



Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church

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An effective plan to help those suffering from wounds inflicted by the church find spiritual healing and a renewed sense of faith.

Raised as a conservative Christian, minister and author Carol Howard Merritt discovered that the traditional institutions she grew up in inflicted great pain and suffering on others. Though she loved the spirituality the church provided, she knew that, because of sexism, homophobia, and manipulative religious politics, established religious institutions weren't always holy or safe. Instead of offering refuge, these institutions have betrayed people's hearts and souls. "People have suffered religious abuse," she writes, "which can be different from physical injury or psychological trauma."

Though participation and affiliation in traditional religious institutions is waning, many people still believe in God. Merritt contends that many leave the church because they have lost trust in the institution, not in God. *Healing Spiritual Wounds* addresses the church's dichotomous image—as a safe space and as a dangerous place—and provides a way to restore personal faith and connection to God for those who have been hurt or betrayed by established institutions of faith. Merritt lays out a multistage plan for moving from pain to spiritual rebirth, from recovering theological and emotional shards to recovering communal wholeness.

Merritt does not sugarcoat the wrongs institutions long seen as trustworthy have inflicted on many innocent victims. Sympathetic, understanding, and deeply positive, she offers hope and a way to help them heal and reclaim the spiritual joy that can make them whole again.

Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church Details

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From Reader Review Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church for online ebook

Cynthia says

This book didn't work. The title leads you to think it will help you recover from bad experiences in church, but I didn't find it helpful at all. This is mostly a memoir about growing up in a very conservative church and with an abusive parent. The book also tries to be an all purpose self help book. Sorry, I wasn't looking for help with my finances or a re-interpretation of my image of God. The author writes beautifully. This might be helpful for former fundamentalists, but not for the rest of us.

Tad says

I feel a bit awkward writing a review of this book since I happen to be friends with the author and she sent me a free, autographed copy of the book. It's a weird position to be in when you are friends with an author because how do you objectively review something they've written? I'll just say that I think Merritt really nails it here. She gets at the heart of the reasons why so many of us have been wounded by the church and she gives us some great exercises to do to recover from those wounds. This is an important and needed book for anyone who has found themselves hurt by the church, which sadly is most of us. An easy going and engaging writing style that doesn't get too bogged down with complicated theological terms or ideas. Accessible, short and detailed. Thanks for writing this, Carol. Looking forward to seeing you in person next week and telling you how much I enjoyed this.

Cara says

I really loved this book. Highly recommended for those who have been hurt by church or religious people, but still keep coming back to God. Interview forthcoming at Off the Page.

Erin says

Another entry in the Recovering-Evangelical genre. I was hoping for a more nuanced discussion of repairing relationships in Christian community and instead found it mostly a rebuke of hyper-conservative, purity culture complementarianism. If you've read Sarah Bessey, Rachel Held Evans, or Dianna E. Anderson, then you've already encountered much of the territory traveled in this book. Having not grown up with that baggage, I'm not looking for a way to recover from it. I can understand this is probably helpful for readers who need it. Church community can be hurtful in other ways that could've been addressed here - how about churches that burnout their staff? Consumer Christianity/Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?

Pros: the helpful tips for overcoming negative church programming, specifically related to abuse or strict gender roles

Cons: florid prose, not nuanced

Ruth Everhart says

I was able to read an advance copy of this book, and was delighted to see that it was everything I hoped it would be: readable, insightful, and packed with practical help.

Carol Howard Merritt gently unspools the tightly wound messages of shame and guilt that strangle spirits and cause damage to body, soul and relationships. Merritt shows the reader how to unfurl into the open space of God's great love. An invaluable tool for faith leaders and healers of all types.

Robert D. Cornwall says

Stories abound of people who have been spiritually wounded. Many who have such experiences have decided that religion and God are not worth the trouble. If they're to find healing it won't be in a religious context and likely won't involve God. Such wounds come in many forms. We have heard much about clergy sex abuse scandals. LGBT folks often find that the church and religious people can be not only unwelcoming but hostile and even violent. Religion has been used to justify racism and sexism. Then there are the preachers who rain down upon their congregations words of anger and abuse, often creating a climate of fear, guilt, and shame. So, is it possible for someone to experience such realities and reconnect with God?

Carol Howard Merritt is a Presbyterian pastor and author (and a friend). Carol has her own story of spiritual woundedness that is deeply rooted in her own experiences growing up in a fundamentalist context, with an abusive father who justified his rage with the Bible, and then found herself in college at Moody Bible Institute. It was during her time at Moody that she began to discern a different path. In part this had to do with encountering other forms of Christianity while in Chicago. It included being given the opportunity to befriend an older woman, needing companionship, who was liberal in her sentiments, opening up another avenue. It also included a horrific event, the day she was sexually assaulted (groped) by a man, while standing near the front door of her college. Even as she felt shame, because she had been taught that women were the temptresses and cause of such assaults, she began to realize that such a message could not be true. While she might have left Christianity behind during these moments, she didn't. Instead, she found a pathway to healing that ultimately led to seminary and ordination.

Carol's own story forms the foundation of this beautifully written (as one would expect from Carol) book that is part memoir and part guide to spiritual healing. The message is in many ways quite simple. As Carol puts it in the opening chapter "Yes Christianity was and is part of the problem, the cause of much suffering, anxiety, and pain in life; but Christianity has also been my cure, my solace, my center" (p. 8). That is an important message that needs to be shared with all who have experienced spiritual woundedness.

Throughout the book Carol weaves her own story with the stories of others, many of whom she has had the opportunity to minister to during her years as a pastor. Each chapter includes exercises that can help readers needing spiritual healing to remember, deal with their own experiences, hopefully letting go of the hurt so that healing might take place. Her purpose in writing is to provide a "safe place where we could speak honestly about all the bitterness caused by the church --- the blatant sexism, physical abuse, sexual harm, and emotional manipulation -- while finding a way to hold on to the sweetness and wholeness and healing the spiritual life can bring" (p. 9). This isn't meant to be a defense of Christianity, but is her attempt to help those desiring to reconnect with God to do so. That means reconnecting with the loving God she has discovered during journey.

After an introductory chapter, Carol begins to lay out a way toward healing. She begins to develop a vision of love and of wholeness (shalom). This is the goal -- wholeness. That often requires a new vision of God, thus she leads us through a conversation about "healing our image of God." For many the way to healing requires replacing a vision of the angry God with the loving God. This is important, as Carol notes, because for many God was understood to be involved in that which wounded the person. So, it's important to reclaim God! It also involves, as Carol writes in chapter 4, recovering one's emotions. Carol had learned to hide and suppress her emotions. She survived spiritual abuse by becoming numb, but this numbness is a result of messages designed to produce guilt and shame. Through a series of experiences and encounters, Carol emerged from her numbness, allowing her to move toward healing. In a chapter titled "Redeeming Our Broken Selves," Carol writes of not only learning to love herself, finding the possibility of loving all humanity. That required her to reenvision how she spoke of God to the world.

Chapter six is titled "Reclaiming our Bodies." This is an important chapter in the book, especially for women. The message that often is given to women is that they must be careful about how they dress and act, because they can cause men to stumble. They are often blamed for sexual assaults. All is justified religiously. As I read the book, I looked back at my own pathway out of a more fundamentalist context, though nothing like hers. I was part of a conservative Christian community, and I bought into much of its message, but I wasn't born into it as was Carol, and my college experience didn't reinforce these messages. In fact, in many ways, though my teachers weren't necessarily liberal, they opened up my eyes to different visions of God. But the other piece for me is that I'm white, male, straight. I may have had issues with my body, but they weren't religiously instilled. But for Carol, and for many women, that lesson was deeply embedded. She found healing by affirming that God had created her flesh in God's image and that her flesh was good. Yes, this is an important chapter.

From there we move to questions of hope, a conversation that takes us into the fundamentalist interpretation of scripture, especially dispensationalism. In this chapter Carol shares how this version of biblical interpretation was taught and its implications. Healing comes as one moves from fear to hope. There is an intriguing chapter on finances. Here the issue is the way in which the prosperity gospel and other forms of Christianity turn the faith into a transactional one, that can have deadly impact on one's finances.

The final chapter is titled "Being Born Again." Conservative Christianity often lifts up the need to be born again, and often does so in a transactional form. On the way to healing Carol reclaims the idea, and shares her own story of being reborn. That is, being born from above. It is in this chapter that she shares the story of being sexually assaulted, and the final discovery that she was not to blame. As she let go of her guilt and shame, she was spiritually reborn. For her and for many this requires a movement away from patriarchal views of religion. Ultimately it came when she experienced the fullness of God's love enveloping her, so that she realized that she needn't "livin in constant fear of losing God's love, or anyone else's love" (p. 212).

For Carol, healing ultimately required that she deal with her relationship with her father, a relationship that did not get resolved during his life time. She found healing when read the story of the raising of Lazarus, and she heard Jesus words "unbind him, and let him go," as a word to her about her relationship with her father. That was the wound that needed to be healed, and it was healed, when she removed the bandages and let him go, and discovering that love remained.

I know that Carol initially planned on simply writing a memoir of her experiences at Moody, but it became more than that. While I might have enjoyed that original concept, I believe that this is a book that can help a lot of people reconnect with God, so that they might experience healing of spiritual wounds that have been inflicted on them by the church and by Christianity. As Carol noted early on, this isn't a defense of Christianity. She's not attempting to convince anyone of anything. But for those ready to take this journey, she wants to help guide them to a place where they can find healing. My prayer is that many will take this journey.

Julia says

Review here: <https://revgalblogpals.org/2017/02/16...>

Beth says

Carol Howard Merritt has offered herself as a loving, compassionate guide for anyone looking to reclaim love of self, love in community and a healthy understanding of God. Her storytelling and her use of beautiful metaphor light the way to recognizing and embracing a fuller interior life. She leaves no stone unturned, speaking frankly about patriarchy, finances, abuse, and sex. She both examines hurt and offers healing from stories and poetry in the Bible. As a pastor, I will keep one handy, ready to give it away.

I received a free copy in advance for my honest review.

Jason says

In an approachable and pastoral way, Carol Howard Merritt brings our attention to the aspects of religion which have been used to cause harm and inhibit healing. Through her stories and honest yet caring dialogue, she reminds us - both in the church and outside of the church - how these very same aspects, when utilized in a more faithful way, can bind up the broken-hearted and promote health and wholeness. Hope-filled and Life affirming, these words call each us back into a discipleship and faith practice which honors the invitation to Life Abundant, and that our health is tied to the health of others, as well. A must read, and an enjoyable read.

Brian Cabbage says

I am a friend of Carol Howard Merritt, and my wife, Candasu, is an even closer one. I have had the pleasure of hearing about the genesis of this book for some time through Candasu, who read an earlier version and offered notes. (She is mentioned in the acknowledgements.)

The book was worth the wait. Merritt does a great job of naming the most salient causes of spiritual wounds for people who have encountered hurtful religion: Physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse and the rush to blame victims for their own abuse; patriarchy and complementarian theology that teaches women they are lesser beings; homophobia and shame of our bodies and sexuality; and a "transactional" view of relationships that teaches us that we are only worth the money and wealth we possess. Rather than dwelling at length on the pervasiveness of these sources of spiritual wounds-- and they are pernicious and widespread-- Merritt focuses on ways to help those who have been wounded, but want to retain a connection to their spirituality, find a way forward.

I found Merritt's discussion of finances and the "transactional" view of relationships refreshing and helpful. It's not what I am used to seeing discussed in this context, but shame and exploitation around finances and debt is widespread, both within churches and without. I work in a law practice that does consumer law and personal bankruptcy, and I can attest to the crippling shame and crisis of self-worth that comes with being in

debt over your head. Merritt discusses those issues with sensitivity and real insight.

My advice to anyone inclined to read this book who doesn't already know the author and her other work would be to prepare to read it twice. The first read-through will give you a sense of the overall framework of the book and Carol's overall perspective towards spiritual life and spiritual healing. The second read will give you an opportunity to work through the helpful spiritual exercises that accompany each chapter.

Lindsay says

A thoughtful and provocative entry point to the work of healing that the church has caused. Carol bears her soul so we might do the brave work in her likeness and find grace and God in the process.

Mindi Welton-Mitchell says

I received an Advance Reader Copy for an honest review.

I wrote a full review at The Young Clergywomen's Project: <http://youngclergywomen.org/healing-h...>

Short version: I highly recommend this book for anyone who has experienced spiritual harm by a church or organization or member of the clergy. I also highly recommend this book to be on your shelf if you are a member of the clergy or a therapist. This is a good resources to help people navigate the journey of healing with a loving God.

Rev. Deb says

Carol Howard Merritt, known for her insightful writing in the Christian Century and her previous books* offers a gentle work for those who have endured mistreatment by the Church. This book is not intended as an apologetic for "why" one should be in a church, or even be a Christian. Rather, it is intended to help those who are struggling to redefine faith's role and want help finding the path back to belief and wholeness.

As a trained chaplain, several of the chapters reminded me of my own work in my spiritual identity and pastoral identity. In particular, the chapter on "Healing Our Image of God" took me back through the process of experiencing the "life-giving God" through a process Merritt calls "communal and personal" (p. 55). I remembered how I learned to experience God outside of a list of do's and don't's. How photography, poetry, writing and music changed the "replay" of God's work in my life. It was soul-stirring.

See my full review at <https://unfinishedsymphony.org/2017/0...>

Martha says

In her new book, Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church (Harper One, 2017), Carol Howard Merritt tells her own story of moving from the punishing theology of her childhood to a new understanding of love, mercy and forgiveness. Yet this is not a memoir; it

is a trail guide designed to help the reader make a similar journey. Recognizing our wounds allows us to undertake our healing, the healing God wants for all of us.

The Reverend Carol Howard Merritt grew up in the evangelical church. While attending Bible college, she made a turn in her theological understandings and became an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Her past books, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Alban/Rowman and Littlefield, 2007) and *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation* (Alban/Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), provided resources based in a deep understanding of cultural changes and generational shifts the mainline church seemed reluctant to acknowledge. Now she turns her gaze to the tradition that formed her, and to the injuries inflicted by a controlling, patriarchal system.

The chapters are organized around areas in our lives that might need healing from wounds inflicted by the church: our image of God, our emotions, our broken selves, our bodies, our hope, even our finances. Howard Merritt shares pieces of her personal story as well as the experiences of others whose stories illustrate each concept. At the end of every chapter, she includes exercises designed for use by individuals or groups. The exercises employ scripture, art, encounters with nature, journalling and other forms of reflection. A range of questions prompt the reader to consider and reconsider events that may have been harmful. I found the prompts to be creative, gentle, and pastoral.

I grew up in a downtown Southern Baptist church that didn't seem to differ much from the mainline downtown churches of my childhood, and I have done a lot of psychological and spiritual work over the past thirty years. I thought, as I began reading, "This book will be a great tool for others." As I got in deeper, I recognized the places where I learned something new years ago that I accepted intellectually, but never at the heart or gut level. Any of us who grew up influenced by the patriarchy can find some good work to do with this beautiful book.

Carol Howard Merritt is an intellectual force in the life of the 21st century church, an artist and a mystic, and a genuine example of a faithful Christian who has done and is doing her work. This book is recommended for individuals and groups, for men and women, for anyone who has been hurt by the church or wonders what people mean when they say they have been hurt by the church.

I received a free advance copy of the book in exchange for my honest review.

Becki Iverson says

A friend found an article about this online and sent it to me and I am SO glad she did. This is a very profound book, one which will linger with me for a long time. It's not a book meant to convert anyone or to glorify Christianity, and although Christianity-focused it really could apply to other faiths too (if you replaced the prayers and biblical passages with those from other texts). Merritt has a beautiful, holistic way of viewing spirituality and a wonderfully quiet, thoughtful approach to religion. She brings a uniquely feminine, nurturing perspective to the bible and to the church, and it is one that I very much needed after being raised in a patriarchal, regressive evangelical tradition. Merritt finds many major hurts the church can cause that she addresses here, the most familiar among them homophobia, sexism, and sexual and physical abuse; but she also includes some more subversive (and less openly discussed) problems such as convicted evangelicalism, misapplication of biblical texts and principles, and the low self esteem and self-worth caused by the prosperity gospel and a false focus on "humility." I really think this is a necessary book for any Christian or person raised in the Christian tradition (ESPECIALLY women) in America to read today, both as a way to understand the harms the church can do as well as to understand their Christian privilege. It should be easily digestible from such an approachable source. I flew through this but I can see myself re-reading it several

times; there is a lot to unpack in these simple but loving words.
