, medicine, and food—because of the rapid spread of COVID-19. Except for the very few who were alive during the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, none of us has experienced anything like this before. For all our technological, medicinal, and social progress, we are still walking around in mortal, susceptible, vulnerable bodies. To protect our bodies right now, we have to stay away from other people, lest we catch or spread a virus that has the power to kill in a matter of days. We won't know how bad things are or could have been for many years, I'm sure, but this *is* scary and worthy of fear. And this is just one example.

But how do we hold the tension between the ever-present fear around us and God's daily admonition not to be afraid? Is that really what it is?

Like brokenness, shame, and anxiety, fear is part of what it is to be human. We are afraid of endless things, from the very understandable to the bizarre. Our fears can generally be categorized into five types: fear of no longer existing (of which fear of death is a part); fear of being hurt or having our bodies invaded in some way (think snakes, spiders, needles, the dentist); fear of powerlessness or the loss of freedom (think suffocation, drowning, imprisonment, aging); fear of rejection or abandonment; and fear of humiliation or shame.²⁰

I first encountered debilitating fear when I was a junior in high school. In religion class, we were reading a book about life's big questions, and while I don't remember which question was raised, I do remember zoning out pretty suddenly as I realized that one day I would not only die but not exist. The fear that gripped me was like nothing I've ever felt before or since. I was overcome by a foreboding sense of utter nothingness. My life was headed toward absence, despair. I couldn't pull myself out of the panic I felt. My heart raced, my hands became sweaty, and I felt dizzy and nauseous. I thought I might faint. Even though I was in a Catholic school, I didn't consider—until much later in my life—that there might be a scenario in which life waited for me on the other side of death.

Is fear something we can overcome—and should overcoming fear even be our goal? We all have undoubtedly heard stories of people conquering fears, and we may have even done so ourselves. The psalmist says God delivered

him from all his fears (Psalm 34:4). And according to John, the one referred to as the apostle Jesus loved (John 13:23; 19:26), “perfect love expels all fear” (1 John 4:18). But in my experience, fear isn’t something I can ever fully shake. I thought I had overcome my fear of flying in the mid-2000s, when I flew constantly for work; the more I flew, the less afraid I was. But the fear returned with a vengeance as I began to fly less and less.

While I’d like to be fearless, I’m not sure that lack of fear alone is the goal. When I look at the passages of Scripture about fear, I see something different from an instruction to knuckle down and overcome. God’s Word doesn’t seem to order us to use human efforts to banish fear. I see instead an invitation to trust, to be present, and to be aware of God’s presence where we might otherwise assume his absence:

Psalm 23:4: [David wrote,] “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, *for you are close beside me.*”

Joshua 1:9: [The Lord said,] “This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. *For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*”

Deuteronomy 31:6: [Moses said,] “Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic

before them [the nations living in Canaan]. *For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you.*”

1 Chronicles 28:20: [David said,] “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don’t be afraid or discouraged, *for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.*”

Isaiah 41:10: [The Lord said,] “Don’t be afraid, *for I am with you.* Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God.”²¹

This is the confidence we have from Scripture: The more we live into the reality of God’s presence, the more aware we are of him, the more we embrace his love for us—the less of a hold fear will have on us. Why is this so? Because God himself, in and through Jesus Christ, conquered our deepest fears and has opened the pathway into dependence on his love. We can trust him because of not only what we see in Jesus but also what God did through Jesus: He came in human flesh to demonstrate God’s love; he lived the life of a perfect human to show us what total trust in God looks like; he died on the cross to atone for the sin of all humanity; God raised him from the dead to display his power over the scariest thing of all: death; and he ascended to the right hand of the Father, alive, promising to bring us there with him—alive—in the end. Left by

ourselves and to our own capabilities, there are plenty of things to be afraid of in this world. But God is not shaking a finger at us and telling us to try harder to not be afraid. He is telling us that as we lean into him and trust him, our fear will dissipate.

BEING CURIOUS

How can we notice when our brokenness is at play? Or when our shame is causing us to act in harmful ways? How do we notice when anxiety and fear are dictating our words, thoughts, or behaviors? Like so many other things, noticing these parts of ourselves is a process that takes intention and reflection.

Noticing, very simply, is paying attention; it's being curious about how we move through life and why we respond the way we do. I can't always distinguish between and among brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear, but if I'm paying attention, I start to notice when something in my internal or external responses feels off.

A key phrase I've learned in my noticing is "hysterical = historical." I'm not sure where this comes from or who coined it first, but in essence, it means that when you have a strong (over)reaction to something, your response probably has some connection to another event or experience in your life that was hurtful, made you feel misunderstood, or caused you distress. Of course, sometimes you might just be passionate about a particular issue, but strong reactions can be a signal of brokenness, shame, anxiety, or

fear. Noticing a disproportionate response allows us to get curious about what's causing it.

I've also learned to look out for defensiveness. For example, let's say that our garage door starts having issues over the weekend, and my husband and I agree we should call someone to fix it during the week. I have more free time in my schedule on Monday, so we also agree I'll make the call. But when Monday comes, I completely forget to call. That evening, my husband asks me, "Did you ever call about the garage?" An innocent enough question, right? He's just checking in on something we talked about previously. But I immediately get defensive and respond in an irritated tone, "We *just* talked about it yesterday." (Translated: "I can't believe you're asking me already. I'm a busy person, and I've been working on other things. I'm not lazy!") I don't say, "Oh, oops, I forgot. I'll put it on my list for tomorrow." Instead, I get angry about being asked at all. Unholy leakage.

That particular unholy leakage leads me to even more: spiraling. A few minutes after that kind of defensive interaction, I start berating myself for forgetting. I look back on my day and see all the times I could have called but didn't; I consider my lack of responsibility; and I feel embarrassed for saying I'd do something and then failing to do it. Spiraling is another signal. Shame has taken hold. A minor mistake runs through my mind nonstop, leading to fear and uncertainty about my worth.

Lastly, gut feelings can be a helpful prompting. Even

in our day, when so much seems permissible, we all know when we've acted out of bounds—when we snapped at a coworker or were passive-aggressive toward a friend. Our own conscience makes us aware, and if we are Christians, the Holy Spirit has a way of convicting our hearts when we've done something sinful.

I don't always notice when I'm acting out of brokenness, shame, anxiety, or fear. These things can be so deeply rooted that, while I sense something's going on, I'm not always sure what. Sometimes I am really impatient or anxious or short with others without any sense of why. Noticing the subtler, deeper, disguised, and well-worn areas of brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear can be far more difficult. But that's when we can take a closer look at a key signal of those deeper struggles: our coping practices. That's what we'll talk about next.

But we shouldn't try to suppress our feelings or forget about them and move along with our day. God wants to be invited into our brokenness, our anxiety and shame and fear. We need God in these places. So when we sense a part of our lives where we have pushed him out or not allowed him in, let's not power through or shut down or avoid a closer look. Let's get curious. Ignoring or dealing with these conditions on our own steals our peace and joy; self-dependence blocks the full life that Jesus came to give. But dependence, inviting God into the parts of ourselves we don't understand, creates opportunities to encounter him. And if the Bible is true, to encounter God is better

even than the healing he might bring to a particular issue. Ultimately, whatever underlies our brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear can be satisfied by God's loving presence.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what area(s) of your life does God seem absent or feel distant to you? In what area(s) do you long for God's presence?
2. Consider the ways in which you feel your brokenness, shame, anxiety, and fear internally. What comes to mind? Notice any overlap between your answers to this question and your answers to the first question.
3. How does brokenness manifest itself outwardly in your life? What about shame? Anxiety? Fear?
4. Which of the four conditions we've talked about do you experience the most? Which do you experience the least? Which is most foreign to you altogether? About which one(s) might you say, "I don't struggle with that"?
5. In what area(s) of your life are you most longing for healing?

