

The background of the book cover features a photograph of a bright sun rising or setting behind a range of mountains. The sun is a large, glowing orb with rays extending across the sky, which is a mix of light blue and yellow. The mountains are dark and silhouetted against the bright light. The overall mood is hopeful and serene.

CARTER NEILL HOLMES

**HAPPY GAY
CHRISTIAN
HEREAFTER**

8 Steps to Reconcile Your Identity to
Family and Faith or Leave without Regret

Happy Gay Christian Hereafter

8 Steps to Reconcile Your Identity to Family and Faith or Leave

without Regret

Carter Neill Holmes

Difference Press

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Advance Praise

“Happy Gay Christian Hereafter offers readers an authentic exploration into deep emotions in order to move past fear and into the freedom to dream again. If you’re a gay person who has ever written off happiness as not even worth hoping for, this book will resurrect the power within you - through a proven process and Carter’s willingness to walk by your side – to define your life by the joy and peace you desire... and deserve.”

— Rev. Erika Allison, author of *Gay the Pray Away: Healing Your Life, Love, and Relationships from the Harms of LGBT Conversion Therapy*

“Happy Gay Christian Hereafter answered a lot of questions that I have had over the years in terms of accepting my being gay and finding a way to come out. It gave me the answers for questions that I was looking for and really gave me peace in a lot of ways. Carter helped me to understand my struggle for what it is. I’m not out here alone or going through this alone either. There are thousands of us out there in the world struggling with the same issues, and we don’t know how to reach out. Carter’s book is going to do a world of good by giving people resources to reach out and find the answers that they’ve been struggling with for years. I close with a prayer: Father in the name of Jesus Christ I ask you to take Carter’s honest book and use it for your glory to touch hearts, to change lives, to give people that are struggling with who they are a resource to come to terms with who they are in you, Jesus Christ, and in themselves. Bless Carter with not only this book, but perhaps future books that delve further into the material of certain chapters of this book. Please give people more resources, Father. You have opened Carter’s mind. I see that you’re using him as a very good writer and as a resource for both the gay community and Christian community. Please continue to use Carter as a writer to provide resources for people who look for answers that lead to You in peace. In Jesus’s mighty name, amen.”

— Reverend Floyd T. Stottlemeyer, minister of The Universal Church

“Happy Gay Christian Hereafter is an outpouring of compassion from Carter Holmes. He puts all of his experiences of pain and healing into one book for others to use as a guide, complete with the eight-step Rainbows Process to assist you on your journey. He believes in the power of healing and wants that for all of his readers.”

— Midge Noble, empowerment coach at Empowering Awakened Hearts, LLC, and host of the
GAY with GOD! podcast

“We all feel it: the anguish, loneliness, and solitary situation we are in when we want to come out, even to ourselves. It’s even worse if you’re a Christian. You imagine your church and community will smash you, and you can’t reconcile with God. But you can. And it’s never as bad as you think. There’s an easy way and a hard way. Luckily for those that follow, Carter Neill Holmes boiled the process down to simple and painless steps anyone can follow. God made you and he knows where you want to go. Let Holmes’ book help show you part of the way.”

— James Rice, chief executive officer, www.UkraineDisasterRelief.org

Dedication

To those who silently grieve to keep the peace, that they may finally let go and cross the Dark
River without knowing what lies on the other side.

To the Light who has come into the world.

To Suja.

To Luis who taught me to stand.

To my family who loves me where they are. I love you, pray for you, and hope you are well.

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Chapter 1: Why Does Being Openly Gay and Christian Feel Like I Can't Love Family or Church Anymore?

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

— Lao Tzu

It's only external, your happiness. You realize that you've come out externally as "not-quite-straight." You don't give yourself much credit because you feel bad about yourself *inside*, perpetually.

You picked up this book hoping to God that it's not another sad waste of paper asking for approval and trying to persuade people to let you be happy. You saw the word "happy" in the title. That's why you gave this one a chance. You're done with trying to change people.

Your head is spinning because of this question:

"Should I stay with intolerant family and church or leave to find God's love and – dare I say it – a happy gay life?"

Only recently, you've been bolder to power through fear and come out to others. You came out to your wife, and you didn't know the best words to use. You didn't know the path forward either. You imagined the worst, and all you got was silence. You imagine what is going through other people's minds, and it maddens you. You just want them to speak. You're afraid of sharp words, and you feel crazy because you want people to hurt you, so you finally know how they think about you and how they feel about you.

I don't blame you for wanting out. I would, too.

I don't blame you for feeling drained. I would, too.

I don't blame you for denying how livid you feel. I would, too.

I don't blame you for not wanting to help anymore. I would, too.

I don't blame you for medicating yourself to stop your mind from thinking. I would, too.

I don't blame you for wanting to run away. I would, too.

I don't blame you for taking off in the car without knowing where you're going. I would, too.

I don't blame you for letting things go – leaving the garbage behind all piled up. I would, too.

I don't blame you for not speaking. I would, too.

You feel like your efforts to fix things never make a difference anyway. You don't want to lose, but you can't win. You feel like your only option is to give up. You're not a person who gives up. Still, you feel like to keep the peace, you must give up your heart and silence yourself. Making yourself small is the only way.

You feel no control and need freedom. Here you are – out, wandering the country roads. You like burning gas. As expensive as it is right now, it feels like a good investment to keep you sane. You feel accomplished in a strange way for burning half-a-tank.

You're safe to daydream. You love kid's movies. You love the line from *Cars*: "People didn't used to drive to make good time; they drove to have a good time."

You want to enjoy life. The constant grating of family and trying to be in a normal faith community can't be worth it. It used to be. It slowly turned nasty. The benefits don't come in, and the cost is great. The cost is your happiness, your self-worth, your self-esteem. You feel bad about yourself. Life is so short. It's not worth continuing down this metaphorical road.

But let's wander down this gravel road. This is new.

You have to leave. It's the scariest thought that has entered your mind. You haven't seriously considered it until now.

Your Struggle to Remain Humble When No One Will Listen

You're trying to be honest. Sure, you've made mistakes. But you're human, and you're a human being with needs. You feel like there is slack for normal people. Normal people – normal heterosexual people with a few kids – have a lot of slack: not to mention tax benefits and health insurance plugs. You know life is difficult for everyone. It's not fair to say they have no challenges. But God-Almighty, at least they can talk openly.

You grew up in the conservative South, and now you don't belong.

You took time away.

You can't help but feel guilty, though, for drifting away. It's the same if you stay. You feel guilty because you cause angst. The silence is deafening. If you leave, your excuse is work, and you feel like everybody must know that it's so you can go live your dirty life.

You don't like feeling bad about yourself, and you don't like feeling guilty. You've always wanted to be an honest person, and people make it impossible to be honest because the truth hurts them. The truth disgusts them. You have to live with yourself. You're not okay staying in a

marriage where you don't want to sleep with your wife. You genuinely love people, and you genuinely love her. Your heart goes out to her, and your heart goes out to your family. That's why this is so hard for you.

You feel dishonest when you try and force yourself to act like the father – the man – that you aren't.

You are an honorable man. And you're not straight.

You don't want to sleep in the same bed as your wife, and now she doesn't want to look at you. All you've done is be honest.

You want to be one of your children. They love you, and they have no concept of differences of religious belief.

"What's commitment, Daddy? Do you love me?"

They're just pure love. They admire you. They make you feel like the man that you know that you are. And for some reason, there's no one in your adult life who makes you feel this way. You can't find them – well, you feel like you could find them if you knew how.

You've been to church your entire life. You feel guilty for not going to church now, and you feel guilty that you have found a man who sees you and wants to make you happy. You can't see a happy future, yet. You feel like it might finally happen, but it's going to get ugly first. You feel like you can't ever come out with your whole life – with all of the dreams in your heart – because the silence of your childhood community is deafening. It's just – silence.

You wish people would laugh at you and berate you. You hear stories – everyone has seen them on the internet – where gay kids in high school get bullied. You feel like your pain would be more real if someone was doing it to you. Yet, you feel guilty for feeling pain and wanting to cry because no one's hurting you. It doesn't feel like anyone is doing anything to you. Something's wrong, and you don't know how to blame someone.

Everyone's just so nice, and it's killing you. You want to push people's buttons to provoke them. That makes you chuckle because it's so childish to want to provoke people and make them angry. At this point, you feel like you know exactly how to do it. You're dreading the upcoming Christmas dinner with family.

You have work over Thanksgiving.

"Thank God," you say to yourself, "God, actually, thank you."

That's what you say, "I have to work over Thanksgiving," and you do. Your kids will stay with your wife because you have a work trip. But you're going to be spending it with his family.

That's a nasty secret. You don't like hiding things.

You aren't hiding things. But it feels like hiding because no one responds to you when you speak the truth. You feel hidden away against your will. Your wife knows that you have someone you're interested in, and – yeah – it's not right to be dating someone else when you're still married. It's not. You're damned either way, and what's a triple tequila when you're already having a double?

It's like you aren't still married, though. It's just a formality. This doesn't feel like you.

You need to end it. She won't let you. She's not ready. You want to give her time.

They're never ready. They always need more time. You came out to her years ago, and it's been increasingly unbearable because your relationship is defined by what you don't talk about now. There's no intimacy, and it's just a constant drain.

You aren't hiding anything. Are your feelings lying to you? You're honest. You feel invisible. You can't make people respond.

Your parents don't respond to you.

Your siblings don't respond to you.

Your wife doesn't respond to you.

You're saying how you feel, and you're saying your thoughts. Are you invisible, inaudible? You don't even feel like this is real. And you're wondering if this book is even real right now.

You feel like you can never express what you're trying to say and what your experience feels like because it never solves the problem. It just stays there. Sometimes talking just makes it worse.

Your psychiatrist helps you think straight: "You're happy because you choose to be happy."

That's what you tell yourself. "I'm happy because I choose to be happy."

Something has to change because this isn't working. Something is getting worse. You're not sure what it is. You just know that even though you aren't depressed, you know you're still not living. Life is pointless this way. The meds prop you up, but your life hasn't changed. You know that you're being dishonest with yourself because you're not dealing with your issues. It's just that no one will let you.

You want the permission.

You want the support.

You want the affirmation.

Most of all, you want the approval: that when you do what you believe you honestly need to do, in your heart – you’re doing a good job. You haven’t felt like you’re doing a good job in a long time. You can barely see past the to-do list for the day. It’s gotten harder to get moving because, what’s the point?

Your psychiatrist asks, “How do you feel?”

“I don’t feel much.”

“What do you want?”

You don’t feel like you want anything really. That’s why the doctor tells you you’re depressed. The truth is that you must want a lot. You’re just not allowed to want anything anymore. You used to be a person who dreamed a lot, and you’ve become a person who doesn’t want anything – who has no preferences. You’ve always been a person without many opinions. You thought that if you did what other people did, that you’d be happy. Now you have the family. You have the career. You have the house. Is it enough?

Somebody got it wrong because this life is not working for you. This is all wrong.

If you’re honest with the psychiatrist, you feel utter terror. And yet, life is pretty good. Life is pretty, darn good. You have so much to be thankful for. You keep the gratefulness journal. You make an effort.

You can’t push anymore.

You find yourself saying, “I just need to run away.”

You feel silly saying this to the psychiatrist.

“Run away from what?” he says.

Isn’t he supposed to have some answers?

You’re always talking to the wrong people who don’t help. Your psychiatrist is not a therapist. He just medicates your feelings. You try to think well of him. Now you’re angry that he doesn’t know what you’re talking about.

You need a therapist who understands.

Your last therapist was probably not a therapist either, honestly – he was a Christian marriage counselor. You couldn’t be honest there because then it was “shame added on shame.”

Reformed Christian backgrounds and conservative politics, that's your background. You run away from it. But you can't get it out of you. It's what you were raised on, just like your genetics. It's what's in your mind. They tell you it's the right way, and you're afraid of leaving it. You don't want to be a non-Christian, and you don't want to leave God because you do love God. You want God.

But somewhere, something has to give. Other people don't want to be near you. You're scared they're moving on.

You pull in to park at the wine store. You're singing into your little SUV's steering wheel. That psychic you pay a pretty penny sure gave you an earful earlier today.

"Your depression is not a serious illness. You're not an alcoholic either."

You felt angry. She took your nice problem from you. She exposed the real problem. It hurt for a bit. Then you felt great for being understood. You paid her in cash, no trace on the credit card.

You feel strong.

You're a new person. You're willing to do something different.

Why You Picked up This Book

Hey, you haven't put it into words, but picking up this book had you feeling 53 percent confident and hopeful that someone had something useful to say about your situation. You wonder if anyone else has a life like yours. You also wonder if anyone else could be reading this book.

"It would be nice to talk to them about this chapter. It spoke to me."

You've made your Malbec purchase and think of finding a river where you can rest and read. You pull onto the main road as you flip off the blinker.

You wonder why none of the other Christian-gay books shoved in your face have a happy message. You've read them all. They're all so effing sad and want someone to come to wipe away your tears and save you.

You're not pathetic. No, you're not.

You got your favorite wine.

You're not looking for someone to do the work for you. You're determined to launch yourself into the stratosphere of your dreams again – just like you knew you could when you were a little boy.

“I’m an adventurer. I’m independent.”

That makes you feel good.

You’re tired of asking for help. You just want to help yourself, and you want to know someone else has felt the same way. You know that as long as you’re living you must be here on planet Earth for a purpose.

“Perhaps someone else has thought about these things, too. That’s a happy thought,” you smile, “and maybe someone is just a little ahead so they can give me a crumb of advice.”

It’s worth it to keep reading because, what have you got to lose?

You find a spot under a tree branch and pull off onto a hidden gravel area. It’s a deep shoulder. Clunk.

You throw her into park with more agitation than you intended.

“Sorry, Sweetheart.”

You decide to flip the page to Chapter 2 with a flicker of hope that life can be happy, peaceful, and guilt-free. At this point, you’re ready to be alone without *any* romance – just to make the misery of hurting people stop. The pang is still there, even when you feel good.

You love people.

You know that you can find the love you need to thrive again.

Chapter 2: The Guide Who Traveled Around-the-World-and-Back to Become a Happy Gay Christian Hereafter

"Give me liberty or give me death."

— Patrick Henry

Look, let's just get this out of the way. Some people would say I'm not a Christian, including my parents. In the end, no one's opinions matter to my peace because no one has a monopoly on God. No one has perfect discernment either, so how could they know for sure about my faith? I love each person in this world to the best of my ability. If my priorities are in order, no individual can touch my happiness in return.

It used to distress me, what my family and church thought, and it doesn't anymore because I know what I believe and I'm at peace with it.

"[I] confess with [my] mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in [my] heart that He was raised from the dead; therefore, [I am] saved," to quote Romans 10:9. I also think that my daily life bears the fruit of the Spirit which is: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, mercy, and self-control. Against such things, there is no law." That's evidence of my faith, and I'm not judged by God, to reference Galatians 5:22-23.

Check that off the list. Saved by grace in faith – to reference Ephesians 2:8. Happy and free.

Am I ready to live now? Yep. How about you?

"Yep."

Cool.

Facts versus Perspective: Here's My Story Told in the 1001st Way

"I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1,000 steps."

— Thomas Alva Edison

I failed at telling my story in love even though I told the facts. I failed to find people who listened. If you're at this place in your story where no one listens, I understand. I stayed in grief and never accepted reality. I stayed in anger and resentment for the eight years of my wanderings of the earth and my searching for the truth to set me free – which is a condition-less gospel. Anything good I do is a gift for God's love to me, not an obligation.

I looked for approval as well as support, affirmation, and permission to follow my conscience. The wrong people had access to my heart, and that is why I failed at loving people with my story.

What's your story? Find my contact details in the back of the book if you want to tell me. For now, we'll talk about me. I'm a kind man, but I'm not letting people get off easy in this book. I'm gentle, but fear is the enemy. There is no place for fear here. You want to listen to me because I have a new perspective, a fearless perspective. You'll find happiness as you become more fearless.

I used to question my own value as a human being. I didn't see anyone treating me like a valuable person, regardless of what I would do for them. Now I see that I have an abundance of goodness to offer back to God, myself, and others. I feel amazed that I couldn't see my own value before: perspective.

By some miracle of consistently showing up to do what I believe is right, I learned – on my own – to see the majesty of who God created me to be. I learned this first by walking out in nature and seeing I belonged. I have a purpose on this planet, which is to live happily and enjoy it. I once fought to be right on other people's terms. This is not my purpose. This is slavery. I now fight for happiness on my terms. That's the new me, my free inner child, and it yields more of that Fruit of the Spirit than I ever had before. I believe my freedom scares the people who don't matter. If I follow Jesus, I have no obligation to follow them. If I'm at peace on the right track of fearlessness, then I'm finally free to live.

Why I Had to Leave Home and Church to Find God

Up until my early twenties before coming out, I knew I was right. I espoused the faith that I had received – passed down by imperfect church fathers, impacted by politics, and praised by the people I loved. I was a master at the cerebral component of doctrine. I memorized *The Shorter Catechism* because it gave me a strong sense of self-reliance. There is no faith in self-reliance.

I felt my entire foundation dissolve when I faithfully took my pastor's advice to go to a reparative therapist for a year. I was book smart and a bit clever. I think God has blessed me with wisdom and insight. I came to realize that I wasn't right inside, but how could I accept it? Is being different wrong? I couldn't touch the fact that I "wasn't quite straight." I wasn't doing anything immoral, even by their standards – as long as I kept silent.

In an effort to get rid of my same-sex feelings and not go down a path of sin – breaking the rule that forbade any sort of open same-sex lifestyle – I read the reparative therapy books. Was I allowed to act gay? Was I allowed to sound gay? Was I allowed to look gay?

I wrote in the margins. My reparative therapist seemed to think that was sufficient. All that resulted was disappointment, anger, and angst. I was trying to change myself in my strength, and I believe now that I was wrong to do so. My faith until then had been about me making sure I was right. Where was my religious faith – not to mention community – when I needed them?

My worldview broke down completely when after a year of that fake-therapy, I came out to my dad on New Year's Day of 2016. He wasn't capable of hearing me say:

"Dad, I need you to stop pushing girls at me at church. I'm not quite straight. I'm not as straight as your other sons."

The conversation progressed with me trying to make sure everybody was okay – to make sure everything was okay and right. I told him:

"I've been going to a therapist for a year, and I have everything under control. I just want to be honest and forthright and ask you to stop doing this."

"Are you calling me a bad father?"

"What? No, this isn't about you. It's about me. And I'm just trying to be honest."

I remember repeated accusations that escalated in volume with pointed cross-examination as to why I would say any of this. For shame. The conversation ended with him telling me to fuck myself as he stood from the loveseat of the living room and rushed through his bedroom door, closing it firmly.

My name was supposed to be Carter. I'm pretty sure my name was Quiet.

I had been homeschooled, the second of eight kids. I used to know my duty within the family unit. I was on my own. I was self-responsible. I was obedient. I retreated into myself and withdrew into my mind. I didn't have a place after that day I was honest. I couldn't fit anymore. I knew it. I felt terrified of belonging nowhere.

I had taken responsibility for myself for years in wanting a music career. I had paid my way through high school and college, going to boarding school and getting a full scholarship to university. This coming out incident was the year after I had graduated. I felt like my life was falling apart because that music career was not panning out. I decided to apply to medical school, and I didn't feel supported. I had never asked for much of anything, and the one thing I needed –

which was sympathy, understanding, some reassurance, and hopefully some guidance – none of it panned out at all. I didn't get a crumb of what I needed.

I came out to my mom, who I'll call Revela, as suicidal shortly after, and she dismissed it by saying she had to go make dinner.

I knew then that either 1.) I was crazy because I was speaking English and people weren't responding to the words I was saying or 2.) there was something dreadfully wrong with my support system. That's when God brought my first real job offer through to me. I moved from North Carolina to upstate New York, driving away with everything I could fit in my car and getting rid of the rest by dropping it off at Goodwill.

I felt at that time that it was a life-or-death situation. My recurrent suicidal thought was that I could drive my car into a tree. Truthfully, I didn't want to end my life. I wanted to end the heartbreak of how disappointed I was at my experience. I didn't ever want to be same-sex-attracted or homosexual or God forbid gay.

I didn't want any of it. I didn't want my career as it had panned out. I wanted my life on my terms.

God blessed me in my first pharmaceutical jobs in laboratories and helped me advance to work in Europe for half-a-year as well as several other large cities in the U.S.

I struggled with a broken heart. It had been broken for a long time. I stayed in denial of an empty heart until I came out. Then I couldn't deny reality anymore. I saw. I didn't belong.

People didn't want to hear what I had to say. My feelings weren't okay. My thoughts perhaps were non-Christian, too, based on how I was raised in a rigidly conservative background.

I'm not quite that conservative.

I'm not quite that Christian.

"I don't believe you're a Christian." Those words don't pierce me anymore. That person has no access to my heart until I get respect.

My folks don't talk about things, even though the image is that they do. I'm good at appearing vulnerable by sharing details that look intimate that I don't care about. I attribute this tendency as coming from an addict home, pretty much alcoholism on both sides.

I didn't know the family I was born into had issues. I was raised thinking I had it so good, so much more blessed than other people because I was homeschooled. I was so much more right than anyone else because of my faith tradition.

It didn't work for me anymore. I didn't understand how being right could result in my life being so wrong.

It took a long time for me to be able to question if I was wrong in my assumptions about God and people. I was disgusted with myself. I didn't want to be with myself. And at one point, I did tell my mom:

"Look, you don't want to touch me with a ten-foot-pole because I'm gay. And I have to live with myself. How would you deal with this?"

I judged myself inhumanely for my feelings and my thoughts. I also judged other people to the same severity. I was raised to feel disgust for the audacity and offensiveness of other people's thoughts, choices, and feelings.

How could I cope with this noise? I naturally tried to escape. I couldn't get away from myself. I took to toxic coping habits. That meant drinking heavily. Since I didn't want anyone to know me, I would only talk to gay guys over the Grindr app.

My first kiss – a gay kiss – was halfway through a bottle of Jack Daniels. My first dating experience, first real dating experience, was when I worked in Europe. I feared that people from my church and my family would find out.

Harboring this dishonesty and self-hatred leads to only one place: self-destructive behavior. It stems from judging oneself and other people.

I kept major parts of my life secret. That's called a double life.

It was difficult for me; I had always been a genuine kid and wanted to do what was right. I had the bravery for honesty and openness, but I had a limit to what I could take. I felt a sudden failure where I couldn't maintain integrity anymore because my existence was wrong. To talk about my existence was offensive.

I learned pretty quickly that it's difficult to do what's right and to have standards when you have no support.

That's why I didn't do what was right, and I didn't have standards for a while. (By right, I mean wise and what I would do in ideal circumstances.) I drank too much like I said, and I had risky sexual behaviors as well. I realized that to a lot of people, dating is an interview to hook up. I had some wonderful experiences in the midst of some dark holes that had me fearing for my life. I've been raped twice, almost three times. The first of those led to the others. The first rape experience happened after my heart was broken by the first guy I gave my heart to. I was dating

someone far too old for me. I rebounded with people who had personalities that were not suited to me; basically, they pursued me relentlessly because they knew I would allow it. I accepted the attention because it was easy and gave me some relief from the emotional pain of not having the support I needed. I wanted to feel seen, and I was desperate.

My heart was broken. I had none of that vitality from my teenage and young adult years. Where was that passion that fueled my music so long ago?

I'm a fantastic pianist – I'll say – and someday I'll resume playing again. I gave my piano up to God in my mid-twenties because I couldn't stomach being known as a church boy or a pianist. That was all I had been known for. I had been rejected by the people I loved the most, and I needed to hide my deepest wound. I feared being rejected by the gay community as well. How would I cope with shame among the Christians and overt hatred among the intolerant gays I knew in the Big City? It felt crushing. I wanted a friend somewhere: not a chore partner after a fellowship meal or hookup toy on a late night that would be forgotten. Christians among Christians have expectations. Christians among NYC gays have expectations, too. It was all too much.

“What will be left of me if I let go of everything I used to be?” you ask.

That's the major fear of grieving, and we all must confront it.

I ran from this grief for a while. I wanted to be known as a whole person, free from everyone's expectations. I made strides when I met my needs and achieved physical independence. I would not find emotional, mental, or spiritual independence for some time yet.

I got on the community theater stage and learned to speak. I was no longer called unopinionated.

I found confidence in my voice and my singing. I was no longer called inaudible.

I made friends at work, and people loved me – even though I'm not an engineer type. I was no longer called alone.

They enjoyed me as the oddity of a wanna-be Broadway actor working in a spacesuit in a sterile room. That's where I learned to sing Adele, in the soundproof clean room.

In the area of romantic relationships and dating, I was an utter wreck because my heart was completely broken. I was still called an emotional deserter.

I had deep programming to look externally for approval. I can't blame anyone. I do believe that parents should teach their children about honor over obedience because I struggled to separate

the two. Adults can't obey human institutions quite like they did when they were children. They have to learn shrewdness and insight. I felt bad for being smart.

When Best-Friends Desert You, God Is There

Let's talk about the absolute lowest point.

My best friend, Matthew, took me in when I was going through a hard time. I got scammed out of all my life savings and maxed out my credit cards in the early days of the Social Security phone scammers. I had the flu. With two dimes and a tiny loan, I got out of New York City and bought a clunker car on credit, since I still had my word. I lay down with a sheet on the carpet of an empty bedroom in Matthew's apartment.

"Please just let me be."

He pressured me to come to church with him.

"Matthew, I'm just not comfortable. It will change your friendship with me."

"Man, you can't stay with me unless you tell me why."

"Well, I'm gay, and I'm not welcome at my old church."

The next morning, he told me I had to leave – no reason. I know that he knew. I could see it in his eyes that wouldn't rise from the floor.

That's when I lived in my car until I secured another pharmaceutical contract. God came through for me.

I have enjoyed plenty – it's all about perspective. From the two dimes, I adapted my food-service experience to get on as a line-cook where I had meager paychecks trickle in slower than expected. Undocumented immigrant kitchen workers were kind to me, and they had more than I did. They encouraged me. I withdrew the last fifteen dollars from my ATM account expecting thirty-five.

Officially, the poorest I've ever been is having those two dimes to my name, the flu, hefty credit card balances, and student loans – and no paycheck because the direct deposit system was down.

Simultaneously, the richest I've ever been was when living out of my car. God dumped the dead weight of reputation and things that other people would consider valuable. I realized that He would take care of me even if I were homeless. If I had to walk, God would provide a tree to shield me from the rain. He did that once.

I Owned My Issues by Disregarding People's Approval

As I improved the quality of my life, I owned my persistent desire for approval as a false part of me that has no faith in it. I follow Jesus. Seeking approval from people is not following Jesus. My desire for approval had to die or I would watch my life actually go down the drain for good. I wasn't doing well, and I accepted the facts. I made some hard decisions that I will explain later in this book. I see in myself that seeking approval is based out of a fear of being wrong. Does Jesus call me to be right? I don't think so. He approves of me if I follow Him.

I believe I finally learned what high self-esteem and solid self-confidence feel like as of this summer 2022. I know what it takes to never seek approval again. I have only recently seen the option to take a second to decide that I will stand with myself in moments of anxiety. I will never desert myself – ever again – to be there for someone else. People need my strength, not my servitude.

I choose bravery, to stay with myself. Only after taking responsibility for my angst and gripping it like a dragon do I turn to others for support. No one can stand strong for me. I have to respect myself.

Looking back, I can see that my anxiety burdened people. I didn't know what to do when I didn't feel like anyone understood my feelings, thoughts, and needs. Perhaps they'd listen, but they wouldn't respond. I didn't feel like I could get close to anyone for that reason. I couldn't say what was important to me. I couldn't admit truths to myself because what if I was actually alone – alone with a problem?

I had learned to hate the type of person that I was. I neutralized myself. Now that I was a gay person, I didn't know what to do aside from follow directions, obey, and hate myself. Wait for the wind to change. It didn't.

Do you want to know what I felt most ashamed of? I had terrific mounds of anger that I wanted to run from.

Why did I want to hurt the people who were supposed to love me? That's just the way it was. I've realized that why-questions rarely help.

“Accept facts, Carter. Facts of your experience.”

“Okay.”

I became a resentful person. A text or a call from my parents would send me into a rage, and I thought that I had some sort of chronic illness because I couldn't fix this – my feelings. I had gotten treated by a psychiatrist for depression and realized that medication helped me. Still, I felt chilled to the bone to go for that degree of care because my folks are afraid of psychiatry. I'd say they're against it, but who knows if they'll disagree. I don't remember getting straight answers at my house. I don't expect them now, and that's okay.

I couldn't afford to be afraid. I had bigger fish to fry.

You Can Bounce Back Faster Than I Did

Now we're here, and I've written this book. How did that happen?

I worked a series of eight steps. I developed them in a haphazard fashion of living real life pulling from people, books, different cultures, and more. I made ends meet and reconstructed a daily routine with better habits to thrive and feel good about myself. I will share these steps with you in the upcoming chapters of this book.

I first felt extreme hope when I unexpectedly found a cure to my chronic anger issues. I put myself through a twelve-step program during COVID-19 in 2020. I went to one for sex addicts because certain people in my immediate vicinity – after coming home – wouldn't accept the fact that I now confidently called myself gay. I let them convince me to hold off on using the words I chose to express my life experience. I let people who didn't know much about me to convince me that I could potentially be a sex addict since they didn't believe sexual orientation exists – per the faith tradition of my upbringing. The next time the doctor disagrees with the way you explain your experience, see how you feel. Do you like investing in someone and not feeling heard? Why would you ever trust them? Do you believe they love you? How could they if they don't know you? I believe a person's words are theirs to choose. Facts of your experience are facts of your experience. You deserve to voice them and have your experience respected.

I had come back home for the family by leaving the best-paying pharmaceutical contract of my life. My grandmother was sick in hospice. I wanted to be there with her. I knew now that money wasn't everything. Upon my arrival, I quickly realized I was offensive again to the immediate family. Why else would there be so much anger and eggshells around me? Should I leave? No, I didn't want to despite the tension. Naturally, I took to changing myself. Old habits die hard.

I decided to test one more hypothesis.

“Perhaps my sexual orientation is entirely lust-based,” I thought.

I respected this hypothesis even though my motivations were self-demoralizing. I am not afraid to be wrong. I still want to do what is right. I believe that lusting after people is wrong because it’s using them – not looking out to build them up.

After doing the twelve steps with a sponsor he told me:

“Look, Carter, you’re just gay. You’re not an addict.”

I’ve always wanted something to be wrong with me – that is, until recently.

I learned what it means to love myself. Honor my feelings. Speak the thoughts behind them. State my needs as met or not met. Now I prioritize meeting my needs. I love myself more than things and more than other people. My Holy Triangle of relationship yields durable happiness to survive hardship: it spans between God, my inner child, and my present self – or my heart – as we speak. The healthier I live daily, the more God, inner child, and present self all become One.

Don’t you want to be like the kid you were? I do.

I must consider every single idea and belief fed to me. Thoughts and beliefs pass through my head daily. Thoughts either tear me down or build me up.

“Does this idea arouse negative feelings? What’s that thought prompting it? Between God, my inner child, and my adult self is this true or helpful?”

If it’s a harmful thought, it’s out the window with you.

Meditation is a mental activity. You can find relational closeness in spiritual connection to let go of what no longer serves because someone else is there to help take it away. It improves with practice. That’s how I let go during the day. I pray to a Friendly God, who scoops up my burdens that I hand to Him. These He places into His care, and that’s a safe place to put things.

“What do I believe about God? What does my relationship to God do for me practically? God is my friend, and I’m not friends with people who don’t build me up. I believe God is not a terrorist. I believe God loves me and that he puts dreams in my heart. I walk in the direction of my dreams. It’s His job where I get.”

My heart healed as real people spoke into my life. Everyone needs to be seen.

I never healed or felt a sense of belonging alone.

If you're anything like I was, you need this book to know you're not alone. If you're not alone, you have a chance at happiness. There's a more direct route from point A to point B, knowing that there's hope and you can be happy.

You have permission to decide for yourself what you believe. It's your choice. Until I decided what I believed for myself, I don't know if I ever followed Jesus. I don't know if God ever worked in my life. How could He if I didn't own my responsibility to build a life that I believe in?

I suppose He might have, but I never knew such serenity, peace, joy, happiness, and connection. I also never got over my anger issues until now because I never knew how to forgive. There's hope for reconciliation, too. I don't need it to be happy. I'm happy between God, my inner child, and my present self. Reconciliation is a gift that I choose to give if I believe it's healthy. A lot of people reject reconciliation, which is their loss. They want me to turn against myself and into their way of living out of fear. That's no reconciliation. That's regressing into an old hellish life.

I'm at peace with how my life is structured because I'm doing my job. I'm building a life based on my needs, my thoughts, and my feelings. This is my heart. God designed my heart. There are people out there who love me for the person I am.

Why I'm Not Worried about Sinfulness, Confusion, or a Slippery Slope to Destruction

"Rejection, rejection, rejection," was my refrain for those eight years.

I'm pretty damn smart. That's why I believe people in authority – where I come from – shut most conversations down before they ever felt obligated to respond to what I felt, thought, or needed. They wanted to be right. This retreat from fear wasn't about me. It's their own cowardice. At the time, I felt like people personally hurt me. Now I see people run in fear because we live in an imperfect world. Most adults choose to follow rules rather than look to God for strength and discernment.

I understand now that parents, pastors, and fellow Christians were shutting their own feelings down when attempting to shut down mine. This compulsive behavior to run from matters of the heart hurt them more than it did me. In a personal relationship, there is no place for "rightness." Laws are inhuman, objective, and cruel towards imperfect people – which is all of us.

There is no heart there. There is no place for absolute law in a trusting human relationship. There's only pureness of intent. Intent is the measure of virtue in a human heart. Most people don't understand this, so their relationship to God is inhuman. Not surprisingly, they experience a heartless relationship with God. Likewise, they also have heartless relationships with other people. They have no concept of trusting God or trusting people with pureness of intent. Children understand, and that's why people look at children in mystery and wish they could be children again. Amazingly, they can.

Children have no concept of law. They understand intent with precise wisdom. People grow up and hide intent, and that's the most genuine and loving part about a person.

I have compassion on people huddled together like herd animals in conformity and fear because they're in pain and consume one another. They start with knocking off those who they perceive to be the weakest. They're usually wrong about who the weakest are. I am not weak, and I'm a friend of other outcasts. God shines strongly in the fearful dwelling of the outcast. I used to live there, and I didn't exactly know how to move forward.

I came back to the basics of Christianity because I wasn't sure why logically an unloved person like myself would want to be a part of the Christian community. That's when I decided to call myself – instead – a Follower of Jesus. That's all I do. It's very simple. I have a relationship with God that is personal, and He's my friend. I follow Jesus in the many meanings of the word "follow." Like all quality relationships, there is an exchange of value where we help each other. Humans need each other. That's why relationship exists. With more trust, there is more free giving without expectation of anything in return. Since I know the Person that Jesus is, I know that He'll give me an abundance of gifts in love in daily life. I no longer have to fight for what I need, which was never love at all.

I'm not afraid of sin, doing the wrong thing, being wrong, feeling wrong, thinking wrongly. If I have a Friend who is with me in every moment to advise me and I listen to his input, why would I fear the gray areas of life? I believe that the worst possible thing that I could do would be to turn away from relationship with my Friend. He meets my human needs: food/water/clothing, security of mind and body, belonging and friendship, feeling good about my efforts, and feeling like I'm the person I was born to be.

That's why I believe that sin is to turn away from relationship with Jesus. Would you invite a friend over and not talk to them? There you go. Show up – if you're inviting God into your life. Otherwise, enjoy your empty apartment.

It has nothing to do with the law anymore, as we see time and again in Bible verses. You can read a textbook if you want to study the Bible. I want to study God, who is the unprinted person as Word more than paper ever will be, to reference John 1:1. You can expect a personal relationship with God in this book, even though I do address the Bible book later on. Even if I fail at showing up as God's friend at times, it's no problem because our personal relationship isn't about perfection anyway. Friends get over issues and trust intent. God is the best at this.

Jesus found his people ostracized in churches. He found me there, too, in the power of the Holy Spirit – which speaks to me. My conversational relationship with God, about the practical matters of life as I run errands, means I choose to buy a water at the gas station instead of a green tea. Who knows why you feel such direction, but I can guarantee that the water will come in handy or it might be what your body needed more. God is in the details, and the simplest details mean the most to people.

My First Client

I've become the go-to guy for openness about being happy and gay from a conservative Christian background. It started when I decided to be brave and honest back in 2016. Sure, I was a wreck. But I've always been a listener foremost and then a truth-teller of what is helpful.

Now I say with confidence, "I'm Carter Holmes. I'm an author – for obvious reasons. I'm a speaker because I speak. I'm a healer because I help gay guys love difficult relationships while finding the love they need to thrive. I have always shown people what it means to love and be loved."

My friend Mark was probably my first gay client, and I didn't know it at the time. He was about eight years older than me in 2016. He was engaged to a girl who wanted to go to seminary, herself. He would hook up with guys in gas station bathrooms, and I never judged him for that. I felt angst in my heart for my unresolved life issues, and I certainly didn't have a success story to show for my coming out to my parents. I wasn't happy about my gay life, and I wasn't wearing rainbows on a daily basis.

Do you know what matters in this story? I had dealt with my fear enough to be a man. I punched through his fear by asking him:

“Are you gay?”

“I can’t believe you asked me that. I’ve been wanting someone to ask. No one has ever asked me, and only my fiancé knows that I struggle with this.”

“Well, Mark, if you’re honest, that’s all I believe God wants.”

“I’m afraid because she’s going away to school several states away.”

Fast forward a few months, and he sent me the following message:

“She broke up with me and is marrying another guy. I’m so sad, but I understand. She always said she understood me, too. I don’t know if I’m meant for marriage. I’ve been thinking about the morality of admitting I’m a virtuous slut.”

Everyone wants someone to talk to who has been through the ringer. God knows I’m lightyears ahead of where I was back then and well-equipped to show happiness, durable joy, is possible. You and I go through the ringer in life, and you will be humbled by circumstances and people. You don’t control the things around you.

You control only what you do. Neither you nor I control the outcomes.

Mark now has a thriving career as a social worker where his heart is full. He had several career changes. He’s happily out and gay. He returned to church but with a new denomination after years of not going. He has what he longs for, is doing well, and is happy with healthy boundaries. He lives in the mountains of eastern Kentucky where his heart sings, and lives on a cabbage farm where he has the life of his dreams.

Last time I talked to him, he shared that he didn’t want all of the things that he thought he was supposed to want. He rediscovered his easy-going personality. People love him. Regularly remarkable people came out of the woodwork and give him the love he needs to thrive.

Chapter 3: The RAINBOWS Process – Eight Steps from Angst to Peace

“Focus on what you want and never on what you don’t.”

— A Friend

I have developed eight steps for your emotional, mental, and spiritual healing. I call this the RAINBOWS Process: Eight Steps from Angst to Peace. I designed these steps to lift you from a state of feeling hopeless, fatigued with life, emotionally burnt out, and shaming self-loathing to discover inner quiet, peace, joy, intuitive understanding, and readiness with new vigor for life. You will build a new life – I guarantee that. It will simply happen: new actions yield new results. I suggest that you follow the steps in order because they build on one another.

You will reclaim your life much, much quicker than I did. Just stick with me. I came out to my pastor in 2015, my dad in 2016, and it’s now 2022 where I’m feeling like I’ve finally gotten my life back. That’s eight years.

Do you want to spend eight years before reclaiming your life? I would hope not.

“Can I reclaim my life right now?”

Yes, you can start now.

Make quicker progress than you thought possible. It’s there for the taking. Grab for what you want, and don’t look back.

Why This Process Takes Eight to Twelve Weeks

Take the butterfly. I believe there’s something special about how long it takes for him to undergo a complete metamorphosis. I believe that you will undergo a complete metamorphosis in the same amount of time.

It takes up to four weeks for a dormant egg to wake from hibernation.

It takes up to one week for an egg to hatch into a caterpillar.

It takes up to five weeks for a caterpillar to grow full-size by munching away on life.

It takes up to two weeks for a chrysalis to emerge as a vibrant butterfly.

Entering the real world feels like a grueling, emotional experience for the amazing butterfly. Struggle gives the adult butterfly its colors and the strength to fly.

Your Butterfly Metamorphosis = 1 week + 5 weeks + 2 weeks = 8 weeks

Your Dormant Butterfly Metamorphosis = (4 weeks) + 1 week + 5 weeks + 2 weeks + 4 weeks = 12 weeks

You're not a butterfly, or are you?

I am now an adult butterfly. I'm ready to migrate like the monarch.

Thankfully, I finally got serious about being happy this year. I'm doing what I want to do, which is reach you. I open the way for people to love difficult relationships while finding the love they need to thrive. Until I arrived at final publication of this book, God helped me find safe places to let everything unnecessary fall away.

My Recent and Complete Metamorphosis: It's Possible

I took the eight-week track using my own RAINBOWS Process from angst to peace. Here's what happened.

Week 1: I realized in April 2022 that something was desperately wrong. I had medical school stress with great test scores – yes, I was in medical school. I was a normal, high-performing student. I had a bad support system. I spoke with the school psychiatrist. I needed treatment quickly. I had a past of major depression in 2016 when I came out to my folks. I knew the symptoms well. I had invited my mom and dad back into my personal life when they weren't ready to support, affirm, or give permission for my decisions. I didn't feel safe. It drained me. I take responsibility for making a poor decision. Live and learn.

Week 2: I withdrew from medical school even though I was doing well. I flew back to my home state. I checked into a local psychiatric hospital near to my hometown.

Week 3: I emerged upon discharge with crayons. I colored for a week at my childhood home – following the doctor's recommendation to rest. I didn't want to be there. I swallowed my pride. I journaled a lot, too. I asked myself, "What now? I can't change people even though I love them?" Family loves me as they can. It's not what I need. I'm a responsible adult. I pay my bills. You don't pay my bills? You undermine me? You're out. I made an expensive mistake, having to withdraw from med school. Sometimes we need big mistakes to see what's important. I'm strong and mighty. I'm determined to put my heartache in the past and remain open for abundant love.

Week 4: I remembered my dream of writing this book about the trials of my twenties – before the age of thirty. I went for it. My birthday is just days after this book's publication. I actively forgave myself and others. I reconciled if it was possible. Some reconciliation wasn't

possible. Sometimes, the best people remain unhealthy no matter how much you love them. On my dream board, I glued an image of the family I'd like one day. That night, I met the man, Gallagher. After a tragic dating past, I won the lottery and found true love. He showed me myself and encouraged me to be strong.

Week 5: I joined a publishing company and developed the eight-step path that follows in this chapter. I reviewed what worked for me. I marked off what didn't help put my life back together. I forgave myself for the failures in those stories. I decided to start eating sushi once per week. Eating well can be a challenge for people recovering from a depressive episode.

Week 6: I re-read my past scholarly sources for this book. I've read many books on this subject. I journaled on what I believe. I planned my book outline while continuing to date Gallagher. I met his friends. I had fun this summer. I learned to laugh from my eyes. I learned to cry as well.

Week 7: I finished my book outline and wrote the full draft. I got to work with an amazing editor.

Week 8: I started speaking publicly. I spread my message in churches and in secular organizations. I started a TikTok that connected me with readers. I took on clients around the world through video chat from countries including the U.S., Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, UK, Ireland, France, Germany, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, UAE, Australia, and most recently the Philippines. I'm sure the list will grow. In the end, though, this book is written for you: the gay man who still feels angst and stuckness. You can't move forward because it feels like you hurt others and yourself whenever you try.

Will your journey look similar? Yes and no.

Yes, internally, because you and I are both human beings and have human experiences.

No, externally, because you are a unique person. Your decisions will have different details to consider. Your unfolding is as unique as butterfly to butterfly – person to person.

Rules Are Meant to Be Broken: Unless You Don't Understand Why They're There

Let's start with the rules of this work: my steps your way. I have only three rules, and they keep you on track:

1. Show up when you say you will.
2. Put pen to paper.
3. Write one thing.

The rest will follow.

Are you ready? Focus on today, my friend. If you work honestly with yourself, you will accomplish more than you ever thought possible. No, you don't understand everything or why things have happened for you. That's okay. You are building your foundation for a happy life. You get out what you put in. Life can get better, even if you don't know what it will look like.

Step 1: R – Remember Your Feelings to Reveal Your Needs

In step one, you will talk about your feelings. Like I did with my first psychiatrist, I'll show you how to start with the basic emotional labels of happy, sad, angry, fearful, joyful. I'm not your psychiatrist or therapist. Perhaps you may need these professionals. That's okay. No prescriptions from me. What you're doing with me is not your average therapy session either. You will work the step by writing an anger and fear inventory. I have ways of getting you clearer on where to start. It can feel overwhelming. You will deliver that anger and fear inventory. You will experience something that you will only understand once you've experienced it. That is intimacy, being known, and being seen. This step may seem scary because it's scary for everyone who hasn't come clean with these powerful feelings for the first time.

I will teach you about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid that has sequential categories of needs. Each higher classification of needs is essential to you feeling like a whole person; however, you have to keep meeting the lower levels of needs in order to keep advancing with your higher purpose in your happy life. Don't forget to eat and take care of yourself.

When you speak your feelings, you have a thought right there behind it that fuels the emotion. When you articulate that emotional thought, you reveal your core vulnerability – whether this need is met or not met: this is your heart. This is how you speak from your heart.

You will bring your heart into your mind in this step. This is a huge deal. It pays to invest your effort in it because it will help you going forward more authentically than you ever thought possible.

Step 2: A – Ache Openly Because Heartbreak Gets Better

In step two, you will learn about grief as a cloud you might be living in. Are you living in grief and don't know it? You'll discover where you are in the grieving process and how to make sense of your feelings. You have this problem – there, I said it. Good news is that I will lead you to overcome your broken heart to find brightness in life again. I teach concepts from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's 5-Stages Model of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Grief gets better. The point of grief is to come out of loss on the other side and to have goodness fill your needs again. I define grief as adjusting to loss that happens against your will. I'm never ready for grief, even though I understand it better than I ever have. Still, I experience loss every day. Some days are worse than others, and there are different stages of grief.

Not having expectations met is a form of loss that results in grief. A piece of your psyche is shattered, and it hurts. You lost stability and security.

No longer having a happy pet running around when he or she passes away causes grief, too. You lost a source of joy and connection – a relationship. You lost friendship and belonging.

Grief may seem like a heavy topic. The degree to which you suffer is the degree to which you will feel happiness, joy, and freedom on the other side. Once I talk it out with you, it won't seem so scary anymore. You'll meet your need for safety and security because you'll know how to process and move through grief. Most people get stuck in grief and run from it. This new skill will give you confidence.

Step 3: I – Invest in God, If You Want To

In step three, you will decide if you want a relationship with your Higher Power as you understand Him. I give you permission and safety to choose what you believe. You get to put your Bible down and stop going to church for a while because that's going to be a fear on your inventory. I can just about guarantee it. Stop doing what you've been doing. It isn't working anyway, is it?

I no longer act out of fear – ever. That's my goal. Fear is my enemy. I decide what is best for me from a place of peace. Your entire life will be built on peace, you'll see. Then you'll experience peace, and happiness will come through. See how that works? Fear gives rise to fear. Peace gives rise to peace.

I lay out your needs from steps one and two. I show you how to think of God in a practical way. Instead of you serving God, what if your primary task was seeing how God can help you?

What if God wasn't offended if you acted so selfishly? What if God wanted you to be this selfish in your relationship to Him? Is it even selfish to have needs? No, of course not.

I present a God who can meet your specific needs. God can present a practical, functional relationship in your life that saves you from a lot of problems – if you want God. The point is to see that God can be practical and useful to you. You could believe in a real God who likes being seen like this.

Still, you don't have to want God. Of course not. Try living as an atheist or an agnostic for a day. I did. I have more stories.

I'm adamant about this here place being an agenda-neutral space. I did not have a place where I could ask offensive questions like:

- What if I want to try being an atheist?
- What if I want to try being agnostic?
- What if I want to be Catholic?
- What if I want to be Protestant?
- What if God is a woman?
- What if God has had sex?
- What if everything I've learned about God is wrong?
- What if I'm afraid of being wrong about God?
- What if church is bullshit?
- What if church is the only place I can reach God?
- What if people in church don't worship the true God?
- What if God reveals Himself to people differently?
- What if I found God outside of church?
- What if I found God in nature?
- What if God talks to me?
- What if God is especially fond of me as I am, even when other people are disgusted with me?

No one has a monopoly on God. You don't need to worry about the pitfall of having a Build-a-Bear-God that leaves you feeling ashamed. You are an intelligent being, and your intuition on God will lead you where you need to go. Draw near, and He'll appear. If you're serious about

pursuing God, why on earth would you come up with an honest concept of God that resembles a fruit salad? I'm serious, I had a client once who was scared that he would make something up that was either atrocious or silly. He went back to church in defeat and fear of being wrong. That's where all of his problems started – not to blame church. He just happened to be there when his world crashed and burned. He lost his family, wife, and kids. I'm happy for his decision to return to church as long as it wasn't out of fear. It's a fair fear to want to remain reverent, but I say:

“Give yourself more credit.”

If you're looking for the true, Christian God, the Bible says, “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.” There's no fear in seeking God.

You're taking this seriously, and I believe God understands. It scared me to close my Bible for a little while, terrified me. You have had your beliefs, and you can always come back to them. They're not going anywhere.

What if the work you do in this step results in you having a faith that works and is consistent with your Bible to check all the boxes? That's what happened for me. I would never have gotten to my own face-to-face relationship with God without putting my Bible down to speak directly to Him as a Person.

I will lift you out of fearfully accepting what other people want to teach you. You're taking the steering wheel for your spiritual life. You will think for yourself about God. You imagine for yourself about God. You will approach God as a person and develop your friendship. If you don't like what you find, you can toss it all out and go back to what you know.

I found that the God of my understanding confirmed His presence. I saw evidence of His work in my life. It's my sincere desire that you would experience this as well, if you want it.

Step 4: N – Notice How Forgiveness Frees You and The Gift of Reconciliation

In step four, you will learn to forgive people and forgive yourself. You will learn the practical reason for forgiveness, who it is in your best interests to forgive, and what it means to forgive. Here are specific and effective methods of changing how you feel towards people. You will gain back your power over fear, anger, and resentment that has been your slave-master. God can help a lot if you want Him from step three.

You will also learn about the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is for you. Reconciliation is your gift to the people you forgive. You will decide in which relationships you want to take steps of reconciliation. You will seek a functional dialogue and even work towards friendship where trust grows.

Lastly, you will learn something about boundaries – what they are, their function, how to set them, and how to modify them as reconciliation results in more trust. The more trust is built, the more intimacy is possible. The more intimacy, the looser the boundaries.

Hear this: boundaries even in the healthiest relationships are always necessary. Everyone is a separate person, no matter how close, supportive, and intimate you become.

To whom do you have a boundary? Consider your trust boundary to me, to your secret lover, to your annoying blood family – even to God.

Wait, does God have boundaries? Well, I will give you a sneak peek to say that God is the only one who is everywhere and belongs everywhere. He's so safe, but you have to discover that for yourself. That's the reason He needs no boundaries within me and completely comes together with me more and more every day.

I'm still humbled by unpredictable nature of this reconciliation process. It's life. Life should be happy for us, regardless of the results. Sometimes there are victories, sometimes not. You can be happy and love life through all of it without reference to the outcomes.

Step 5: B – Believe in the Bible You Read

In step five, you assess what the Bible means to you.

You put it down in step three. You pick it up again in step five – if you want to.

However, you might be surprised by how happy you are after steps one through four and decide that you don't want to touch the Bible book anymore. After all, it's a huge stack of paper sheets with lots of words all over it. That might feel like a lot to sort through.

Yuck.

I didn't want to read my Bible either. I don't believe I had to. I believe God understood.

I want to challenge you: the paper copy is just a book. The Word is not the book. The Word is not a translation. The Word is Jesus per John 1:1. Therefore, the Word is the Person of God speaking to you. Yes, you can find the Word through the printed text. Can you find the Word elsewhere? That's for you to decide.

Touching the Bible book felt like a burden to me, like a can of worms. The Word has become encouraging to me now. Take your time. I needed time.

When you're ready, I lay out an exposition of the pro-gay and anti-gay understandings of the passages people fear and get ready to fight over.

I don't care about whether you think you're right or not. I think you'll be happier if you disregard that question altogether and choose what you believe based on your personal relationship to God. You judge your own intent, and that's all that matters. I don't think Jesus called us to be right – ever. That's why I think you're safe to choose your beliefs as you follow Jesus freely.

I started thinking about going back to church in this step.

I'm okay with where I am because I'm making progress every day. Please, talk kindly to yourself. You're doing a good job doing your best. The point of reading the Bible and going to church for me is to nurture my faith-based relationship to God. This helps me live well.

No one else matters. Just you and your Higher Power.

Step 6: O – Open Your Heart to What You Used to Dream

In step six, you will visualize what you want. I will reflect back on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid from step one. Why? Well, you'll see how you have met your fundamental needs. Excellent job, buddy boy.

Now it's time to build on this foundation further. You've addressed physiologic needs and safety and security needs. You've started meeting your friendship and belonging needs when you finished step five and looked at rejoining a spiritual community again in peace.

Now let's look at your esteem needs. These are met by accomplishing the desires of your heart. When you've met your lower-level needs, in my experience, your dreams, and playful inner child comes out and you spontaneously find yourself dreaming of what you want.

Figuring out what you want – opening your heart to what you used to dream – is a result of removing the danger that scared your inner child into hiding. Are you free from fear and anger? Your inner child is as real as you are alive. Your inner child will always be a part of you. It's in you, and it was always in you. If you're breathing, your inner child is available and will come out on his time. Be patient and do the work of living well.

When your inner child comes out, it's startling. It's disorienting the longer he's been hidden away. Already, I see that for most of my clients, their inner child has been asleep for at least ten

years. In my experience of talking to guys, it seems like as kids they experienced a traumatizing awakening around the ages of nine or twelve. Then they started trying to think like an adult and protect themselves. When this self-protective living happens, the heart gets hidden, pushed out of sight, and often forgotten. When you hurt, you hope to forget about your pain.

Once the heart and the inner child comes back out with your step work, you make new decisions and start doing new things out in the world to follow the child you are. You'll work overtime towards the apex of your heart – the apex of your needs. You'll approach becoming self-actualized.

As you might have guessed, this could potentially be a step that lasts for the rest of your inspiring life. Your inner child is profound and infinite, just like God. You're a slice of God made in His image. What is half of infinity? I'm not a mathematician, but it can't be a finite number.

To get your inner child awake and ready to come out and play, I'll take you through two methods of visualizing that work for me. Create a dream board and a vision board (they're separate projects). Then you'll implement a discipline of visualization as a form of meditation that is a simple way of getting your headspace in a victory mindset that continues to work for me repeatedly.

Step 7: W – Wait to Hear God in Your Relationships

In step seven, you will speak honestly and constructively with the people in your life. You have likely invested in a new relationship with the God of Your Understanding. You can use this relationship dynamic with a helpful prayer life to learn the “Sacred Pause” that allows you to discern which relationships are healthy and which ones are not.

Do you feel in your heart that you're built up?

Or do you feel undermined and slightly beaten down?

You can discern whether you feel bigger or smaller around people and modify trust boundaries during the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the process of building trust again.

Your emotional work from step one will pay off in this step. And your investing-in-God work of step three will also help you find quality relationships for your inner circle that I like to call your support system. I believe you build a life in this step: life is relationships. This is a step

where you may choose to visit new churches as well. Perhaps you start dating, too, in a new way with your self-awareness of what increases your happiness.

Step 8: S – Serve through Loving without Agreeing

In step eight, you will take stock of all the work you have done:

- The reality of your emotional state during the day
- Your status in the grief process from your initial inventory
- How you feel about your relationship to God and what you’ve discovered
- The status of your forgiveness and work at reconciliation – asking yourself if boundaries are sufficient
- Your comfort-level with reading the Bible again
- Your realistic plans for the future
- How building your life of relationships is coming along

Learn that “acceptance is the answer to all my problems,” not a passive process but one that gets you out in the world and responding to it to make it yours.

I will lead you further into the topic of acceptance to dispel misconceptions of what it is, what it isn’t, and teach you how to do it well. You take stock of reality as you understand it and respond to it. You always have a choice. Returning to the facts of the situation is the path forward.

You will also make an action plan for how you feel it best helps you to circle back to any of the steps on a daily basis. For instance, a lot of people take mini-anger and fear inventories on a regular basis. It’s great for maintaining quality communication in friendships and romantic interests and relationships. If you want to continue feeling happy always, I need to tell you that this is not perpetual bliss. This is a durable sense of joy, purpose, and fulfillment that will become part of you to the point that you can say with honesty:

“I am happiness and peace.”

Loving without agreeing is a simple way of summing up your new life where you follow these four basic principles:

- Don’t judge your feelings
- Don’t judge your decisions
- Don’t judge others’ feelings

- Don't judge others' decisions

I define judging as “labeling facts you observe in the world as good or bad – instead noting that they just are.” Looking to people's hearts is the ultimate way of bypassing your adult, judging mind to see yourselves and others as children, too. You completely bypass any positive or negative intent to build up or tear down. You just see each other and respond to people as they are.

My friend, welcome to The RAINBOWS Process. It's an honor to have you here. Please take a few deep breaths and get a glass of your favorite beverage before proceeding. Nurture yourself and meet your needs. You are more important than the work. People are more important than things. You are a person. You are more important than anything.

Chapter 4: Step 1 – R – Remember Feelings to Reveal Needs

“Happiness is a choice.”

— My Dear Mother

“Do what scares you.”

— A Friend

Lucy is one of my best friends. I met her my first year of medical school.

I bonded with Lucy during the first week of classes over a disturbing discovery: my classmates all seemed one way during orientation week and then flipped into a new personality at the slightest bit of stress.

“They’re some sort of degenerate version of themselves,” I laughed. I laughed because it freaked me out. I’d never seen such a change in a whole group of people. It was unsettling.

I felt safe around Lucy because she seemed to be pretty close to the same person as she always was. Like me, she feels her feelings way down deep and can compartmentalize them for a time.

That works until it doesn’t. She and I try to remain honest and authentic about hers and my real human issues: Taurus (she) and Scorpio (I) for the win.

I had off-days in med school, and so did she. All medical students do.

Upon reflection, I realized that stressed med students are like slobs at the dance club. Give a med student an assignment, and he starts to act like someone with three too many drinks on a night out. Exam chair or dance floor, stress and drinks reveal what’s already there.

Angry student equals angry drunk.

Insecure student equals insecure drunk.

Promiscuous student equals promiscuous drunk.

Happy student equals happy drunk.

This was when I realized that my years of being in the care of a psychiatrist would come in handy.

In 2016, Dr. John asked me, “How do you feel today: happy, joyful, sad, angry, fearful?” I had never talked about my feelings before.

“This is hard. I don’t know.”

I never needed to progress beyond these five basic emotion words, even though you might want to. I have my clients start a Feelings Journal in their first session with me. It reveals

everything about their lives. I didn't know about this technique at the time. I only felt grounded enough to answer this single question honestly.

"How do I feel today? Happy, joyful, sad, angry, fearful?"

I'll give you a life hack: usually you aren't asking this question unless the answer is angry or fearful.

During med school, I took on the daily practice of journaling every morning and during the day when I needed it. I checked in with myself and dealt with fear: yes, usually I felt fear.

Lucy is the most stable person I know, and she came to me once during finals week. She seemed completely unmoored this time – the stress had gotten to her. Some people who are strong feel the need to always be strong. I used to be this way. I started out by saying:

"I am not a psychiatrist who prescribes medication. I also am not a therapist with a license. I am a friend and a healer who does what works for me. Would you like to proceed? I will end the conversation when either 1.) you stop answering honestly or 2.) you tell me you want to stop. If you want to begin, you have to ask for it."

"Okay."

Crickets.

"And?"

"Carter, I want you to help me. I will answer honestly, and I'll stop the conversation if I don't want to continue."

"Great."

You probably know the feeling. You have a limited amount of time to sleep. All you want to do is sleep, and you're watching the clock tick from 2:34 a.m. to 2:35 a.m. You can't bring yourself – exhausted – to get up. Then quiet down again before going back to bed. You sit there, miserable, wishing to sleep. You know that your alarm goes off at 5:45 a.m. That's three hours and eleven minutes, not three hours, and ten minutes now. Damn.

"Lucy, how do you feel: happy, sad, angry, joyful, fearful?"

"I don't know."

"Ehh. Gotta pick one of the five. You wanna be done?"

"No. Sad. I mean, I guess."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

“There’s always a reason, a thought behind what you feel.”

“I just want to be happy.”

“Okay. You’re sad tonight with a final exam in biochemistry tomorrow. You’re sad because you want to be happy.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you not happy right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you terrified?”

“What? No. I’m not scared of anything.”

“That’s nice. Are you part of the human race?”

Crickets. She gave me a look. I smiled painfully.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to continue?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Can you and I please continue?”

“Sure.”

This went on in circles because that’s what it takes. Even when you’re spent, you must get to the core of what you’re feeling, what you’re thinking, and what your need is. Once you know this, you’ll find peace. That makes up for any lost sleep. Take care of your mental health, and you’ll survive. You’ll naturally take care of yourself when you understand what’s going on. The truth is a motivator.

“I’m afraid and that’s why I feel sad. I don’t know why I’m scared. I can’t go there.”

“I understand. Would you like to stop?”

“No.”

“You’re doing great.”

“I’m afraid of being home alone. I’m afraid of being left alone. I’m afraid of returning home as a professional. It hurts. I’m afraid of being alone.”

“I understand. You can speak about this. Your words you’re saying are the right ones. Just talk it out. You need to talk about this. You can feel at peace that you’re not alone when you bring

people in like you're doing with me now. You have friends who love you. You and I believe in a God who never leaves you. You can bring in him by speaking to Him. Do you agree with this?"

"Yes. I have friends who love me. I'm not alone at home. I believe in my God who never leaves me. I'm with people. I feel at home."

I enjoyed silence with her, breathing. Confess your fear to another person. You dissolve its power. You heal yourself.

Lucy knows I'm gentle and sweet. She also knows that I can be a gentle a-hole. It's a gift. I've gone through a hard life of my own, and I don't have time for games of denial.

Do you want to prolong suffering? I am a soldier who fights against fears – mine and others. Nothing makes me feel angrier than people backing down from honesty in the face of fear. You will hurt by hesitating, and you will look like an ugly creature.

You aren't ugly. You're beautiful.

If people want my help, they'll get the truth. I will talk to them until they stop making an effort at being honest with themselves.

"Do what scares you." That's my motto.

You'll do a great job with this step. I've been getting a lot more sleep, and I've collected even more experience to start you off strong in this step. Let's launch you forward into a happy life.

How Do You Feel: Happy, Joyful, Sad, Angry, Fearful?

Today's the beginning of the rest of your life. Are you ready? No one ever is. Let's go.

Step one is where I plant your feet at the starting line. I'll lead you by the hand to start talking about your feelings. Yes, I'm here, too. I'm going to start talking about my feelings. You don't believe me? It's a lifestyle, a way of dealing with feelings in daily life. I'm having to work the steps again because life threw me a curve ball as I was writing. My sister is getting married. It feels complicated and emotionally charged.

I feel humbled to be working the step again. I'm still human. I love these steps when the going is good. I hate them with all my might when I hurt, feel rage, and want to run away in terror. Strong emotions feel crazy. If you feel slightly off kilter, you're not alone.

I can say with certainty that this step works if you work it. You can feel at perfect peace without being affected by anyone. This serenity is achievable. I got this exercise from my first

experience with a twelve-step program for sex addicts because it corresponds to steps four and five. What I'm going to do with you is something practical.

I tell you now: get out a journal, get out a pen, and draw three columns. Then I'm going to write some stuff in each column, and you'll do the same.

Exciting right?

This can feel like death when you're doing it, and that would mean you're on the right track. It gets better, hang in there. The first column is going to be any person, place, thing, organization, or object that you think of that arouses a feeling of anger or fear in you. I like to start with people, and usually my inventory is entirely people or might be some demographic or authority role like pastors, police officers or librarian. You get the deal.

Have I exposed my story a little? Hmm, why would Carter have anger, resentment, and fear towards pastors, police officers, and librarians? I'll let your imagination run wild, kiddo.

Resentment was the word that kept me in twelve-step, even when I realized that I wasn't an addict. My sponsor told me he just thought I was gay, but I kept coming because the steps work if you work them. For the first time, I felt relief from my internal suffering. I rationalized staying because I came from an addict home. I realized later that I belonged in Al-Anon. I thought anger and fear ruling my life was something I had to live with. I went to these meetings because I thought maybe my sexual orientation was based on lust. I went to Googling how to get over lust. That led me to this group. These people are the most genuine people I have ever met, and I am indebted to the call-lists of guys who gave their time in selfless service to hear me stumble over my words. I learned to express how I was feeling.

I got a lot out of my time among recovering sex addicts because I learned discipline by "not acting out with self or others," as they say. I joined what most people probably know as the "No-Fap Movement." It's where you don't masturbate. I felt normal to have standards for myself while believing in God and believing myself to be gay. After feeling loneliness and futility for having a gay experience in intolerant circles, I felt supported in a life I felt proud to live. I respected the quest for no sex without a committed relationship, even though that wasn't my problem.

Most importantly to me, I found support for living a life free from lust. I felt guilty about almost everything in my life. I felt disoriented when I started this step you're working on now. I got six months of sobriety and kept working the program for anger and fears. Then I felt oriented. I felt proud of myself. That's where I daily need to start: the Feelings Journal. No one can control

me anymore. That's why I'm starting you and myself here, too. Deal with your feelings. I'll deal with mine.

My problems were more that I didn't have someone to listen to me, and then I acted out sexually or with alcohol because I hurt so bad and wanted to escape. The hurt manifested as anger and the Big Mama: RESENTMENT. Resentment is anger all caked on and baked at high heat for days, months, and years. Resentment is anger felt repeatedly in memories that ruminate so that it takes on a life of its own. Resentment is the enemy of happiness, and since it took so long to make, it takes some work to get rid of it. It doesn't take as long as you think, however. I thought I was stuck with this hot, seething soreness in my chest when I thought of certain people.

You're not stuck in your resentment. Get a grip on anger and fear in your inventory, and you'll see your resentment dissolve.

Once you have the column for angers, everything you've ever felt anger towards, you will then proceed for each entry in the second column to write out why you anger it. These entries can be a bit longer. You'll leave the last column blank for when you deliver this inventory to your Guide or Trusted Friend or Sponsor (if you choose to use a twelve-step program).

Anger and Fear Each Have a Practical Purpose

What you may find is that after you vent onto the paper (the angers took me a good two weeks of working every day for an hour) then you may realize that the fears come through. That's how it worked for me. Fears took a little longer to feel. I realized in the course of this assignment that every anger had a fear behind it. Anger is an aggressive form of fear. Anger essentially signals to my intelligent body that someone has crossed one of my boundaries: "Danger! Push back!" It's possible that I have or have not articulated my boundary in this new situation.

"What is my body okay with? My body is literally not okay with what is happening now. How can I meet its needs for security?"

I get better at avoiding situations that cause anger, but I'm always approaching perfection – never arriving. What a happy life, right? It is. Jokes aside, the boundary needs to be reassessed, rearticulated, and refortified.

Fears signals my vulnerabilities where I have less ability to push back. They signal a powerlessness, and that's why they're so terrifying. What's more terrifying than not knowing what to do and being threatened there?

Once you have your full inventory worked out, it's time to schedule a time to deliver the inventory, and this can take some time as well. You'll take notes in the last column on feedback that your Guide or Trusted Friend or Sponsor provides. This feedback is to provide some unbiased feedback on what the actual thought behind the feeling is.

Did you know that every feeling has a thought behind it? If it's my current anger towards my parents, it would be something like this:

"I feel angry that Dad dismissed my psychiatrist as a 'godless atheist' and used a stereotype as an excuse to discount my need for someone to understand and create a safe space for me to express myself."

When I first started taking inventories, I did not have the skill to do what I just did. I related a lot of irrelevant details because I didn't know what was important to me, and that's okay. It's a process of self-discovery. Rather than the above, I'd relate the whole situation like this:

"I went to lunch and thought it was going to be an awesome time. Then once I got to the table and gave Dad a Father's Day card with a little gift inside, I felt like I got a face slap. He asked me what I would like that I wasn't allowed to do around him. I told him maybe bring my boyfriend to the sister's upcoming wedding, and then he started ranting about how I don't forgive him for the past and don't know what it would look like for him to respect me. I did tell him what I'm looking for from him. He chose not to remember it. Dad wouldn't shut up, and I had to keep my composure to make everyone happy. No one remembers anything I said at lunch. They insist I'm wrong and that's it."

Wow, what a mess. It's all true, but there is a way to get to the bottom of such confusing situations to get to the root of the issue. "I feel angry that my needs are discounted, and no one notices."

What is the need behind this anger? "I need a safe, stable place and I also need friendship and belonging there."

Do you see how this anger is useful? In the moment, anger feels like an extroverted need to respond. But the emotion points to practical information as to why you would feel that way.

Every Emotion Points to Your Five Needs List: Needs Met versus Unmet

I pull the specific needs that your emotions refer to from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid. There are five levels ascending that are the following:

- Physiological needs (food, water, warmth, shelter, clothing)
- Safety needs (security)
- Love and belonging needs (friendship)
- Esteem needs (feeling proud of accomplishments to build self-respect)
- Self-actualization needs (feeling like the person God made you to be)

Here's a string of events from my life: see how meeting basic needs allows you to meet higher-level needs. Meeting higher-level needs is, in fact, building your new, solid life of lasting happiness.

I came out in 2016 to my dad. I felt I had to flee because of his response. I confessed suicidal ideation to my mom at the same time, and she dismissed this confession with a chore she needed to do. That's why I moved from North Carolina to upstate New York for a job. I went from fearing basic lack to having my physiological needs met, thankfully. I needed safety, and the new apartment and mental health professional assisted with this need. I had a lot of fears moving into this new situation because I had vulnerabilities. Once I felt settled and felt a sense of stability and regularity, I naturally wanted to do other things. My psychiatrist, Dr. John, suggested I get involved as a volunteer somewhere. I had a friend at work suggest I look into one of the many community theaters. That's where I satisfied my love and belonging needs for friendship. I've always been a high achiever when I'm passionate. My esteem needs naturally bubbled up, and I grew into a person who met these needs by developing a resume of theater credits. I felt a pull towards making a career out of this, and while I was in Ireland for pharmaceutical work, I auditioned for and got into Applied Art of Acting School in Dublin in 2018. That's when my full-time acting adventure began.

I progressed in this self-actualization journey – the highest tier of needs – by coming back to New York City after graduation and getting an off-Broadway role. I acted as co-lead for *The Picture of Dorian Grey* with Onomatopoeia Theater Company. I played Basil Hallway, the artist and best friend of Dorian Grey. It was pretty special to me to get such a large part at my first NYC audition. I didn't need much to meet my physiological needs, safety needs (I have a pretty high-risk tolerance), and love and belonging needs (I made friends well compared to before).

I met each need of the five needs in order. Once I met the lower needs, I felt the glow of new self-esteem and self-actualization naturally come forward. I followed my love for life, and opportunities pushed me forward.

No One's Process Is Neat and Tidy: Show Up, Pen to Paper, Write One Thing

My point is that if you meet your needs by getting honest about your feelings, I believe that you'll naturally grow into a direction for your life like I've outlined. It's not always this neat and tidy. After the off-Broadway show, I ended up going back into pharmaceuticals due to a tragic event I'll divulge to you in another chapter. I had to meet my needs again another way, and the cycle of building my life continued.

It's a lot of work to build a life. Therefore, it pays to complete this step with thoroughness. I wish that I had known about this type of inventory earlier. I had a hard time making my decisions unaffected by people from my past who didn't pay my bills. I felt I needed family support and belonging long after I knew I didn't have it. I was afraid of letting go of the attention of biological family when I didn't have a new family to replace it.

It's only recently that I've faced my fear of losing relationships that don't support me. Try pushing your relationships to the breaking point; I know who supports me and who doesn't now. A fake life isn't worth living to me anymore. I can't be bothered.

Until I faced this all-consuming fear of what my family thought and felt about me, I moved a lot from place to place. I see now that this was my form of running. I could never get away because I couldn't get away from my heart. My heart is the "well-spring of life," and it has needs, thoughts about those needs, and feelings about those thoughts. I denied I had a heart, and so the fears of my heart ruled me.

Live Life Out of Your Heart

I quickly wrote down church and Bible-reading in my lengthy angers-and-fears inventory.

I recommend setting your Bible aside and taking a break from church if you find these items on your inventory. It's nearly impossible to resume a happy life without taking a full break to get distance from your angers and fears. You can reconcile with God, church, and Bible in a

later step. I'll show you how to redefine and reestablish your relationship to your angers and fears. You'll feel positively towards them. Isn't that what you want?

You want to be happy.

It takes time to feel your feelings, articulate them, know the thoughts of your heart, and to see your needs. It's a process that is what I call living life out of your heart. Your needs are your work of living life. You and I are in process. It takes time, and it's about the journey – not the destination. But by golly, your life is going to get so much better.

I still forget I have needs. I still become aware of needs that I never saw before.

I still forget I have thoughts. I still become aware of thoughts that I never noticed before.

I still forget I have feelings. I still become aware of feelings that I never felt before.

I'm right where you are right now. I've claimed a fearless territory that is my space. Yours could be larger theoretically. It doesn't matter. I'm still expanding the borders for a happy life because it's a fearless one. Every fear processed is a fear that allows me to expand in the life I'm meant to claim.

Building a life is an investment, and it's important to make wise investments.

Invest in your step 1.

Let's get you through this step because I'm going to utilize your anger and fear inventory to launch you upward in step 2.

Chapter 5: Step 2 – A – Ache Openly to Grieve Because Heartbreak Ends

“You are happiness and peace. All other thoughts, feelings, and memories blow by if you let them go.”

— A Friend

It’s a common reaction for children – who’ve learned from adults who are afraid of sadness and seeing someone cry – to say this:

“Look, they’re laughing.”

While innocently meant, a child should know that crying is the way of letting sadness out of the body once the feeling is accepted and respected. All feelings leave the body when they’re accepted and respected – and laughter is the release of happiness and joy.

I used to think that I wasn’t a crier. Now I see that I just haven’t cried all that much in my past. I never learned how to grieve. Therefore, I never finished grieving to leave the past behind. That’s what this step is about: respecting and letting go.

I Let Go of Money Because Other Things Are More Important

In 2020, I came home to the mountains of North Carolina during COVID-19 because my grandmother was sick in hospice, and my sister’s wedding had been rescheduled twice. I wanted to be there, to support, and to help. I love to help.

I sacrificed to make this move. I had the job of my dreams, a Senior Upstream Processing Scientist III in the Vaccine Development Group with Merck & Co. – located in the greater Philadelphia area. I suppose that I had been working step one of The RAINBOWS Process going into this job because I realized rather quickly that I had no fear despite the allure of great compensation. Therefore, I felt space in my mind and my heart. I knew an awareness of my many desires, and I felt less and less scared to go after them. I discovered that money is secondary to feeling connected in relationship. I could let money go.

Sure, when I arrived at my childhood home in North Carolina, there was tension with my rocky past to my parents. I never knew about how my siblings felt about me. I figured it was a situation of bystanders watching cars crash: you can’t look and you can’t look away. You live in a state of shock.

As for the larger community, people seemed shocked when I might not be such a good kid after all. I had become a cigarette smoker, and I did more than play the piano like a good church boy. I used to fear discovering that others conditionally loved me after all the years we spent together. I used to fear seeing them turn away once they knew me. Then I would be alone.

My fear of not being loved became irrelevant after grieving openly. I healed because I could express my feelings, thoughts, and needs with confidence when I committed to grieving all the way to the end. My heart became stronger than any fear. Now I'm powerful because I'm whole.

I took an indirect route back home. I'm all about taking pilgrimages because I find them to give peace, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of self-respect that I'm living my life well. I quite literally follow the feelings, thoughts, and needs of my heart when I travel. I like to travel without an itinerary.

As I drove south from Philly toward North Carolina, I reflected on all my past pilgrimages, too. I took my first ever extended trip away from my people when I lived in Salamanca, Spain for eight months with a large family spanning three generations. No one spoke English, and I felt like I belonged because I had so much in common with the toddler. She struggled to speak Spanish – just like me.

“Pan. Pan. PAN!”

“You go gurl, you just want bread, I got chu.”

I took long walks by the cathedral, built around the year 1000 C.E. I crossed the main bridge, cited in the medieval literature that I was reading in the university classes. I touched the rough stones of this massive structure built by the Romans around the year 0 C.E.

“This is a beast of a bridge and would destroy my glasses if they fell off my face,” I murmured to myself, “wow, so much perspective. “I’m so small and part of such a large world. Lots of space and lots of time. I have my part to play – my part – and there’s no time to waste. The water still flows gently by no matter the languages spoken, and it wastes no time. No matter where I come from, I belong. I truly do belong where I am.”

I had a similar pilgrimage to elsewhere when I enrolled in acting school in Dublin, Ireland. I felt one with my feelings because there was no judgment of how I expressed them among actors. I was a foreigner, too, and I didn't feel pressure to fit. I got my first girl-kiss from an Icelandic so that my stage kiss wouldn't be my first. I redeemed my tragic first gay-kiss – the one where I was completely wasted on whisky – and that made me smile. I felt equally close to being the person I

was meant to be in the Irish wilderness, among their cliffs, and of course the pubs because everybody is the same in this world of pints of Guinness.

I floated to New York City as an off-Broadway actor – as I mentioned . However, I feel the most important event of this time in my life was running through Central Park. I found park benches made for me, and I felt a sense of urgency to locate the Balto statue near 5th Avenue. I had always wanted to find this statue, I remembered. I had things to do – places to be. I had come out of the fog of my grief.

You probably know something of grief, and you’ve probably left and lost a job or two. Let’s resume the main story again.

After leaving that Merck job in Philly, I needed to find the beach. My heart was starving for it. I was willing to feed it. I found Jersey Shore and day-by-day drove the coastline south along agrarian Maryland, developed Virginia, remote Outer Banks of North Carolina, mossy-treed Georgia port of Savannah, and white sanded Atlantic coast of Florida. I dove in both feet first and trekked all the way down to Key West.

Do you ever get where you’re going if you don’t know where you’re going?

I believe you do – if you’re honest about the issues in front of you. I believe you figure it out along the way. I picked up on this coastline trip to trace my ancestor’s journey over the last few centuries. I started in Pensacola, Florida. Then I skirted Georgia’s gulf coastline to Mobile, Alabama and Pascagoula, Mississippi. My great-great-grandfather gave his life to serve the people of southern Mississippi and died of malaria as a traveling, primary-care doctor. His death left behind his son – my grandfather’s father – another son, as well as their mother. They fended for themselves in the pine-tree wilderness. One of the sons left to go on his own to Florida, I think, after the family tragedy. My great-grandfather stuck with his mom. The two made the decision to travel north together. I imagine it was something like Ruth and Naomi from the Old Testament, leaving for a new place after all joy and hope dried up. I traced my ancestors’ path from New Orleans, Louisiana – where the doctor went to medical school at Tulane – up through Magnolia, Mississippi into the capital of Jackson. That’s where my grandfather’s father arrived with nothing except his mother and an intent to survive. My grandfather was born in Jackson, Mississippi during the Great Depression in the poorest state of the union.

I took my car into dark portions of the Jackson ghetto – shaded by magnolia trees. I wanted to find my grandparents’ childhood homes and the ancestral graves that bestowed my names to

me. I didn't tell anyone where I was going until afterwards, probably not the wisest life choice. But it meant a lot to me. I drove further north and finally ended up in the bayou country of Indianola, Mississippi in the Delta along the Great River. That's where the other side of the family came from.

Want to know the best part about it all? I got to visit my first gay crush's homeplace in Tupelo, Mississippi.

Can you guess who it is?

Elvis the Pelvis Presley. Yep. Dear Lord, help me.

I'm connected to the ground I come from. I push off of it, and it pushes back. I'm in control of my life. I push against it, and it pushes back.

That's what my pilgrimages did for me. They helped me see the facts of my life in perspective. I realize that I can look at the map of my life and decide where I'm going to go today. There are kind people everywhere, and everyone needs help to finish grieving. All it takes is noticing their feelings, hearing their thoughts, and respecting their needs. That's what everyone wants, and that's what everyone is going after – whether they know it or not.

Don't you know that people grieve in bars? This is why: strangers are willing to listen.

Why You May Start to Travel as You Grieve

Let's get to work on the most skipped step of my life – this step 2. It's important to be intentional about grieving well and fully. Before you know it, you'll see that heartbreak ended somewhere along the way – distant in your past.

I heal by traveling. It helps me tremendously. I feel space and no pressure to appear any certain way. You'll need some space and some silence to get into what might seem like a heavy topic. But as you can see, grieving by aching openly can be an adventure where your life becomes a pursuit of picking up pieces and finding lost treasure.

I am now teaching you about grief by defining what it is and its specific and common steps between all people. You'll be able to see these steps for yourself. Once you do, then you'll recognize more and more where others in your life are suffering in their grief journey. It's an honor to see yourself and see others. If you remain stagnant, grief is a nightmare because it carries on perpetually. The feelings won't go away on their own, even if they lie dormant until the next crisis.

If you decide to move forward, grief becomes a crossroad where your fear of what's next becomes potential for the future.

I'll help you figure out if you have grief in your life. Then you'll see where you fall in the process of grief to make sense of your feelings.

Your anger and fear inventory from step one is fresh in your mind. It turns out that if you have angers and fears, it's most likely that you're midway through the grief process.

I define grief as the human experience of recovering from loss that occurred without your permission.

You're never ready to lose what you have unless you do the intentional work of continually giving it away. Most people cling. It's natural. Anything lost that was not given away as a gift ends up being an unexpected loss. Most people have massive grief that accumulates.

Can you see how regular people experience grief every day? They hold on. They lose things. They hurt.

Once, I allowed my heart to feel battered every day. I had unresolved grief that accumulated. I see now that I can control whether or not something gets to me by giving away my expectations. I can everything I have as a temporary gift for an allotted time. Life is temporary. Love is forever.

Living isolated – cut off from intimate connection – is an experience of most people at some point in their lives. You probably got good at wearing a mask, and I'm here to tell you that the mask has to come down. Either you choose to lay it down or at some point in your life, you will endure an emotional breakdown that lowers it for you. The people who become hardened through their lives are not the winners. They are the losers. They become less and less human as the years pass. They become more and more empty and unhappy.

A human's highest state is to be living out of his or her heart every moment of every day. You can know a life completely in-tune with your feelings, your thoughts, and your needs. The bravest thing you will ever do is face reality. Most people never learn to face reality. You have to be brave to live well. There is constant wilderness in the heart because there is always another fear to face. The good news is that facing fears is a simple and transferrable skill that gets easier as you do it. You will know how to endure uncomfortable situations that stand in the way of what you want.

How to Grieve Well by Bravely Accepting Reality

Lest you become discouraged that you'll never get through this step, I would like to remind you that 1.) this is a lifestyle and 2.) you created a finite fears and angers inventory. Therefore, you do have enough to process for now. It will end.

Whatever you have now is everything you need.

Everything is exactly as it's meant to be right now.

Meditate and breathe while thinking through those last two sentences. I dare you to choose to believe them. Speak aloud:

"I believe that what I have now is everything I need. I believe that everything is exactly as it's meant to be right now."

My assignment for you is not about perfection. It's about progress. You'll notice a shift at some point in your step work – especially for this step – where you'll feel new and unfamiliar freedom from fears and angers. You'll realize that you have more space in your consciousness for things that build you up. You've been set free from that which weighs you down.

You don't think about things that used to bother you. You don't feel those thoughts either. You're happier. You met your needs.

At this point, you ought to have the angers and fears inventory in three columns where you laid out each point, your explanation of why you have anger and fear for each, and then the feedback from your Guide that explains your unmet needs. The feedback is useful to help you gain an impartial assessment of the facts. You have needs unmet. Now you can meet those needs.

You're going to use your angers and fears, which are two opposite sides of the same coin. Anger is active fear on the offensive. Fear is passive emotion on the defensive. Both signal unmet need. Notice that according to the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross 5-Step Model of Grief, anger is the second stage. Here are the five stages:

1. Denial (when prolonged leads to insanity)
2. Anger (or fear) (when prolonged leads to chronic outbursts and illness)
3. Bargaining (when prolonged leads pathological manipulative behavior)
4. Depression (when prolonged leads to hospitalization or worse)
5. Acceptance (when prolonged leads to happiness, joy, and freedom)

For each of your entries, where do you think you fall in the process of grief?

Your Guide gave you his more objective, outside perspective. You have a part to play in all of your relationships and experiences. Your side of the street is something you can clean up: fully grieve by accepting the facts of the experience. Express your feelings in response to those facts – usually sadness expressed as crying as you choose to stand in acceptance. As I lead you forward, you'll have ways to give those emotions away. They feel intolerable. They aren't. You can choose to believe that this painful emotional experience will end. Then you'll discover that heartbreak ends. You'll see it happen for yourself.

Have you accepted the facts of, say, your current experience with sexual orientation? What are the facts of your experience?

I should say that if you never accept the facts as you understand them, I believe you will circle endlessly through the first four stages of grief. You'll feel terrible. You will ruminate. You'll probably land on anger most of the time. You'll feel afraid and not know why. Fear comes from fear of disconnection. Unresolved grief pushes your attention into your mind, and you have no heart to share in connection with anyone.

You decide. You have two options: 1.) to grieve by reaching acceptance or 2.) live alone in your head and in your pain.

I remained in shock horror for years because I never accepted the facts. I wanted to fix myself as a man with a gay experience. I wanted to fix things about myself and life around me. Here's my classic tendency:

"Yes, I accept the fact that I have always preferred dudes to gals. That is the fact of my experience. But I think..."

My friend, the "yeah-buts" will kill you. If you judge your thoughts and your feelings – if you try to understand them to control them – you'll never accept the facts on their terms. There is no place for thinking your way out of your grief. You must learn to accept facts as facts of your experience. There is nothing else to think about in grief. Only acceptance. Still your mind. Stop grasping for control. Instead, breathe deeply. That's something you can do in the moment of temptation.

"I accept I feel naturally compatible with men in romance. I accept this as a fact of my experience. I may feel tears welling up from the ends of my toes and out of my eyes. I choose to stand strong in acceptance of the facts as I understand them. I trust that the pain will end once my

body responds to this belief. Nothing is permanent except God and the love that comes to me. I will get through this. I can't see the outcome. I choose to believe.”

I experienced a lot of anger and resentment towards myself and my first sexual experiences. God never felt angry or resentful towards me. I know this because I'm on the other side of things. I felt angry and resentful because I didn't want to accept the facts. I wanted things my way. I wanted to change things with every cell in my body – until I chose to accept them as they are.

Are You Laughing to Push Away the Sadness of Grief?

Can you speak the facts of your experience aloud with a straight face? It will get easier. Just because I'm open with my story doesn't mean you ever need to be. I do think at least one person as your audience or Guide is essential for you to finish these steps 1 and 2. What's important is that you acknowledge aloud – with a witness – how you feel. All of this bargaining comes from a fear of the truth. There's probably some crying that will happen when you do what you need to do to. Respect yourself. You consume a lot of emotional energy. You feel lifeless, and that's depression. Depression will normally resolve if you stick with the process. It won't resolve if you run away. The acceptance for me has led to a lot of crying, especially recently.

I never used to cry much. That's because I never used to accept much. As I've faced the reality of my story more – especially things like accepting the fact that I have been raped twice – I accept that I have strong feelings around this experience. I had unmet needs to an extreme degree.

I accept that I was scared.

I accept that I was terrified when it almost happened a third time.

I accept that my hair stood on end as I realized that I had not only slept with a married man back in the states but that he was also a friend of one of my co-workers. To some, this might be nothing. To others, you'll want to close this book. To me, I don't care about your response. It's my grief. I couldn't believe how low I had stooped. I wasn't out to be malicious. I needed love, and all the wrong ideas were in my head. I would not face facts that I must accept lost relationships with family and church. I would not grieve. I would drink instead. I would rationalize behavior that I didn't approve of because I would not accept reality. God doesn't judge this. God is with us in this. We're here on Earth to grow into people with full hearts who are strong and brave to face tragedy.

I felt afraid that I would cease to exist if I accepted reality.

I felt afraid that I would discover that people truly didn't love me – once I let go of controlling the facts. I couldn't grieve because I ran from the fear of discovering what would happen. What is on the other side? You must go there.

You have me here to ease that fear of not being loved. I bet you share this fear. Many feel it. You'll continue on with these steps and find that this is the biggest lie that has ever been told. You are loved. It's okay that people struggle with it. You can choose to believe you're loved. See confirmation in your own life experience. Look for the love coming to you. That's your future in these steps.

What Does It Mean to Be Loved by Others?

Love is not something that you buy. It's not something you barter with. Love is something that is a gift, a free gift of energy in the form of prayer or something physical. I couldn't trust love to come my way as a kid since I was afraid my needs wouldn't be met. That's no fault of anyone. I had to learn as an imperfect human being. I know that I hurt my parents along the way by rejecting love. I was focused on my own fear.

As an adult, I meet my needs. I realize that showing up for others with my needs met gives me boldness to show up further. I am enough for people to like me. I am enough for people to dislike me. They're irrelevant. I will never know the response before showing up, so I show up in faith.

If people like me because they like who I am, then maybe that's enough for them to love me. It turns out that this is true.

I like myself.

That helps others like me.

Others like me, and they go further and love me.

God loves you even when you don't like yourself. That's how He's different. He'll fill the loss of your grief and meet your needs for wholeness and belonging. You'll like yourself automatically after you've grieved. You'll like yourself because you respect yourself.

On the other side of massive grief, I see now that people have always loved me. I felt like I wasn't worthy. I didn't feel comfortable enough to express the feelings of my heart, the thoughts of my heart, and the needs of my heart. Once I started being more open, I could start finishing the

process of grief by facing reality and playing all that catchup. I began grieving the small things on a daily basis.

It's difficult to grieve well if you don't speak to anyone. That's why you need a Guide, and that's why I had a Sponsor when I did 12-step work. That's also why I never knew how to grieve beforehand, because I didn't bring anyone into my heartbreak. Another person present forces you into more honesty.

Intimacy heals heartbreak if you're friends with someone who has already grieved themselves. It takes a healthy person to help another person grieve well.

Do you want to attract healthy people into your life? That's going to be a later step. It's important you continue to talk about the reality of your circumstances in this step so that you can work towards a life of not fearing anything. It's possible to feel fearless. It's possible to reach this place. At first, you'll feel like the peace comes in fleeting moments. Then you'll realize that it's here to stay.

The flicker becomes a gentle and constant light.

My Current Grief: How to Use a Therapist Well

As I've been writing this book, I've had weekly appointments with my therapist, Roger – ever since I left the hospital for depression in April 2022. I find it helpful to discuss an issue that causes me anger or fear. I need to deal with these issues because I waste energy on these concerns in my life. Anger and fear take up space and won't go away unless I face them.

I go into a productive discussion with Roger by noting that something has happened (no longer in denial, check). I tell him how I feel (no longer in anger, check). I tell him the facts of my experience as I understand. I tell him what I want (no longer bargaining, check). Often, he has to respond to me. He is a good therapist because he clarifies the facts and sets me straight. This is exactly why I pay for him to be there listening to me. Otherwise, I'd just talk to another friend. But Roger is a professional. As I verbalize the facts of my experience, I feel spent and tired (no longer descending into depression, check). Sometimes, I feel like there's a hole inside of me. I have to let go of control. It feels like free-fall. Grief yields a vacant spot in my heart, and it hurts. I cry.

“Roger, I accept the facts as I understand them. I accept my life as it is and look for what I'm grateful for.”

Now I'm accepting in the presence of a witness, check.

I can't get to full-on acceptance without a Spiritual Connection, and that's what I will teach you in step three. You are not required to do so. That works for me. This is your journey.

Write Your Story of Grief

You're tying up your angers and fears inventory with a bow right now. You'll set it in the past in the presence of a witness. What I would like you to do now is an Unmanageability Inventory.

Reality is heavy, isn't it?

How do you get rid of it?

How do you stop thinking about it obsessively?

Will it go away?

Facts are permanent. However, you can lay down the unchangeable facts in a new area of your mind – a fearless, well-lit place. Clean up the dirty pot and put it away.

To set you up for step three, I'm going to take you through one of the early AA steps that I've adapted to your situation:

"We admitted we were powerless over [the facts of our experience, our understanding of sexual orientation, and our imperfect relationships] – that our lives had become unmanageable."

— Bill W., *The Big Book*

This is going to be a short, two-page essay that you will write: explain why your life is unmanageable and has taken your happiness. Basically, you're packaging up your vulnerabilities and all the problems you can't solve into something you can read. When I did mine in an anonymous group, I delivered it to people who were all there to serve and had gone before me. It left me feeling seen, heard, and a little bit scared of the vulnerability after the fact. Trusting people is an essential part of life. It's important to trust the people who earn your trust. It's important to let people see you and know the real limitations you have. You're a finite human, and I'm there with you in disappointments, too. You don't have to have anything figured out. Just speak from where you are right now.

Encouragement: This Is the Beginning and It's All Brighter from Here

Believe me when I say that this is the worst it gets. You probably are scared to death. I know that I was. It's a hard step for everyone, to deliver this Unmanageability Inventory to a person or a group. It's also a step that gives you the greatest jump forward on your path to peace, feelings of belonging, and acceptance.

You've now done the hardest work of this program. Once you finish steps one and two, you will have a framework to reference your angers and fears during the day. You can call a friend and deliver a One-Point Inventory, and you'll return to your calmed, serene state. This is a way of life that is realistically sustainable. You can keep doing this and keep feeling happy and free no matter your circumstances.

Can you imagine a life without ruminating on things that cause you sadness? Can you imagine sadness, angers, and fears not popping up and ruining your mood? You can empty your mind of negativity and live a life of happiness and wellness.

What do you want?

If you want to suffer, you'll suffer.

If you want stress and anxiety, you'll get stress and anxiety.

If you want happiness, joy, and freedom, you'll find it.

You can have a real life of happiness and joy that effortlessly comes out of you. This is worth the work.

Let's go on to step three.

Chapter 6: Step 3 – I – Invest in God If You Want To

“It’s not hard. It’s faith, a decision to believe. I don’t quite understand the situation. I just know what I have to do. Will I do it? Yes. I’m a man who shows up.”

— A Friend

My dear father – who I’ll call Judd – has said that when he goes through the Pearly Gates, he looks forward to God saying to him:

“Well done, my good and faithful servant,” in reference to Matthew 25:21.

I respect Dad for the consistent man that he is. He has great wisdom. He showed consistency for longer than I’ve been alive. I know that he works hard every day to do what he believes is right. He’s a good man, worthy of honor.

I want God to say these words to me, too. Personally, I go a step further.

I believe that God tells me, “Well done, my good and faithful servant,” every day. I don’t have to wait for physical death to live out heaven now. That eternal life in heaven starts right now. God’s love for me will carry me through this imperfect world, a physical death, and into life that continues. Nothing is lost on time spent in this life. What I invest now sets me up for eternity.

Despite my spiritual searching, I still don’t quite understand why this life is meaningful. In the midst of extreme suffering, I decided to believe this:

“I’m alive; therefore, God wants me to live.”

I live in heaven during this time on planet Earth. It’s a constant dialogue between God, my heart (which we discussed in steps 1 and 2), and my inner child (who we’ll talk about more later). God speaks to me. I invite certain people into my personal life who earn – through respect – access to my heart. They get to come into this part of my spiritual life and experience it with me. I get to choose whether I experience heaven now – through turning into God for connection – or hell now – through turning away from connection to remain alone.

Hell is to be alone, in a way.

I tell you what I believe based on my experience because it’s what I have. My agenda is to give you permission to choose what you believe. Look for confirmation that you’re heading the way you want to go. I do my best to never tell anyone what to believe. That’s your decision.

Now, onto the rest of the chapter.

From Heaven-on-Earth to Heaven-in-Eternity

You know Mimi, my last living grandmother, from the last chapter – if you’re reading the chapters in order. I mentioned her as one of the main reasons I came home during COVID-19 in 2020. I took several pilgrimages through my twenties to grieve, to accept what I had lost, and move past all of the suffering. I learned to respect my feelings as a sacred part of my life.

What I didn’t tell you is that I shoved off on the Mississippi pilgrimage because Mimi passed away just a few months after my arrival home. I needed to see her grave in Indianola, Mississippi. I also had to whip-into-shape the guy who needed to finish engraving her headstone. Then I said my goodbyes; I welcomed Mimi to be with me in spirit forever. It’s the same with God as I know Him.

I’m so glad I had my heart back for this event in my life. Mimi is the only reason I have something to tell you for this chapter. I had been scared of going back to church for quite some time. I anonymously started going to Catholic mass – though I was raised Presbyterian – after she spoke three simple words that changed my life forever.

I sat in the crunchy, wicker chair next to her bed, “Mimi, I love you.”

She had been bedridden, in and out of hospice care for two months at this point. I tried to see her as often as I could.

“I love you, too, Darlin’.”

She sipped her pink Moscato wine on the regular, and the nurses seemed convinced that she was hanging on to see all of the hundreds of friends who circled by to tell her how much they loved her. I didn’t know who all these people were. I’m sure someone did, but it surprised me as they kept coming. Each person certainly knew my grandma. Mimi was a special lady.

She rocked back and forth in her stationary bed as if on a sailing vessel.

She happily smiled at me. No words were required. I hadn’t come out to her, and I felt in my heart that after the years of aching, I had to take a chance and tell her the truth of what my life was like. I wanted her to know me better. I had to come out. She had always prayed for me to have a special someone, and it hurt my heart when she would say so. One by one, each of my seven siblings had gotten married: first the older one and then those younger and younger. There’re a few siblings still single on the tail end of the family unit, to be fair.

Carter just traveled and worked. That’s all Mimi knew – well – so I thought.

“Mimi, I have something to tell you.”

She beamed at me and laughed in her jolly way, even though she couldn't stand anymore or sit up in bed.

"Mimi, I'm gay."

"Okay, Sweetheart."

I thought for sure it must be the second mini bottle in hand and her spiked Sprite. It's a Mimi-spritzer: wine and sprite.

"No, that wasn't the right response," I thought. "This can't be right."

"No, Mimi. Mimi. Mimi, I'm gay."

"I know, Sweetheart."

I laugh thinking about that now, but in the moment, I couldn't have felt more perplexed. I wanted to die during my exchange with her, waiting for the minefield of my family to detonate. She rocked away, enjoying every moment of me sitting next to her. After all, I do have a special connection to her. She told my mother I was a "winsome child" coming along. Mimi and I had memorized poetry together. I also share her name of Neill as my middle name.

I had one follow up question that was as important as being there on her deathbed.

"How do I have a happy life?"

I'll never forget how she looked at me and reached for my hand. She didn't have much strength, but she gave me what she had in a tight grip. She paused, then resumed smiling.

"Look to heaven."

She gave two squeezes that placed a firm period on that sentence. I knew it was complete.

"That's it," I reflected to myself. "It's actually finished. No more searching. Nothing else matters. Just look to heaven."

It's the most remarkable piece of advice I have ever been given. It's the starting place for working step three. It's my honor to share this precious step with you.

Approval Versus Support, Affirmation, and Permission

First order of business. You have to decide you no longer seek approval. You cannot move on to this step until you recognize the difference between seeking approval versus seeking permission, affirmation, and support.

If you try seeking approval and then try seeking support, you'll see for yourself. You get two opposite outcomes.

Seeking approval never leads to happiness. Whether you get the approval or not, you'll feel afraid of losing approval. In contrast, finding the right people to give support allows you to do more of what you're meant to do. You find more happiness around the right people.

I will never approve of you. I will never disapprove either, to the best of my ability.

You're safe without ever needing approval.

I give you permission, support your efforts, and affirm your honesty.

I'm an imperfect human being. It's no other human's job to approve of you.

It's your job to approve of and trust yourself. You will find approval from God in this step by following your conscience. This is why I say that I'm a Follower of Jesus. I need God's approval to keep being brave. That's how I explain my relationship to God.

You're here to discover your relationship to God – no one else's. You will find hidden strengths imprisoned behind your fears. Sometimes, other people put those fears there. Sometimes you put them there. It doesn't matter where the fears come from. It's your story to own and your story to begin anew.

Why Can't You Follow People Instead of God?

Churches and supportive families at their best protect people and supply their needs – eternal needs they'd say. I report objective facts as I know them, no shade, I promise. I have immense respect for religious institutions and the people who give their lives to serve others. Unfortunately, most people have a conflict of interest. Why would they teach you to be strong and leave if that's what you believed was the right thing to do to follow God?

It takes an unearthly being to teach people to follow no human being. That's also – in my view – the only way to help people find true freedom. Every person has a conflict of interest, including me. I'm aware of my needs, and I want to create a space that protects you from my needs as well as others' needs. Churches and families are often not like that, even though they likely taught you most of what you know about Jesus, God, Bible, Muhammad, Allah, Krishna, agnosticism, atheism, etc.

People usually ask for favors rather than allowing love to come freely when you want to give it. That's the human condition. Humans fear. Humans are needy. Humans fear their needs. Naturally, imperfect human institutions would have people seeking favors rather than attracting love.

Dare in Faith: Follow Your Conscience to Find God

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”

— Paul, *Romans 1:19*

Please put your Bible down and stop going to church for your work of step 3. You'll find a convenient opportunity to resume religious obligations in step 5. I give you this verse because you may fear the idea of seeking God out of your own conscience – or out of your own spiritual awareness. This is exactly what I'm asking you to do. I believe God will show Himself.

I'm suggesting you do this work without a pastor or guide whose job is to direct you to the right way. We are entering the territory of relationship with God, not academic prowess. We explore relationship with God, and right or wrong is an irrelevant discussion until you make discoveries that you would like to talk about. It's just like mature dating: there's no right or wrong about the person in front of you. Is it a match? That's the question.

I'll never tell you you're wrong about your work. You won't hear me tell you what you should believe. It's your relationship with God. I'm confident you'll find Yahweh if you're looking for him because there are oodles of passages that talk about approaching the Face of God. Furthermore, Jesus says only to follow Him, and when you know Him, you know the Father – John 14:7. I'm here to actively redirect your desire for approval. I'm happy to address your fear of not getting approval. My clients use a Feelings Journal for this purpose. Let's clarify this confusing situation. It goes like this:

02 Oct 2022 at 6:34 p.m.

- How do I feel? (Happy, joyful, sad, angry, afraid)
- “I feel afraid of not having approval.”
- Why do I feel afraid or angry?
- “I feel afraid of not getting approval because I'm afraid it will hurt.”
- What need is not being met? (Basic needs, safety, belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization)
- “I need to feel safe and secure in my beliefs, so I don't go to hell. I need to belong to a group of people who love me.”

Given this, I want to tell you:

- Your feelings are valid. You're one of the humans.

- Your concern about being hurt is valid. You're not alone.
- Your need to feel safe in a loving place is valid – both now and in how you understand physical death through to the next stop.

Here are two questions for you to think about:

1. “Is the way I’m currently meeting my need for security-in-love working for me?”
2. “Is my current method the only way to meet my need for security-in-love?”

If the answer is “no” or “potentially yes” to either question, then perhaps step 3 will be a useful exercise for you. You can always come back to the way you’re doing things. God is patient. You can’t mess it up.

Also, if your Feelings Journal entry looks different, no worries at all. My contact info is in the back of the book if you want to reach out to me. I’ll fill in my feedback points and give you words of affirmation, support, and permission so that you can do what you need to do.

Seek the God Who Loves You, Not One Who Gives You Favors

You’re ready to approach God as a Friend. You’re ready to explore an infinite relationship. You’re ready to investigate how you can meet God’s needs as well. You’re ready to consider this idea: engage with a Spiritual Lover if you dare.

Which do you honestly want more, someone who loves you or someone who does you favors? I know my answer.

Steps one and two are designed to construct a solid foundation for your self-esteem. You respect yourself for facing angers and fears. You feel self-confidence growing out of you as you take your fearlessness into daily life. You’re honest with yourself. You value yourself after putting in the work to see who you are from the core of your heart.

I would not be surprised if you find yourself seeking approval again. It’s okay. I did, too. If you slip up by wanting approval and don’t realize it for a while, don’t worry. You’re making progress in your own way. Keep going. After a time, you’ll automatically decide to approve of yourself and never desert your convictions or rethink decisions. You’ll feel decisive, strong, and powerful. Why? You will see how much better you feel when you don’t seek approval anymore. It feels right. You’ll feel happiness, joy, and freedom.

To recap, here’s the logic sequence:

Seeking approval is seeking love.

Love can't be sought – bought.

Love is a gift.

You can't ask for a gift.

If you ask for love, what you're really asking for is a favor.

You don't want a favor.

You want love.

Love comes from people who choose to give at an expense to themselves.

People who love you choose when and how they want to give to you.

There's a lot of growth in this step to trust that God will give you love.

There's a lot of growth in later steps to trust that other people will give you love.

If you're given love as a gift, it is by definition unconditional. If the gesture is conditional, it's probably a favor. Unconditional means that there is no response or threat of taking away the gestures based upon how you're performing. How you're doing today with a good God should not impact the quality of that relationship. Likewise, for the future steps, your performance today should not impact the quality of your relationships with good people either. God sees your intent. Good people see your intent.

Good intent is all you can ask for from God, yourself, and others. God leads you to the next best thing. Good people try to do the next best thing. That's as good as it gets. Life can be pretty damn good.

What Do You Actually Do if You Want to Invest in God?

You learn to receive unconditional love from God if you want it.

I'm more comfortable with giving than receiving, personally. Receiving gifts without strings was new to me. I had fears about receiving freely.

You will build an awareness of what this unconditional love looks like for you, based on your intuition and imagination. You choose to believe this God you know is there. Then you speak to the God you wish to befriend. That's seeking His Face. Any good thing you do becomes a gift to please Him, just like another friend you would like to please.

Do you recall when I mentioned the usefulness of One-Point Inventories for angers and fears during the day? It's when you call a friend to unload a specific anger or fear that you want to

grieve during the day. Try this: consider talking to God about this inventory instead of another human being first.

If you listen for God's Voice, do you choose to trust He is there? Do you give God an honest chance to speak? Do you hear anything come back? Do you expect all people respond to you in the same way every time? If God is infinite, is it possible that doing something out of faith – like going to the park after a hard day – would make space for Him to speak to you further?

You have to focus outside yourself to seek God. You have to stop being selfish.

Try speaking. Try stopping and listening, just like a normal conversation.

As you take turns with listening, talk out your angers and fears with God – yep, the Invisible One. Communicate your thoughts about your feelings. Tell God what you think your needs are. You might be surprised when he disagrees or offers further clarity.

You're sharing your heart with your Friend. This is an act of love, to share your heart with someone. Your feelings, thoughts, and needs have value. Your feelings help people. Your feelings do not hurt anyone. You were created with a human heart to share, and God – if He's as infinite as you give Him credit for – may just be worthy of such an act of love.

If you haven't already, I want you to start a gratitude journal in this step. It starts with three items per day without repeating any from the day before. Do you remember rule 2, "Put pen to paper?" The point of the pen to paper is to focus your attention and bring thoughts into reality. The discipline of writing helps, even though you can practice gratitude during the day without writing a thing.

If a human friend gave you all of the items you feel grateful for, would you feel compelled to express something to them? Would it be in words? Would it be in writing a short story or poem? Would it be in making cookies and giving them away?

I don't know why more comes in, but the more gratitude you express, the more abundance you receive into your daily life. These moments of receiving sprout up unexpectedly. You feel joy when you notice gifts to you. God has given you an unconditional gift. You make space to notice. It doesn't matter your performance. If you dare to receive on the hard days and continue making space, you'll have breakthrough moments where you realize that you have so much more to be grateful for. You'll feel awe despite seeing the tragedy that you're facing.

People have asked me why gratitude is the antidote to suffering.

“Why can I go into my gratefulness journal feeling angst, sadness, and hopelessness. Then I finish journaling with joy and celebration?”

“Well,” I say, “You received acts of unconditional love. You feel it. Love is good for you. It meets one of your five needs that you’ve learned about.”

Talking to God on Your “Off-Days”

Recently, I was driving in my hometown past an old bowling alley they closed down years ago. I never thought I’d be back in my hometown. I was thinking about why I didn’t like the place. I saw the third cloudy day in a row unfold into gray, unappetizing rain. I needed to change my wiper blades. I felt my mood going down and down. Eventually, I believe my mood goes into the circle of those four awful stages of grief: denial of my issues, anger about them, bargaining in what-ifs, and depression to validate my negative feelings. Then I’m faced with the fifth stage of acceptance: the unfortunate realization that I need to take the situation for what it is and respond to it. I had just left a coffee shop that was so edifying that it made me feel sick. They had cello hymn music playing, and it was so warm and comfortable.

I sound pretty ungrateful, don’t I?

The place reminded me of having to act like a good church boy, even though my past has nothing to do with the business they were running. I tore up the rewards card they gave me out of determination to never go there again. I went to MacDonalds instead. To be fair, the coffee was gross at the coffeehouse. MacDonalds coffee rocks!

I’m a human being, and I have my days.

Then I remembered the ever-present choice: I decided to express my gratefulness for my old car that continues to run. I immediately felt better as the gratefulness flow continued. Rain is beautiful. Deciding to express gratefulness is the turning point on those off-days.

What do you do when you start to feel miserable?

I do one of two things:

1. Feel angers and fears, address the thought, and ask God for what I need.
2. Try piercing through the darkness by expressing gratitude aloud. I believe God will meet me with Light because that’s who He is, a Person who is there for me.

Either way, you will find God there. God spoke to me that day. Even though I didn't like aspects of my day, I did have a Friend who warmed me with light and hope. I felt connection. I felt joy.

How I First Started Seeing God as a Person: An Inspiring Sponsor

I had a sponsor give me permission to consider God as a Person who would help me. That changed my life. I had previously studied God in books. If I choose to believe on faith and see confirmation that He exists, perhaps I could explore the infinity of His goodness. Perhaps it would actually help me to know Him better.

Given I joined an anonymous 12-step program, I'll call my sponsor Nemo and stick to my story. Nemo felt like a guardian angel to me. He showed me a side of God that made me believe. God could actually be more willing and qualified to be practically involved in my problems than I used to think.

Have you ever had grief that seems like it never resolves? Acceptance sometimes feels violent inside. It feels like the immense sadness and crying will continue forever. The way out is through. It will end: that's your new belief. God is there to receive what burdens you give to Him with open hands.

"We're on the fifth day of this angers and fear inventory, Nemo." I beat at my knees. "I don't know where to start today. I feel like it's a mountain, and how can I move it?"

"You can't. God can. Give it away, one entry at a time. I'm just here to help by listening."

Where I started for the day was the right place. I finished sooner than I expected. My list of angers and fears was empty. I had talked it all out – years of hurt.

I feared that more anger and fear would flow in.

One morning, I returned to my angers and fears inventory ritual to continue writing out more sad memories.

"My mind is empty," I realized.

I searched. I had absolutely nothing left in my brain to uncover.

Sweet peace!

I don't remember the rest of the day. I sat cross-legged that night on the kitchen counter for two hours – in awe. I actively felt the peace and quiet of my life. I saw so much detail in the

light shining on the wood cabinets. I noticed the grain of the wood. I liked breathing the air more than usual.

I had broken through. I had a solid foundation of peace. I trusted it. I knew I wanted more. Did this stop me from knocking at Nemo's door? No.

I feared the peace wouldn't last. I didn't know how to respond to someone who would make time for me. He actually helped me. Few people had.

"This is where God comes in," he said. "You have people here, friends. Moreover, you have God who was the one who was listening while you spoke out your grief. He's always there. He'll always take your burdens away."

Your Insecurities about Receiving Love: Return to Your Confident Inner Child

"I'm taking up too much time. I'm taking up his space. I'm asking for too much phone time. Dare I ask for video chat screentime."

Does this sound like you?

It sounds like the former, adult me – after I grew up and worried that people didn't truly care. It turns out that some do. Your God is the first line of business to untangle. God is one of those people who truly cares.

You probably feel selfish and a little silly for your honesty, not to mention skeptical for talking to an invisible person. You're not pretending as you pray a new way, but it feels like it.

How much time does a child need? They'll take as much as they can, usually. When will it be enough for your heart? Do you believe that your heart is your inner child?

We haven't talked much about this idea: your inner child as a real person. Your feelings, thoughts, and needs – I believe – are your heart. As you progress, you'll see that your honesty reveals the kid you always were. Do you want to be a kid again? Live authentically.

I recall the first time I felt a deep sense of connection between my heart and another Spiritual Being. I sat on the piano bench. There was a beautiful white light from the sun that filtered into me from an upstairs window. Dust bunnies danced in my drafty childhood log-home. When I pressed two keys together at the piano, God seemed to communicate with me. I heard harmony. I felt joy.

I have felt a surge of this joy and connection at various moments of my life. I prayed for a Heart of David five distinct times coming along. I remember exactly where I was in private places: the gravel road coming home, the passenger seat looking in the rearview mirror, my bed in Spain when I had the flu and ate fish noodle soup, a tropical garden on the island of St. Vincent, my driveway when I was discharged from the hospital this year.

I must have been nine when I first prayed this prayer. I had always been warned:

“Be careful what you pray for. You might actually get it.”

I believe I did.

I prayed for a Heart like King David’s. I couldn’t think of anything better than being like “the man after God’s own heart.”

My heart has softened again – despite a lot of suffering, hardening, self-abuse, and grief. The hardest grief for me to tolerate has been dying to the idea that what I used to think about my family isn’t true at all. People are limited. They love me, and God is big enough – in my view – to love each person despite their disagreements. My disagreements with others affect me so deeply, not only emotionally but also in specific, life-altering ways. I feel like I’ve wasted so much time by leaving and coming back. I was in process. I see things differently now, and that’s okay.

How to Respond When Your Adult Mind Shuts Your Childlike Mind Down

Descartes – the philosopher and very adult thinker – said, “I think, therefore I am.” In science, your friendly researcher doesn’t know anything for sure when developing the latest vaccine.

“Um, what?”

Yep, nothing is proven in a philosophical sense, aside from your present experience.

I did the work in the sterile space suit and took the replicated readings noted down by faulty, human senses – doubled up by a lab partner in the professional laboratory. I felt reasonably certain that I could trust my senses. Someone else verified it. I think it’s the same with faith in God.

What if God showed Himself to be the same, benevolent Person in your life over and over again? What if you took down readings on your relationship with God? Have a good friend verify

your observations. What if the goodness of God is true? What if He proved Himself to be with you always – never lying – as He guides your steps? What if God was just like one of your best friends who you’ve trusted from years of living side-by-side? What if God is even more trustworthy than that?

From my prayer life, I somehow know things that I don’t believe I would otherwise know. Sometimes I know things about people in suffering. Is it just intuition? Possibly, that’s for you to decide. I somehow have awareness of my surroundings. I know when to exit to escape danger or when to remain silent to listen. I trust God more than ever to give me a gut sense as I converse with Him. He’ll tell me what to do right now. He may also speak through other people. He will speak, though. His voice may sound different from moment to moment, and sometimes He may be quiet to test my faith and show His glory. He is always with me, though. Thus far, He has come through for me in my real-life problems.

I found encouraging inspiration for my childlike friendship with God in the children’s book, *You Are Special*, by Max Lucado. I would listen to an audiobook version on the way to my food service jobs on the NYC subway. That was during my Off-Broadway acting adventure. Yes, I had the day job. It was miserable to be up at 3:00 a.m. to arrive at work between 4:00 to 4:30 a.m. But it was a good adventure. Despite the allure and enjoyment of free-living, I was heartbroken many days. I carried around the unresolved grief of wanting family and church to love me – the way I wanted. I felt very disconnected, and this book comforted me. I cried on the rare occasion of being on the train alone.

In the story, Punchinello was one of the many Wemmicks, a population of puppets fashioned and loved by the Maker who lived on top of the hill, Eli the Woodcarver. Punchinello’s life changed. He met Lucia. She was different than anyone else. The Wemmicks showed their status by stars and dots stuck on them. They had a public image. Lucia had no stars or dots. Some loved her for it, and some hated her for it. Eventually, Punchinello goes to see his Maker because he wants to be happy.

I recall this passage when I’m tempted to stress out like an adult:

“‘Mmm,’ the Maker spoke thoughtfully as he looked at the grey dots. ‘Looks like you have been given some bad marks.’

‘I didn’t mean to Eli. I really tried hard.’

'Oh. You don't have to defend yourself to me, child. I don't care what the other Wemmicks think.'

'You don't?'

'No, and you shouldn't either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They're Wemmicks, just like you. What they think doesn't matter. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special.'

'Why don't the stickers stay on [Lucia]?'

The Maker spoke softly, 'Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. The stickers only stick if you let them.'

The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers.'

'Remember,' Eli said as the Wemmick walked out of the door, 'You are special because I made you. And I don't make mistakes.'

Punchinello didn't stop, but in his heart he thought, 'I think He really means it.'

And when he did, a dot fell to the ground."

Do you have a dot to lose?

Obsessing over your imperfection may not be the best way to get rid of it.

Coming to see God and resting in His presence has helped me far more. Blemishes fall away if you choose to believe in how He sees you. Choose to believe you're loved, my friend.

Is God Angry? That's the Main Reason I Ran Away in the First Place

Fear blocks God out. Anger gets piled onto fear the longer it sits there untouched. Anger eventually develops into long-term resentment that can feel like a stubborn, chronic pain. I know the familiar ache deep in my stomach. Now, thankfully, that experience is a distant memory.

One of my brothers once called this feeling, "missing something."

We miss feeling connected in intimate relationships if we don't have that connection. If we're connected with God in a personal relationship, we expect for Him to earn our trust. I don't expect you to have intimacy overnight. This is a process. You're right to look for gradual increases

in trust with your relationship to God. After all, He's a Person. I believe He understands because He made me.

I look for gradual increases in trust for my quality human relationships as well, and I'll show you how to discern these safe relationships in a later step.

For now, I think that one of the main obstacles you will face in approaching God is that you'll think of God as a human person. He's commonly called "Father." If you've only known a mean authority figure who calls himself a father, naturally you'd have reservations about approaching another one. God is not a human. The Christian God-the-Father is also not like a human. The closest approximation that we may know is Jesus Himself because He says in John 14:9:

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Consider Jesus. Is He mean? What is He like?

Given this concern about God being a father, I suspect there are other concerns about dangerous Christian stereotypes, too. For this reason, I want to mention another book that helped inspire my safe and personal relationship with God. I read *The Shack* before completing this step. In this book, the author, William P. Young, depicts God the Father as an African American woman. The writer did use his imagination, but I don't think it was flippant at all. He wrote the book when working as a janitor to provide for his family. He wrote the book as a gift to his children because his wife asked him to do so. He never intended for it to be published. His wife wanted him to share the story of how he came to know God again. He recovered after terrible grief. He speaks about his story openly on the internet now: with his own personal tragedies as an abused missionary child, I believe Young found a God who helped him live a happy life. He's helped many people.

Tune Out Distractions from People Who Will Try to Tell You You're Wrong

I almost ended this chapter here. However, I think I need to revisit the idea that you may now wonder if I'm a Christian at all. After all, my own parents told me the last time I talked to them that they don't believe I am. They don't believe I'm going to heaven – for now – I guess is what that statement would mean. It's a sad idea. I believe all will become right and that people will come around. Those words used to scare me. Now they don't.

I don't follow my parents, but I love them.

I don't follow human beings, but I love them.

I follow Jesus, and I love Him.

I know what I believe and what I care about.

There are so many categories out there these days. It's no wonder if you feel confused. By a casual google search on October 3, 2022, the self-proclaimed, true Christians now enjoy about 200 denominations in the U.S. and over 45,000 globally. For perspective, there are 50 U.S. states and 195 countries in the world, also by a google search on the same day. I don't care to comb through all the Christian denominations or to investigate the technical reason for this fragmentation of the Christian church. I care about what it means to be a Believer – not a nominal member of a church that doesn't help you be the person you're meant to be by following Jesus. If you're not wanting Christianity, I'll help you investigate other religions as well. I particularly enjoy the exploration, actually. I respect Buddhists particularly and wish to continue learning about Hinduism. Whatever your path to investing in God, I believe you'll get where you're going. God is there to be found if you wish to seek him.

If you're honest in seeking God, I believe that you'll find the True God in a palm tree or while following another religion. People may think you're lost, but how would they know? Perhaps God leads you to eat with tax-collectors and sinners like Jesus did.

Christianity is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not people or denominations. I think that things are looking pretty distracted these days. It's no one's fault, specifically. I have reached my limit for BS, though. I have a BS filter. It protects my happiness.

I can't change anyone. However, I can relentlessly focus on what I care about. I care about the simplicity of following Jesus by my conscience. I also care about the people who've been shut out of this staggering number of Christian churches – particularly you, my gay friend, as I write this book. There are affirming Christian denominations for gay people, and I'll talk about those in a later step.

Yahweh's Hatred, Why It Exists, and How I Understand the Gospel

This Step 3 was a big one, wasn't it? It's okay if you're tired. Just dogear the page and take a break if you need to.

Before throwing in the towel though, I'd like to come full circle with you by investigating God in personal relationship – with regards to one last sticking point. Let me ask you, “Do you believe God hates people? Why would He?”

“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

— Romans 9:13

I meditated on this verse for quite some time a while ago. As you know, I follow Jesus in personal relationship. Why would God hate Esau?

Based on where I came from, I thought, “I hope He doesn't hate me!”

I grew up in the Reformed Presbyterian tradition. They have intelligent doctrines that have a logical scriptural foundation – smart people doing their best. While the Bible is put aside in this step and we'll pick it up later, I mention my background because it shaped the way I read this verse for years. Therefore, it also created issues for me trusting God. Your background has shaped the way you read Scripture, too. That's why we put your Bible aside. People have been reading verses in the same way for a very long time – fallible people in fallible institutions called denominations. I think it's silly that there are an estimated 45,000 Christian denominations in the world. I know people have their reasons, and I don't want to focus on criticizing people. Here's the point: to me, the number of divisions shows that people have distracted themselves over things that don't matter. What matters is relationship with Jesus.

I could understand why a church would hate Esau. He probably smelled bad.

I don't understand why God would. He made Esau to be a man's man who spent his time outside in nature.

I grew up hearing that God picked certain people to know Him, and He left others disconnected to never know Him. In this case, I was taught that God chose to love Jacob and He chose to never love Esau. Therefore, God hated Esau. A theologian will get on my case, and I don't really care. Not here to debate or be right. What's important here? You need relationship.

Whether this choice of belief is right or wrong seems irrelevant to me. It's an academic idea that seems more harmful than good. You choose your beliefs about God based on what you know within yourself, and you always have a choice to change your beliefs if it's going down a dark path. If there's a fear because of your ego, you can analyze that to return to a humble place.

Therefore, I ask one last time:

“What if God is a Person? What would drive a person to hate someone else – especially if they’re in love?”

I understand the Gospel from this place. Humans experience love as a strong yearning of the heart. The opposite of love is indifference where there is no yearning of the heart. If God didn’t care about Esau, this verse would read that He loved Jacob and felt indifferent towards Esau. Instead, it says that He hated Esau.

In my experience, hatred is the equal and opposite emotional response to rejected and jilted love. If God as a Person gives His whole heart to someone, then He hurts when He feels that whole heart rejected. Esau didn’t want relationship with God. In the context of God as a Person, it makes sense why God would feel jilted in love, per se. According to the story in Genesis, this is precisely what happened between God and Esau. Esau followed other gods.

If God is a Person and a Lover who offers his heart to us, then how do we make sense of the Gospel of Jesus? I believe that Jesus came into the world loving everyone. He delivered a message from his Father to all humans. As Jesus Himself says:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

— John 3:16 to 17

Here is my understanding of the Gospel of Jesus. God loves everyone in the world. God offers his heart and reaches out constantly – every day. Humans have a lot of distractions in this imperfect world, mainly their fears. Humans have a finite time on this planet ever since the first humans, Adam and Eve, turned away from God in relationship. I believe that connection with God gives eternal life. Disconnection becomes permanent when a person’s time on planet Earth is done. God still loves people and doesn’t want to lose them. He needs love. That’s why we need love, too. We’re a reflection of Him.

Did you know that 1.8 people are dying per second? That’s per the World Death Clock on October 3, 2022. God must feel great concern, I would imagine, if He can’t reach these people! Could you imagine not getting to loved ones before they pass away, and they didn’t know that you loved them? That’s 56,000,000 individual people God loves who pass out of our world per year.

Adam and Eve experienced the first fear, which blocked their intimacy with God. Ever since, it’s been a struggle for people to turn back to God. People do not act like God when they are

turned away from relationship with Him. They act out of compulsive coping patterns to serve themselves and try to make sense of a life feeling completely alone. It makes sense to me why there is so much suffering.

Jesus shows us how to turn back to God in relationship. That's why He came. He shows us how to receive the love of the Father. Jesus receives God's love Himself.

His single instruction is: "Follow me."

How should I cite this quote, my reader? Jesus says it so many times. It's his only clear instruction that I can find. Sinners all around him, and this is his only specific instruction to any human being. Let's go with this one.

"If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."

— John 12:26

As you probably know, Jesus did show us perfectly how to turn back to God and have our needs met in Him. He gave his heart to God. The Father gave his heart fully to his Son. But there was an abrupt murder of the perfect man. Jesus as human died through a crucifixion. I don't think the death – as painful as it was – is as significant as the heartbreak. Jesus voluntarily underwent the greatest heartbreak that the world has ever known. For once, God the Father put all of the rejection that He had experienced since the beginning of time onto Jesus. God the Father gave his heart to Jesus for His whole human life – and for the whole of eternity before Jesus came. Then at the time of Jesus's greatest suffering, the Father effectively said:

"Jesus, I don't love you anymore. I hate you."

Jesus's heart was broken. It was finished. He died physically.

Love relationships don't just spring back after you break someone's heart. The accumulation of humans hurting God had to go somewhere. That rejection went on Jesus.

True love – however – wholehearted love can't be killed. Even though it hurt Jesus desperately, his physical death couldn't kill Him. Jesus never stopped giving his heart to the Father. That carried Him through, and that's how He rose from the dead.

Jesus showed us that we can rise from the dead, too. All we have to do is follow Him by loving likewise.

Chapter 7: Step 4 – N – Notice How Forgiveness Frees You and The Gift of Reconciliation

“I don’t believe anyone is beyond saving. Neither do I believe anyone is beyond hope for reconciliation. I also don’t believe in being stupid.”

— A Friend

I once helped a guy named Gallagher forgive and reconcile. I dated him as I started writing this book. He didn’t quite realize I took him through these steps.

“Oops! Sorry, Gal.”

“No worries, I love you anyway.”

As I progressed in writing every day, he heard about the day’s work when he asked:

“How was your day, Carter?”

I make an honest effort to never tell anyone to do anything. I open the way that has worked for me, and a client may do what he or she likes. No, Gallagher’s technically not my client. But don’t doctor’s low-key treat their families? The point is that I have standards for people who I let into the center of my life. I live by the words of this book and respect myself for that.

The funny part is that I broke up with Gal – and got back with him later – because he stopped at this step. I couldn’t be with him if he wasn’t honest with himself about certain issues. Those issues affected me. My way isn’t the only way. However, I can’t live around specific types of problems anymore. I’m firm in that. He had past forgiveness to work. He also reconciled with the people that he said were his closest friends.

If you trust people, I expect to see you follow through and show me. Directness used to make me uncomfortable. I’m a new man after my full metamorphosis of April 2022.

A Quick Check-In with You

Would you rather be uncomfortable and happy or angry, afraid, and sad?

You’re reading this book because you want to be happy. You and I started out with the goal of helping you with this issue:

“Should I stay with intolerant family and church or leave to find God’s love and a happy gay life?”

You want to be happy. I want to be happy. Don’t get discouraged if you need rest, though. Resting is part of becoming happy and staying happy. You’re becoming a beautiful butterfly! That

takes a lot of energy. It takes time to recharge. You may recall the butterfly reference from chapter 3. You're on the eight-week, egg-to-adult-butterfly track. You've hatched from the egg (week 1). You weren't a dormant egg, go you! You talked about your feelings readily. You're three weeks into munching on life lessons to become a full-size caterpillar (weeks 2, 3, and 4). It's a lot of digesting, but don't worry. Everyone has to go through it to become the migrating monarch of their dreams.

Real Talk Brings People Together – When They're Ready

Your step 4 will make you a man. You'll respect the hell out of yourself.

You'll see how to stand up for yourself fearlessly.

Gallagher and I have always enjoyed a quality relationship. Quality is the standard. Gal told me that when I came into his family's life, I brought everyone back together. I'm a Scorpio and sniff out flattery, but his friends came back to me and told me about all of the amazing changes they have seen in him – since he has known me and spent more time with me. Gal's new insights and his rise to exceptional peace and joy convinced me that he was telling the truth. Good job, buddy. You're doing it all.

Gallagher and his two sisters – Phoebe and Filipa – didn't have parent figures present growing up. It was the three siblings – a brother and two sisters – who survived on their own. As American, first-generation children of immigrants, they felt their need for belonging was never met. They were displaced from their home country. In their family's culture, people value and feel their closest ties to the mother's family. They now belonged to one another and stuck together without that support.

Difficult financial times and added relationship troubles brought on several episodes of loss where breakups meant that people had to go without. The siblings saved each other financially on multiple occasions because they believe that being happy is more important than money. They truly love each other. They don't stop loving each other when they disagree with their siblings' adult choices. They trust each other. They give each other the benefit of the doubt.

As I've talked to each of the adult siblings now, they tell me a slightly different story of how they have come to be honest with each other again. When there is a lot of pain in a person's heart, it can be daunting to trust someone enough to share what's really going on. As you know, I struggled with suicidal thoughts as symptoms of depression, which signaled a greater problem of

deficient needs. I don't think I mentioned that I also considered cutting myself during those depressive periods. These tendencies are more common than you might think. They aren't logical. They're emotional. Emotions are just as real as logic. As you know, your feelings are intelligent as well. They give you information about your life. If you understand the feelings, then cutting oneself actually makes sense: it's essential to meet those needs that would cause you to do that.

These three kids faced bullying at school coupled with losing parents to deportation and traveling far away for work. Hardship and deficient needs can take a toll on feelings of self-worth. I feel so close to them because their loved ones have felt far away. Mine felt far away for years.

Truthfully, neither Gallagher, Phoebe, nor Filipa are my clients. They're just friends – almost family. They'd say we are family. I guess they are now that I say it aloud and print it. I'm still reconciling with the idea of family a bit. I want one. I must address these fears in time.

However, if they were clients, then I might ask this question in the session where I talk about forgiveness and reconciliation:

“Why is it so hard to share those feelings that drive you down into deep depression and self-harm?”

This is what I imagine such a client saying in response:

“When I'm down-and-out, powerless to take care of myself, I'm just barely pulling through. I can barely hold it together. Why would I risk bringing someone else in? How would I cope if they rejected my feelings, thoughts, and needs? It would be unbearable to open up to the wrong person. It could crush me. I couldn't take it. I already feel like I'm in a fragile state.”

This was my experience of this step. It's hard to trust again. When do we know that we're strong enough? There's fear for good reason. We must deal with the fear and face reality to move on out of angst and stuckness. There is a good way to forgive and reconcile while taking care of yourself.

Forgiveness, Trusting Again, and Reconciliation Among Friends

Forgiveness is committing to having no ill feelings towards someone.

Reconciliation is a gift of sharing your heart carefully to rebuild trust with another.

I still have to put in a lot of effort to trust people well. In fear, I tend to make assumptions about them. That means I still have fears to deal with around trusting people. Once I'm fearless,

I'm free to forgive by thinking the best of them. These positive thoughts about people lead to positive feelings.

If I don't deal with my fears, I would most likely be searching for information to confirm that I have a grasp on the situation – which will never happen. I end up worried and full of angst, even if I'm thousands of miles away. I form escape plans. I've never needed the escape plan. I've needed to confront the fear to exit this place of insanity. In fear, I look for control. In vulnerability, I look for control as well. Happiness in forgiveness and reconciliation is to live fearlessly without drafting escape plans. I don't want to run away anymore.

Gallagher, Phoebe, and Filipa had hurt so much through their childhoods and adult lives that it was simply a terrifying idea to share the truth with one another. After all, if they're all in the same boat with the same deficient needs, how could they help each other?

Honestly, it sounds a lot like my family.

If you don't know much about immigrant families, it's a big step for first generation kids to build a life for themselves. They don't have the visual example or support of parents that more assimilated middle-class people might have. They – the children – are often the support of the parents in the new country. I see how I do in fact have some privilege with this middle-class socioeconomic status where I grew up – even though I felt rejected and left it behind. They would likely have the privilege if I went and lived in their family's native country. I chose to struggle on my own to maintain what I felt to be my dignity as a gay human being. That's why I feel commonality with my first-generation friends.

These kids have worked so hard to supplement the five main needs we discussed in step 2. They have faith that inspires me to make more of my life.

One thing that I'm excellent at doing, and I don't know why it is, but I teach people to love each other. I'm not perfect at loving people well. I do bring a light into the room that makes people hope. I might miss out on being cool, but I have always tutored people in the art of loving – even when working lab science jobs in my pharmaceutical career. It's what I do. Now it's my dream to help people like you.

I define loving as giving at a cost to yourself. I've had the privilege of getting to know each sibling one-on-one. I took Filipa on a date to show her how it can be done well. She deserves the best, and I'm pretty okay at dates. I spent the day with Phoebe who was going through a marriage separation. I helped her branch out to Italian cuisine by teaching her to make spaghetti and

meatballs – as well as buying her gay flowers, which are simply the best. Then, of course, my dear Gallagher had been working my steps. He did what he wanted to do. He stayed around to be with me. He forgave and reconciled his way. Your way is the right way.

To wrap up this story, my three friends – siblings Gallagher, Phoebe, and Filipa – have brought their hearts out to one another by working this step. They trust the people they say they trust with their feelings, thoughts, and needs of their hearts. They've made radical confessions to one another about the bits of their lives they felt ashamed of. They're not perfect, but the intent is there. They make an honest effort. That's as good as it gets. They've brought life back into their family relationships.

I'm proud to have helped them.

Gallagher and I are back together – for now! I love him very much, and I see new ways of loving him every day. I feel very blessed. He teaches me.

Oh, I have to keep the tension. A good love story is worth following to the end, my reader. Who knows what will happen? It's because Gal surpassed anyone who has ever worked this step that he's in this book. He learned to give his heart in reconciliation to his family. I felt encouraged to recommit to my family and work towards more reconciliation with my siblings after seeing Gal's progress with his.

They look stronger, like flowers that found the right nutrients. I know they'll do well. I see it. I'm happy for them.

Let's Start This Step Together – With God

If you feel happy and joyous in the morning, I'm glad to hear your life is going well!

If you feel angers and fears first thing, that's what this step is about. The earlier steps only go so far. You've built a foundation for your new home in yourself. Now you need walls to keep the good stuff in and the bad stuff out. You'll take all of your work a step further by pushing out into the world around you. It's your turn to take up the space in the world that you deserve.

I see angers and fears acutely. You're gaining this skill every day. You've dealt with the first half of this debilitating disease. You rose out of cowering in step one: you cleaned up the angers and fears that come *out* of you. In this step four, you eradicate your tendency to cower against the angers and fears that pour *into* you. You stand up to people. Forgiveness and reconciliation protect you from these external threats.

I have a hard time tolerating the feelings I feel sometimes. For some reason, I find myself emotional and it takes some time to get reoriented to know what to think, even when I have years of doing the right things as a habit.

I have to return the same question:

“How should I respond to this right now?”

In the midst of overwhelm, I often feel like I’m on my last set at the gym. I’m at my end, and I can’t do anymore. I reached my max reps. Muscles trembling. That’s when it’s time to push through because that’s when the growth happens.

Emotions can be exhausting, and that’s when it’s necessary for me to take a moment away – even if I’m out with people. I’ll give myself a few seconds between those last few reps. I’ll check in with God with a Sacred Pause, which is an Al-Anon phrase. You can pause to give up your power and accept powerlessness over the facts of right now. Then seek to accept what you understand with all your attention set on God in effortless prayer. God is a Person, remember?

Some people call this, “Letting Go.” I feel the need to explain what phrases mean. I hope it’s helpful.

I sense God speaking to me during the Sacred Pause because I listen and believe He will.

Until I went through the process of making a list of all persons I had harmed, I didn’t realize just how to take responsibility for my social life. I am half of all my relationships. I am potentially half of the problem.

Actually, I am half of the problem.

I always have a role to play in relationship to another. I can’t control anyone; you learned before about how people think favors are love. They want control of relationships. You can’t buy love, negotiate love, barter for love, pay for love, or win love. I can receive love by being a person who deals with his stuff and remains open to the goodness of life around him. Then love comes to you out of nowhere from the most surprising places. You naturally find love around you.

What is the best way to receive love?

You did the inner work that blocked you from love. Now it’s to learn to forgive others. You need to stop pushing their love away.

Forgiveness looks like giving grace for others by actively choosing to think best of them. Every person has value. Are you willing to see it?

It's hard to give your energy indefinitely. In fact, that's impossible. Can you forgive and think well of people who are actively hurting you? Yes, but this is going to be a lot harder than giving yourself some distance. You need some distance from people who drain you. Then you can think well of them.

You have a finite amount of emotional energy.

It's your job in this step to figure out how you need to structure your life so that you can maintain positive thoughts and feelings towards people you need to forgive. Forgiveness is for your happiness and health. For problematic people in your life, you need to set high boundaries as you forgive and reconcile.

Boundaries can be raised through:

- Physical distance
- Blocking calls
- Blocking social media
- Giving fewer to no personal details
- Learning pre-prepared and respectful phrases so that you feel comfortable and confident in saying, "no," when you do come into contact with such people.

Once you raise boundaries, you will have the available energy to think well and feel well towards such people. You won't let them hurt you anymore. It's easier to forgive when you're not in pain.

Step 4 deals with problematic relationships that have harmed you. High boundaries are essential to learn. In a later step, you will learn about moveable boundaries so that you protect yourself from ever getting hurt in the first place. These are important for finding the people who will become your support system and best friends.

How to Establish Positive Feelings Towards People Who Have Hurt You: Forgiveness

Say you wanted nothing to do with God or a Higher Power in the previous step. Is it possible to forgive?

Yes, you use your own energy for the following actions you will take.

Why is God helpful?

I believe that I'm a limited human being. Sometimes I need extra help to live big and dream big. I need extra help to be the person I want to be. I believe God practically takes the burdens of my mind so that I can focus on other things that are actually part of my happy life. I hand my concerns off to Him and believe He will take them into his care. I find God to be a handy Friend like no other. I'm not one of the movers you see – you know, the dudes with the truck. I hate lifting heavy things. I can do it, but why drain myself if I don't have to?

In the context of forgiveness, I need to exert energy to think well of people so that I have positive feelings towards them. When I worked this step, it felt impossible to forgive without God's energy and strength. I ask for his Life in me, and God fills me like a "jar of clay" that holds a lantern:

"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

— 2 Corinthians 4:6 to 9

Somehow, there is a spiritual motivation for living that God gives me. It defies the facts of my experience that continue to feel overwhelming. This is the stuff that I believe you can give people in the act of forgiveness. God is infinite, and He fills you abundantly if you invite Him in and ask for His power. There's plenty to share with others. God fills me with something that I call joy, too, and I can give that to others in the work of reconciliation.

When far away, forgiveness is a prayer for someone's welfare. I pray that they would have what I most want for myself. When in person, forgiveness is still a prayer. I have my pre-planned phrases. I know that I don't share personal details because they haven't earned the right to know them. I pray further that God would reveal how I might do what is best for them. Usually, the best thing I can do is pray for them to have what I most want for myself – happiness.

As you can see, you don't need anything from the other person to forgive them. You need their participation to give them the gift of reconciliation. They can reject the gift of you sharing yourself with them, and it hurts. Tread carefully but know you're not alone. Always be brave.

Who Should You Forgive? Who Should You Reconcile With?

Forgive everyone.

Reconcile with who you like.

That's the short answer.

Are you ready to do it? It's list time again. Show up. Pen to paper. Write one thing.

This is how I have learned to forgive. I made a list of all persons I had harmed in twelve-step. I became willing to make amends to them all.

I'm going to adapt the exercise to our situation. Take out your initial angers and fears inventory. Are there people on it? There should be.

"We never talked about whose fault it was!" you blurt out.

"No, no we didn't," I respond.

Humble pie doesn't taste that bad. You feel much better afterwards.

Every single person on this initial anger and fears inventory list is someone who needs your forgiveness. It's important to expound – perhaps in a new area of your notebook – by drawing two new columns.

Column 1 addresses what you believe their slight was.

Column 2 addresses what you believe your slight was.

There's hurt on your side, of course. Also, it's very possible – especially for the most difficult relationships that have caused you the deepest grief – that you also hurt them. If you can't think of anything. Get creative and imagine this person as your favorite pet. Then imagine them hurting you tremendously. Have you ever lashed out actively or passively? Is it possible that you did, even if you don't remember? The humbler and the more honest you are now in this work, the happier you'll be in the future. This is an investment in your new life, and your happiness is earned. Your work here is all about you and for you.

You're the winner in this, even if it doesn't feel like it.

Once you have this information written out. It's a matter of consulting with your witness or Guide from earlier dialogues in previous steps. You can deliver this as an inventory to them to get it out in the open. It can feel scary, for sure, but it's worth it.

We've established that you need to forgive everyone by thinking the best of them and praying that they'd have what you most want for yourself. It's between you and God. That's a safe place.

Cleaning Up My Own Mess: Reconciliation to Self and Others

Now we're to the question of reconciliation. To whom do you want to enjoy increased trust and ultimate friendship? It's up to you. To whom do you want to send Christmas gifts and show up for special occasions? With whom do you want to be present on their deathbed?

These are penetrating questions, but this is no small thing. We're talking about your life! There's always hope for reconciliation. It's important to never lose your happiness, joy, and freedom over attempted reconciliation. If they bring you down, then perhaps it's not time for reconciliation, and that's okay. God knows it's been eight years of attempted dialogue with my folks. If you remember from chapter 3, I made the mistake of letting my parents back into my inner life too quickly. I didn't know how draining I let my relationships become until I was beyond empty.

I've made mistakes. I've also done a lot right, and I'm very proud of myself for that. My current, high-set boundaries for reconciliation with my parents look something like this:

“If I'm welcome to talk about my personal and dating life, then I want to be around. If I'm not welcome to be open, then I'll leave. I will not put myself in unwelcoming situations anymore. I will leave them. Same with social media: unfriend or block. If you're able to support my decisions (made out of my conscience as an adult) without agreeing with them, then I will reveal some of my personal life and you have permission to speak freely. If you're not able to support my brave decisions, since you don't agree, then I will not reveal my personal life and you will not have permission to speak freely to me. When you give me the benefit of the doubt, you will honor me.”

You have to forgive people – establish positive feelings and thoughts towards them – before you can reconcile with them. Then you have your heart to offer again.

As I progressed through my amends list in this step, I realized that I had used a lot of people. I couldn't get love. I couldn't even get favors. I took what I needed. I had unmet needs, and that made it pretty easy to rationalize using people in my mind. I don't want to live that way anymore. I once used people mindlessly, and oftentimes they didn't know it. I believe most people mindlessly hurt other people, not maliciously. I believe in giving people the benefit of the doubt. I think the best of people to have positive feelings towards them. It helps me to not judge them. It helps me to not condemn people.

I want to be happy with no regrets. That's why I do what it takes.

As I continued to methodically pray and think well of people, I found it a lot easier to wrap my mind around forgiving others – rather than forgiving myself. You will test the strength of your foundation from earlier step work when you dare to forgive yourself. You have self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect because you took your feelings, thoughts, and needs seriously. You’re doing a great job. If you feel disoriented, that’s okay. It normal. This is a lot to process.

If you want to win at self-forgiveness, continue a Feelings Journal daily to ask yourself, “how do I feel?” If there’s anger or fear, it’s the same story. Go forth by writing out the thought behind the feeling. Then articulate the unmet need. Your own anger and fear closed you off to a lot of love for a long time. You will need to grieve this. You suffered from lack.

You are good enough. You are made to have holes and needs that God fills. Grief leaves holes because you lost something you needed. There’s no fear. Holes are okay. Your needs make you compatible with another human partner, if you want that someday. A supportive partner helps meet your needs. If you’re able to talk about your needs from working this step, you will attract the man of your dreams who can do that, too. Then you’ll know how to love each other, and that’s a beautifully happy life worth fighting for. This is a later step. We’ll cover it more in-depth then.

For now, focus on forgiveness of all and reconciliation to those you choose.

God loves you, and He never put conditions on it – only that you turn to Him to receive it like all relationships. If you accept reality, grieve, and feel the sadness, you will honor yourself and find happiness. Your foundation for this happy life will strengthen even more.

Start Reconciling with The Actual People Who Hurt You: The Initial Amend

In twelve-step, they encourage you to approach – in face-to-face conversation – the person with whom the relationship harm occurred. It doesn’t matter whose fault it is, or which side got hurt, actually. If you harmed someone else, it still hurts you. Relationship harm can be healed if reconciliation is possible. Reconciliation is possible if someone is willing to receive a word from you. It’s important to have your witness or Guide provide input on the best words to use. You need help to plan this out on paper. Decide what to say. You need help to plan out the place and time. You need help to remain honest and go in with the intent only to help the other person, even if they did more of the wronging to you and hurt you more.

You'll never change them. They'll change if they want to. They'll harden their heart if you do anything other than what is best for them. Often, you won't know what is best for them either. That's why outside input for this delicate situation is so important. Lastly, their response is nothing for you to plan. The best amends meeting is brief, only addresses what you did wrong, avoids the words "I'm sorry," and contains the words, "I was wrong."

Here are the actual words I have used:

"I see that I did _____. I believe this hurt you for _____ reason. I was wrong. I regret that I did this."

That is an amend.

"Why should I avoid saying 'I'm sorry?'" you ask.

"I'm sorry" is a common phrase. It's difficult to know what the other person hears you communicating through these words. "I'm sorry," literally means, "I'm feeling bad." This conversation isn't about you: the amend is about owning your actions and cleaning up your side of the street without introducing any conflict by reaching into their space. If you say, "I'm sorry," you are introducing your feelings. Many people feel pressured to provide emotional energy to comfort you when you say this – since you're expressing that you're in pain. Your pain isn't their problem in this situation. Keep it all about why you're wrong for the initial amends conversation.

Resist the urge to jump into a social hour with the person immediately after the amend. Some people pressure you to enjoy time with them after this short amends conversation. Spare yourself grief by politely excusing yourself. Once you've had time to process the conversation, the next wise step will emerge. Perhaps there is hope for ongoing reconciliation, and that's a good thing.

After the Initial Amend: The Ongoing Reconciliation Process

You took complete and generous ownership of your wrongs when you completed the initial amends appointment – a very formal meeting where you talked business and left it at that. You stood up to the person who appeared on your angers and fears inventory. You have made yourself entirely free from any moral obligation to that person ever again. They have nothing on you. Your conscience is clear. You respect yourself more than ever. You're powerful, and you feel it.

Now you decide what you want.

Do you want this person in your life? What do you want this relationship to look like in the future?

Sometimes, the process of ongoing reconciliation can feel disappointing. That's why I want to warn you about the pitfall of having expectations for this process. It often feels like everything should spring back to the way it was before whatever incident occurred.

I believe reconciliation is always possible, but it takes time. After significant damage to a once-treasured relationship, your relationship may heal and improve dramatically. However, I think it's doubtful that the relationship will ever be the same – even though the quality of the relationship might be just as good in a different way. I could be wrong. I'm speaking from some pretty extensive personal experience, though. Romance could reignite if it's a romantic relationship, but if you deny the facts of what happened, then reality will come back in an insidious way.

“How do I keep the facts of what happened in mind and deal with them,” you ask, “so that my relationship can move forward again?”

This is where a story very near to my heart will come into play. Your amend was about you cleaning up your side of the street. You can't force someone else to own the mess of their side of the street. However, you can bring it to their attention in a very safe way. If they go for it, then that's a major start towards further trust in your once-trashed relationship.

How I Got Through a Single, Edifying Conversation with My Parents

I used to want my parents' approval, and that was the source of my angst and stuckness. It led to many of my unhealthy coping habits. I'm sure it complicated our relationship with hurts on all sides. I had to sort through the specific heartbreak to grieve my losses. I owned these items. I separated my desire for approval from the catalogued mess of grief. I can never seek anyone's approval anymore, and neither can you – especially if you decide to do what I did in this passage. I always thought that if I had had an iota of support in reconciling my identity to family and faith that I could have saved years off of my twenties and accomplished more. I accept the suffering now as a force that made me into the person I am today. Everything is how it is meant to be.

As I went into my most challenging amends with Judd and Revela – my mom and dad – I felt confused and quite scared. I thought I should have found support at home. I had a lot of “should’s” in my head, and I had to accept that no one owes me anything.

None of these concerns mattered anymore:

- Whose fault is it
- Why can’t you see this
- This isn’t fair
- I deserve to be helped
- Why can’t you just listen
- Why won’t you let me help you
- This is immature
- You owe me

Out of all my amends, I found my parents to be the most unwilling to allow me to speak. I could not find a way to deliver a simple list of what I did wrong to hurt them. I felt like I was already dragging myself through the mud, and it wasn’t enough. I didn’t think my confession should require anything of them. Now I see that it was probably very difficult for them because they had no idea how to navigate a conversation on something they were uncomfortable talking about. They likely think – since they believe I’m not going to heaven – that the best way they can love me is by continuing to try and force me to do what they think I should do.

I sense feelings as an empath. I almost can’t remember a time I didn’t sense fear around my parents. It started around the age of twelve, and that’s when I started to hide. Now it was 2020. I had come home during COVID-19. I needed to coexist in peace with them until I would leave again – to go to the next place. We could not coexist. We could not stand in the same room and get through a single conversation throughout the eight years of me being away – without the conversation getting heated and someone reacting emotionally. The outburst would end the conversation.

Do you have one of these relationships you don’t want to give up on, even though you’ve tried everything? Perhaps this could work for you, too.

I made this up. Perhaps a group therapist somewhere has used it.

First, I wrote a forgiveness list. I printed out two sheets of paper with the following details:

1. Six points I want you to forgive me for (with precise wording)

2. Six points I want to forgive you for (with precise wording)

“If you agree to only talk about these items, would you please join me in a group therapy session?”

There was some hesitation.

“Dad and Mom, this is probably my last effort at saving this parent-child relationship by establishing an adult-adult relationship. I can’t do this anymore. I love you, and I want to only talk about this list of points. We can agree to forgive each other and never bring these items up again. I invited someone we mutually respect as a moderator. He will help us stay seated and finish this conversation. You told me that you’d go to a group therapy session once. Now I’m calling in the favor. I hope it’s possible to get through this single conversation. Please review the list and let me know if you agree to the items. I promise to stick to the script. I have scheduled our session with a pastor you know on Thursday morning at 9:00 a.m. Please let me know if you don’t want to go, and I will cancel it. I hope you will say, ‘yes.’”

They said yes.

I met my parents in the cold basement of a church that I grew up frequenting as a child. The pastor sat waiting for us. He had set out four, hideous, black leather chairs in a circle. I had led corporate meetings, but I never led something like this. The pastor prayed. He said a word about what forgiveness is. I thought he was going to moderate, but he gave me the floor. He was there as a lifeguard – I guess – making sure the kids behaved. It worked.

I had a plan. I had prayed about it. The blood surged behind my ears and eyes. I communicated my expectation:

“I want to ask forgiveness from my parents for these six items as they have been written. Then I will open the floor to my parents to ask my forgiveness for these six items as they have been written. We have agreed on the wording. Therefore, we will use the wording. In forgiving each other for these wrongs we have committed against each other, we will do our best to never bring these points up again.”

Everyone agreed.

Then I talked as matter-of-factly as I could through each point on the list.

Mom and Dad, I would like to ask your forgiveness for ____.”

“I forgive you.”

“I forgive you.”

This occurred six times. Then I initiated their request for forgiveness:

“Mom and Dad, these points have tormented me. I didn’t know how to believe you loved me when I felt hurt in these ways. I want to forgive you for these wrongs. I believe you have wronged me. I feel it deeply.”

I didn’t know how this conversation was going to go. It turned out that they wanted to discuss the backstory and the particulars of each point before the formal exchange of forgiveness occurred. It was a happy surprise because I want to talk to my mom and dad more than anything.

There were a few points on this part of the itinerary that were pretty sticky. I had chosen the wording carefully, directly, and it made people squirm. Perhaps it was pushing the envelope. I spoke the truth. We had agreed on it. I asked each of my parents to say:

“Carter, would you please forgive me for ____? Please use the wording of the wrong as we agreed to understand it. I wrote it there. Please do not change any words, only if you agree that this happened.”

Ultimately, they and I agreed on all the words from our previously-agreed-upon document.

This was the beginning of my reconciliation to my parents. I was honest, and then they were honest about their feelings: they agreed to forgive and so did I. I made the decision to trust them to do that, and they made the decision to trust me to forgive them, too. We weren’t perfect about not bringing up past topics, but we made a sincere effort. I’m proud of all of us for this.

My Physical Christmas Gift of Reconciliation: The Tribute

If you find that your relationship makes significant progress, perhaps you’d like to give a physical gift to the person with whom you still are reconciling. It’s called The Tribute: a document of your choice that displays everything the person you love has done right and how they have blessed you.

In 2020, I spent about three months brainstorming everything my mother and father did right. They were good parents. They showed up consistently, and they remain contributors to the local community. They help a lot of people. The document came out to about 8,000 words. Yours can be shorter. Low word count is not my strength. Then I printed and proofed the statement with nice typesetting. I found the picture frame to be around the size of 24 inches by 36 inches. I invested in stylish printing, matting, and framing to fit the décor of their home. They could hang it if they

wanted to. I wanted to give my best energy as a lasting symbol to the commitment of having positive feelings towards Mom and Dad.

The Tribute gives positive talking points that you all can remember because it's a public declaration. My parents did eventually hang it on the wall.

I say my prayers regularly because I commit to forgiving: the prayer for them to have what I want. Some days are harder than others. I know my prayers make a difference in their lives because the Bible says so:

“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently...and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”

— James 5:16 to 18

Just because there is more trust between my parents and myself now, it doesn't mean I'm obligated to give them anything more. Every step of reconciliation is a gift, and I can only give when I want to. I can only give when I'm not hurting myself. If I can't handle seeing them because my feelings forbid it and I hurt, it's okay to accept this as a limitation I have. I can still work to feel positively towards them and maintain a happy life of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a way of life. Now, you can pray for people to have what you most want for yourself all the time. You can give them grace to improve the quality of your relationship to them. You can love them from afar or in person – whichever is healthiest for you. It's a beautiful way of living.

I didn't learn to love, giving at a cost to myself with no expectations in return, until I learned to forgive. It's the greatest lesson of my life.

Before I wrote this book this year, I felt like I could happily die because I finally tied up all the loose ends of my personal relationships. I've done everything in my power to improve the quality of my relationships for now. I've built a good life for myself.

If you feel like your life is finished once you finish this step, you're not alone. You'll gain a little distance. Then you'll see that while you've made a good life for yourself, this is now the beginning of the life of your dreams. You're happy, and in the final steps, we go out into the world to conquer it fearlessly.

Chapter 8: Step 5 – B – Believe in the Bible You Read

“The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.”

— *Matthew 11:12*

Based on my experience, I liken the treatment of gay people in conservative Christian circles to the brutality of the Spanish Inquisition. The only difference I see between the Spanish persecution to non-Catholics (1478 to 1834) and the modern American atrocity to non-heterosexual people (1776 – now) is that freethinking Americans are not put on stretching racks and openly, physically tortured. I was not physically tortured: mine was psychological. Make no mistake. It felt like torture.

However, plenty of Americans have been wrongfully targeted for free speech and free expression, incarcerated in mental hospitals, given irreversible therapies against their wills, and thrown out on the streets after the treatments were done. I say “thrown out” because family didn’t come for them. People who are different are not an annoyance. Everyone is different. If you’re not one of the different ones, your head is in the sand. You’re hiding in fear. You have a sad existence where you’re not honest. I felt like I was an inconvenience to everyone because I was a human being with feelings, thoughts, and needs. I felt pressure to make myself small to agree with people. No more. I would rather die than let people mistreat me and suggest that I cause trouble. They’re the trouble-makers. People hold fixed beliefs that they’re right and that they’re kind. That doesn’t mean that they aren’t guilty of murder. They just commit ignorant murder. They don’t sleep well at night, even if they say they do.

Gay people – real people you’d meet in the grocery store who get items from the top shelf for you – have undergone lobotomies in the domestic U.S. in the 1950s after being committed to hospitals against their wills. I’m referencing *The California Report Magazine* June 24 issue with the article titled: “How a Young Gay Man Survived One of the Darkest Eras in California Queer History.” Can you imagine the suffering you’d experience if an uncompassionate person shoved a piece of metal into your skull or strapped you down to a table and hooked you up with electrodes? This man relates his experience. Smart people act like unreasoning animals when they stop thinking for themselves and start doing what they’re *supposed* to do. Humans make mistakes because we’re imperfect, yes. If we cower in fear, there’s no excuse for not speaking up. I sleep well at night.

At best, I suppose such healthcare workers thought they were doing a good thing. At worst, these people were like rapists who violate defenseless people. Involuntary lobotomies were common in the 1950s. Involuntary electroconvulsive shock therapy was common in the 1960s. If you go to a psychiatric hospital today, they have a ton of paperwork because a single ECT treatment has potential for long-term brain damage. Could you imagine getting 60 ECT treatments in one year?

People get in their heads that they have a right to disapprove, and then they abuse other people who aren't strong enough to push back and say: "NO." Perhaps the self-righteous don't pull the trigger, but they keep passing the ammunition. America is a country of freedom, and despite that light of hope that it has provided the world, there have always been groups of American people who had to fight for the dignity of being human and being treated as such. Humans decide what they believe, and powerful – often well-meaning ones – laud those beliefs as the accepted norm. Humans are imperfect, and so are societal norms – whether in secular society or in churches. Human nature has not changed. People want stability and conformity. They are afraid of change and of losing power. I am humbled that I've not suffered as much violence as others have. Fear for one's life is real – physical, mental, and spiritual.

I say my torture was psychological because the threat of expulsion without empathy felt very real. While I don't think my family and church's intention was ever to threaten me for calling myself gay – to cut me off from love – that's effectively what happened. Some people don't survive that. I don't ask anyone to agree. I don't want their approval. I ask to be honored as a human being as long as my intent is to honor God and people.

While you aren't reading this chapter to know about gay martyrdom, I need to put your place in history into perspective. America has always been a violent place, even with the amazing freedom we enjoy. People just smooth things over like they always have, and now the news shows it's not working anymore. If you feel like the same angst and stuckness I've been talking about comes from the culture we live in, you'd be ahead of the class. It's everywhere. You're one of the minority who sees how imprisoned in fear people are. People who fear stop thinking and start obeying. I see a lot of obeying. The people I love from my past may be free-thinkers who happen to agree with everyone around them. They could also be a victim of their own fear.

You want to continue your quest out of angst and stuckness to feel peace and intuitive understanding for how to step forward with a happy life. Your journey is no small thing, and this

step 5 is nothing insignificant. You are changing the world. I never wanted to be this opinionated person who left his comfort zone. I join the ranks of men and women who fight for the dignity they deserve as human beings. I believe this opportunity to create space for you and reprimand those who deserve it came to me because I did a good job at honoring those in authority while never surrendering my right to live. Other important historical figures we celebrate today felt the same way. I suffered so you won't have to.

The Bible has been used as a political document. Bible translations are fallible. The Word of God before it's manipulated remains infallible. I believe as you pick up your Bible again that you will find more joy and meaningfulness than other Bible-readers ever will. The degree to which you have suffered is the degree to which you can find happiness. You will be very happy, indeed.

You rose above caving to fear. You are the happy one percent. You have confronted your anger and fear within in step 1, grieved it in step 2, known God within in step 3, confronted anger and fear outside in step 4, and now you'll know God outside yourself in this step 5.

If known, inhumane treatment continues and no one says anything, I think this is shameful and inexcusable. I feel no regret for waking people up, even if they choose to feel hurt by it. They've been asleep for far too long. They'll be grateful when it's their time to be persecuted.

Let's Follow Jesus by Side-Stepping What Doesn't Matter

If you feel violent emotions well up in preparation for picking up your Bible again or going back to church, you'd be completely normal. We are part of a collective world, and the emotions are shared. The world has always been violent. There have always been struggles for power, and these struggles feel violent. I imagine that Jesus felt these shockwaves as people wanted to make him a political king. He side-stepped all of this distraction to lead people in peace and joy right where they are. That's what we're going to do – side-step out of bickering and argument that doesn't matter. There's no quest for being right here. There's a quest in following Jesus in peace and freedom. You choose what you believe, and it's a private matter. I will not give you approval. I will give you support, affirmation, and permission to do what you need to do in your conscience. I'll help you side-step these distractions to focus on what is important in your Bible reading.

The only violence Jesus engaged in was violence towards fear and anger dressed up as hypocrisy. He addressed people in power who sought outward displays of success and being right while internally not approaching God as a Person who has feelings, too. They had closed hearts:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.”

— Matthew 23:27

The scribes and Pharisees were the religious elite, the educated, the honored, the comfortable. The educated hypocrites are now. They’re still like whitewashed tombs. They still appear outwardly beautiful. They’re still full of dead people’s bones and uncleanness.

Jesus says to follow Him.

“You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You will love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

— Matthew 22:37 to 40

We follow Jesus to learn how to love God the Father. This is a point A to point B journey. Point A is Jesus. We walk through our daily lives to point B, God the Father. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, gives us every human breath we take in this journey. After all, Yahweh’s Holy Spirit is called Ruach HaKodesh, and Ruach means “breath, wind, or spirit.”

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

— John 3:8

If a person does not follow this point A (Jesus as Person) to point B (God the Father as Person) trajectory in their spiritual life, I find it hard to believe that they are centered in the Power of Ruach – the Holy Spirit. I believe they will end up looking and feeling like one of the hypocrites that Jesus battled through his life who has no life in them. They will cling to laws and regulations just like the hypocrites do, since we cannot be perfect and it’s futile to try. “Hypocrite” per dictionary.com literally means “a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess.” They will live lives defined by judgment for standards they cannot meet – firstly of others and secretly of self. They’ll never be happy because they’ll never be good enough. Honest people who try to do this feel miserable and full of angst. Does this sound familiar?

The way out of hypocrisy is to accept that you’ll never be good enough to be perfect. You accept that this is okay. You focus on Jesus’s direction in the power of the Holy Spirit for how to live out your life. The law is simply irrelevant if you give your heart to Jesus in personal

relationship and intend to honor Him. He says He did away with the law for you, even though He never disrespected it. He fulfilled it. You're shielded from the shame of being wrong and from that fear of making any mistakes that would cut you off from love:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

— Matthew 5:17

Here's an idea you can accept or throw out: People who follow religious traditions – by which I mean, standards of law or expectation – at the expense of following Jesus cannot be Christians because they're not following Jesus. They're not shielded and decide to take themselves down in hypocrisy. If a person fears that the religious tradition he or she has been following is wrong, Jesus wouldn't judge them. They'd be just like the people He knew in the synagogue. Such congregants sat under scribes and Pharisees who preached lifeless sermons about duty, works, and conforming to the many, many, oppressive burdens laid on people who struggled to get through the day. There were faithful synagogue-goers who felt shocked at the authority of Jesus and what He had to say:

“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

— Matthew 7:28 to 29

They weren't used to a message of freedom, a message of an easy yoke, a message as simple as believing that this loving man has it taken care of. They didn't feel like it was the same religion. If I don't sound like a Christian you know, perhaps that's because I'm a follower of Jesus instead. Believe that Jesus loves you. If you turn into it, that love will bloom into a friendship that will raise you from your physical death just like it did for Him.

If you would like to pick your Bible up again, I believe it will be a wonderful thing. My recommendation would be to start by focusing on the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jesus is the point. Spend time with Jesus as a Person. Reading the Gospels will support the work you've already done in approaching the God of your Understanding. You're loved, and nothing can cut you off from that – no matter your past or the expectations you feel crushing you. They will fall away, and you will feel happiness and joy.

Could Jesus Lead You to Leave Your Bible on the Table Collecting Dust?

In short, yes, I think He could.

Did Jesus ever say to read your Bible?

I don't think so.

"But the Bible is the Word of God. Don't you need the Word of God in order to draw near to God?"

Let's answer that question: You already drew near to God after putting your Bible down and taking a break from going to church in step 3. You don't need a book, even a printed Bible to find God. The Bible book can help if properly used. But the point of Christianity, the point following Jesus, is to live out relationship with Him in daily life – not study a book.

If picking up your Bible and reading it helps you to follow Him, then pick it up now. If the printed words cause you to doubt that Jesus loves you, then no, I don't think Jesus would want you to read your Bible. Perhaps that's a bold statement. No time to beat around the bush. Jesus's main issue with the religious professionals of His time – as far as I can see – was that they wouldn't stop preaching out of their own confident understanding, studies, and mastery of the information they got their degrees in. They were stuck on their credentials. Their livelihoods and funding of their institutions depended on the expectations they drew out of their learning and put on others.

I think Jesus would smile if you left your Bible behind the bedroom door out of sight – if it brought you closer to Him. He doesn't care about the book itself because He Himself is more than that. He is the Word:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

— John 1:1

Not everything that Jesus did was recorded in the Bible book either, and I believe that His work in your life will be the same way. He will give insights to you privately that no one else will ever know:

"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

— John 21:25

Of course, if you wish to share your journey with others in friendship, that will be your life's work in the upcoming steps after this one!

Jesus as the Word existed before the Bible book was ever written or published. Abraham did okay looking at the stars and talking to God. Moses came afterwards and was the first author of any book of the Bible, and Moses started with Genesis. They all knew God as a Person.

The point is to find Jesus as a Real Person who loves you.

Let's Open Your Bible in a Safe Way: Reasonable Expectations

You want to have a happy and peaceful life because God made you for that. It's completely natural – as natural as a cat licking its paw and meowing. It's in your nature to want to be happy, and happiness is achievable when you remove everything that doesn't serve you.

Here's another idea you can throw out if you want: the Bible book is the perfect, inspired Word of God – printed in imperfect language, through imperfect ink, on imperfect paper, and between two arbitrary covers. Jesus is the Word within it. He's not dependent on the printed words there. When imperfect humans touch the perfect Word for any reason, they introduce imperfection. This includes translations into new languages and translations within the same language.

In Jesus's time, the faithful Jews who went to synagogue regularly had a version of the inspired Word of God that forms a portion of the modern Bible. At that time, the fallible religious teachers introduced the Tradition of the Elders into the perfect Scripture that they had. Perhaps we have a similar situation today where imperfect humans have done something imperfect to our current translations – even though they might have had good intentions. I'm not claiming that whole books were written by uninspired people for the canon of 66 books (non-Catholics) and 73 (Catholics). On the contrary, I'm reasserting the claim that these books were inspired by God. I believe that the Word of God is perfect. Traditionally, those books written after the twelve apostles died have been omitted from the Biblical canon, and officially “the canon was closed.”

Instead, I'm asking: “Do we have perfect replicas of these infallible, ancient documents?”

Now we have the age of modern translations where anyone could potentially translate a Bible and publish it. No one regulates this business, and even if they did, they'd be fallible human beings, too. Jesus isn't physically present to negotiate publishing deals. The apostles who knew Jesus aren't physically present either to slap people on the wrist and talk about their personal relationship with Jesus – which is essentially what they do in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke,

and John. People nowadays take it upon themselves to create translations when they feel compelled to do so. Oftentimes, they need specific credentials to get the funding. Then a lot of money is made marketing the Word of God in an imperfect translation that people consume. That's what we have in Christian bookstores – people selling things with good intentions at best.

I'm also imperfect, and I'm telling you that my book is imperfect, too. Jesus is untouchable. I give you no approval as you read this book or your Bible again. Neither do I disapprove. I give you support, affirmation, and permission to follow Jesus as a Person, and it's up to you to make your own decisions.

Given this massive preface, I hope that you feel like we're grounded in facts and reality. I do my best in this chapter to lay out facts that you may not know. Let's read some fallible translations of the perfect Bible – written in modern English. None of them are dangerous to your relationship to the perfect Jesus who loves you. It's helps to have a Guide like myself so that you don't have to feel lost like I did: I wandered through a lot of scholarly books that didn't quite answer my question for how to be happy and feel secure in my faith. This relationship you have with God from step 3 is perfect because Jesus's love for you is perfect. To the best of my ability, I've stated straight facts and made simple conclusions about the Bible in your hands today.

My First Client Who Read His Bible Again

Camilo is one of my many Latino friends. He is gay. He calls himself gay. He has a right to use the words he wants to say, even though his family didn't like it. They wanted him to get married. I could see why: he would make beautiful children! Joking aside, I don't approve or disapprove of whatever words you want to use. If it matters to you, it matters to me. You have your reasons.

Camilo hadn't gone to church in ages. He was raised Catholic. He was now resolutely Buddhist, and he had gotten fantastic results, i.e., peace, from his religious practice of meditation. He studied the ancient teachers and yogis who faithfully followed consistent principles to strive for enlightenment. He came to me because he always had questions, and he still felt angst relative to his family that never seemed to take him seriously. Camilo felt peace, and the more that I got to know him, I saw that his faith was remarkable – strong and enduring. His sister always insisted on continuing to follow Jesus, and as in many Christian families, this departure of a family member from going to church was troubling to her. The snag for Camilo was the same as it had always

been: gay guys feeling judged by religious people for this blanket reason that no one ever explains very well.

“Gay people can’t be Christians, and here are the verses,” Camilo recalled to me.

We’ll get to those verses later in this chapter, my reader.

Recently, Camilo decided that knowing a Jesus who came to Earth – to show the way back into relationship with God the Father – seemed to make a lot more sense. That’s a Gospel that made him excited and actually helped him in his current life struggles.

“Jesus came to bring me back into God’s family of three,” he stated in our session. “My family is Jesus the Son, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. I think she’s like the mother – you know, the Holy Spirit – kind of like Mother Mary.”

“The Holy Spirit is like your mother?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool,” I said. “It’s nice to have a mother with you at all times.”

“Yes, it is.”

I know people from my past who shudder at the details of The Lord’s Supper – or Communion or Eucharist as synonymous terms – for the reverent specificity this sacrament require. I respect this reverence. I know people who would be troubled by the idea of Mother Mary and lack of strictness with the Doctrine of the Trinity. I understand these concerns. Is it my place to judge another Follower of Jesus if that’s what Christianity is all about? He’s following Jesus. It’s not my journey. He’s on the right track. That’s why I let Camilo have his faith in Jesus in the way he understands.

“What does it mean for a follower of Jesus to repent?” he blurted out.

“I would consider this within relationship to a friend.” I thought aloud. “What does it mean to repent with a friend you’ve wronged?”

“Your intent was not to build them up. Beyond that, I don’t really know.”

“True, you weren’t trying to build them up,” I answered. “Now you relate to Jesus like you would to a friend you’ve wronged. Make an amend for whatever you feel you’ve done that hurt Him as a Person. Then you wait for Him to respond. You build trust again. You reconcile, and you move on with your happy life.”

Repentance in Your Bible-Reading Life

Do you remember that I compared your eight-week journey through these steps to a full metamorphosis from egg and caterpillar into an adult butterfly? It's an unrecognizable change.

I bring up your full metamorphosis again because it relates to the word translated as "repentance":

1. Metamorphosis is a fun illustration that suggests "complete change" – in a biological metaphor. The word "metamorphosis" comes from Greek and means "after-change," suggesting a new life after your change has occurred. Did you know that the Bible might support this metamorphosis? It's not just an amusing joke. I fully support smiles and laughter, though.
2. The word "repent" appears in the New Testament – also written in Greek – and has similarities to our word "metamorphosis." The Gospel writers – and Jesus Himself – wrote the word "repentance" as the Greek word "metanoia."

The word "metanoia" is a Greek word combining "meta" (or "after") and "noia" (or "mind"). "Repentance" means "after-mind" – or your mind's existence after a complete change in thinking. The butterfly lives after a complete physical change. The repentant mind lives after a complete mental or spiritual change. When I used to think of the word "repent," I felt like it was an incriminating proclamation.

"Repent, Carter, or hide!" It wasn't like I was going to change myself – been there and tried that.

That word made me sweep away my dirty life as a gay man because I felt like there was no way for me to feel good about my choices. Now, I think of "repentance" as the act of completely changing how I think. I choose to believe God the Father is as gracious and kind a Person as Jesus seems to be. Even if I hurt God's feelings, He will speak to me patiently if my honest intent is to come back to Him. He's very forgiving like that.

I sum up all of the moral obligations of being a Christian in following Jesus. As I follow Jesus in personal relationship, my thinking about all of my life choices changes and becomes less scary. Anything good that I do is no longer out of obligation to God. Instead, it's a free gift of love that I give back to God because He has freed me to be so happy and full of life. I don't owe God anything, and He doesn't want me to feel like I do. We'll have a closer relationship if I give Him glory, which is what He needs. He's a Person. He gave me gifts of love first, and now I like to return the favor by giving Him what He needs and appreciates.

My act of faith is to ask Jesus, “What would you like me to do next, today?”

It’s as natural as human behavior. You want to give when you receive. It’s the same after “repentance,” where I return in mind and relate to God as a safe Person and Friend.

Diffusing the Minefield: Reading the Physical Text

If we already reunited in friendship with Jesus at this point, let me ask you this:

“Does this upcoming discussion impact your relationship with Jesus?”

I would say, “No. Jesus showed us the way to Friendship with God. We’re on the path. It’s safe.”

That’s an encouraging thought. This actually is a stress-free section.

Let’s take this “repentance” or “after-mind” that we have from our personal relationship with Jesus on a new pilgrimage. You will investigate the modern, English translation in your lap with regards to what have been called the Clobber Passages – those six passages that have been used to say, “You can’t be gay and be a Christian.” I think that Jesus would laugh that anyone would claim that anything could cause you to not be a Christian if you wanted to follow Him.

“How dare they!” I hear it coming through in prayer right now.

I have read many books on this subject. Thanks to me – and God’s consistent effort to sustain me – you only need to know about two, level-headed and respected scholars who helped me once: a pro-gay scholar and an anti-gay scholar.

A pro-gay person would say, “Yes, you can be gay and be a Christian.”

An anti-gay person would say “No, you can’t be gay and be a Christian.” Or they might also say this: “Yes, you can be a Christian, but I have an issue with your lifestyle and say that God is very displeased.” I believe this is where some dear people in my old life may fall – circling between these two statements of the anti-gay person. I understand why it would feel uncomfortable and unsettling to live there.

“Perhaps, Carter isn’t a Christian.” It’s not a nice thought.

They love me. I know you have people who love you, too. It will all be okay because Jesus already took care of eternity. God is big enough to cover our mistakes. This section can help everyone – parent, child, grandparent, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, niece, nephew, pastor, pastor’s wife, pastor’s child, child of a gay man, gay parent of a child. The list goes on. If anyone wants to follow Jesus, at some point they’ll likely want to pick up the Bible again.

There are six Clobber Passages to discuss in total.

Take a deep breath and keep breathing.

In the Old Testament, there are three of these Clobber Passages: Genesis 19:1 to 13, Leviticus 18:22, and Leviticus 20:13.

In the New Testament, you find the other three Clobber Passages: Romans 1:26 to 32, 1 Corinthians 6:9 to 10, and 1 Timothy 1:9 to 10.

Although these two scholars' views oppose one another, I believe that all followers of Jesus can enjoy safe and supportive relationships. I'm not singling anyone out. I believe everyone can live feeling safe and welcome together. You can, too. You can do your part. If everyone takes care of their angers and fears, then the Christian community can get along – and focus on what matters. Spread the love of Jesus!

Now, let me introduce our two scholars. It's important to note that if one of the two scholars presents an idea, I will very clearly reference their idea. If for any reason I don't reference anyone, that means that I speak for myself.

Kathy Baldock: My Choice of Pro-Gay Scholar

I chose Kathy Baldock as the pro-gay scholar for my discussion of the six Clobber Passages because she does a great job at sticking to facts. I also find her story inspiring. She never intended to be friends with LGBTQ+ people at all. She came from a traditional, Christian background. During an ugly divorce, an unlikely lesbian person became one of her best friends and helped her through a difficult time. Kathy launched into a passionate, new career of protecting the people who helped her find an exit from her grief and a new life of happiness. She confronts the reality of how traditional Christian beliefs have shaped the thinking of good people who love Jesus and don't know how to act towards the demonized LGBTQ+ community.

Kathy produced a well-researched, academic source with an impressive citation list that she called *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach between the Church and the LGBT Community*. She lays out fair and compelling reasons for why the anti-gay understanding of the Bible exists and why it also could be reasonably disregarded for the people most affected – gay people and those who love them.

Kathy goes into the cultural context for how and why well-meaning people would bring an anti-gay theology out of the Bible and into their churches and society. She talks a lot about

patriarchy, penetration, and procreation within the cultural context of world history. I come from a very conservative background; I realized that even though I was trained to shudder at these words, they're actually quite important once I got over my fears and thought about what she was saying. During the Bible times, there were tribal cultures, and men and women needed to procreate to survive and carry on a patriarchal family name. There is also a high value of masculinity over femininity in the world at the time. The kingdom of Israel and the eventual Christianity brought the value of all human beings together to an equal standing. Jesus treated women in equal standing to men. He also addressed eunuchs – those who couldn't procreate – as people, too. Women were seen as equal in value to men – a revolutionary concept to the world. Penetration comes in as an offensive occurrence where it would be seen as humiliating for a man to take a woman's place in the sex act.

Whether or not you believe sex experiences and gender roles should change, the fact is that they have, well before America was founded in 1776. Your and my world culturally is different than it used to be. The reality of the working world is different year by year. People can enjoy different lifestyles due to changing cultural expectations as well as advances in travel, science, and technology.

The church never saw the word “homosexuality” in the Bible until 1946 with the Revised Standard Version (RSV). A fallible person – with good intention, no doubt – produced a translation valuable in some ways and detrimental in others. After all, the RSV like all translations is imperfect. It's an established fact in the scholarly world that certain foreign, ancient words can be notoriously difficult to translate, no matter the topic being covered in the Scripture. Particularly, the actual sentiment of the author and inferences made within cultural contexts are complicated to interpret. That's why people go to seminary or other higher education for translation work.

When scholars produced the Revised Standard Version, there were complicating factors in American politics at the time. People's minds are influenced by what is going on around them. A common example is someone coming to work in a bad mood because of something going on at home. If you turn on the news these days, it often has the same effect. These two main factors for the RSV scholars were the following: The Red Scare (communist infiltration of American politics) followed by the Lavender Scare (the equating of gays to be communists; therefore, a gay infiltration of American politics). Gays and communists were seen to be the same at this time. During times of hysteria, it seems people will believe just about anything.

However, what if communists – i.e., “people screwed up in the head” – were seen as mentally ill? And what if gay people were actually proclaimed to be mentally ill? Would it make more sense then to demonize a group of people as crazy, deem all crazy to be the same, and then blame the country’s problems on all the crazy people? This really happened.

Is this happening today? Food for thought.

In America, homosexuality was pathologized as a mental illness starting in 1952, criminalized until 1963, finally de-pathologized in 1973. That’s quite a change in cultural and scientific understanding of this issue. Is it possible that waves of panic and misinformation affected the culture of the church in some way?

It sure is.

They created the RSV translation.

I speak loosely though seriously based on my reading of Kathy Baldock’s book. She includes a story about the actual documented paper trail – which she followed – for how the word “homosexuality” was introduced into the modern Bible by the RSV translation committee. A single, closeted gay pastor raised an objection, and this is the only documented pushback on the decision for the word to be introduced into the modern Bible. If it weren’t for his brave objection, “this will weaponize the Bible against gay people,” there would be no written explanation recorded in 1946 for how the committee made the translation decision that changed the modern church for gay people. This translation decision was made on social, political, and scientific understanding of sexuality – not doctrine.

Does that qualify as an imperfect translation? I think so.

I’m grateful to Kathy’s intelligence, relentlessness, and selflessness as a researcher. I hope this passage sells her more books. She deserves it.

Rosaria Butterfield: My Choice of Anti-Gay Scholar

While you may think I’m writing a pro-gay book, that is not my intention. I’m writing a book that gives you the permission to choose what you believe. I want to give you – as a fellow human being – the dignity to follow your conscience in peace. Therefore, I want to emphasize how much Rosaria Butterfield helped me as well, even though I’ve called her an anti-gay scholar. I know that “anti” as a prefix may carry a negative connotation to some, and I want to emphasize

that I intend no negative connotation. I wish to honor Rosaria Butterfield for her honesty and forthrightness about her life experience and beliefs.

She discourages the term “gay Christian” per her website; hence I stick to the term anti-gay scholar. Rosaria wrote the first books I read on sexuality – in my early twenties – in my quest to love God and come to peace with my experience of being “not quite straight.” I now call myself a gay Christian man based in my conscience.

Rosaria Butterfield wrote two books that I read, which relate her personal journey from an academic career as a successful lesbian professor to becoming an earnest and sincere Christian where her life changed course dramatically. Her two books that I read are the following:

- The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert
- Openness Unhindered

In her first book, she relates her story of leaving a successful, tenured position with Syracuse University where she had a life with a lesbian partner. She transitioned away from this life and entered the religious community I grew up in, reformed Presbyterianism. In her second book, she relates her doctrinal understanding of sexual orientation and more, providing an articulate analysis of why she believes what she believes. She bravely speaks an unpopular message, and I admire her for that and respect her even more.

Both of Rosaria Butterfield’s books are fair, safe, and helpful if you’re looking for a “non-gay Christian” approach to reconciling your identity to family and faith.

Side by Side: Pro-Gay and Anti-Gay Understanding of the Six Clobber Passages

Within this book, I give you permission to choose what you believe. Therefore, I say that neither of these views is better than the other. They’re just opposing ideas. Some people may say that one is right and the other is wrong. That is natural. People are not familiar with the idea of beliefs being just that. I do believe in absolute truth, but this is not the place for it. I consider sexual orientation, sexual identity, and other issues of working out your faith to be grey-area issues. There’s many that have nothing to do with following Jesus.

“Does your choice of belief impact the Gospel? Can you do anything to separate yourself from God’s love if your intent is to honestly seek God?”

I would say, no. I find peace in this. God is big enough to cover our mistakes, especially if we have hearts seeking to honor Him.

Clobber Passage Number One: Genesis 19:1 to 13

Genesis chapters 18 and 19 relate the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. I relate the selected portion:

“The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city.

When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ‘My lords,’ he said, ‘please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.’

“‘No,’ they answered, ‘we will spend the night in the square.’

“But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom – both young and old – surrounded the house. They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.’

“Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.’

“‘Get out of our way,’ they replied. ‘This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.’ They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.”

— Genesis 19:1 to 13

Anti-gay idea: This is the commonly used story of anti-gay Christians where God condemns homosexuals to judgment for their behavior. That’s a fair choice of belief, if it’s what you believe. Does it mean you’re right? No, it means that’s what you believe. I’m not right either if I have a different belief. I choose my belief. However, there are other ways of understanding this passage and what the actual sin was.

Pro-gay idea: In contrast to that understanding you have probably heard above, let’s look at another text to clarify the Genesis 19 incident.

“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore, I did away with them as you have seen.”

— Ezekiel 16:49 to 50

In Ezekiel 16:49 to 50, Kathy Baldock explains that the list of sins of Sodom reads: “arrogance, an uncaring attitude toward the poor and needy despite their riches, and other “detestable things.” Kathy goes on to say, “In the thirteen mentions of Sodom and Gomorrah after Genesis 19, same-sex behavior is never cited as the sin that caused the destruction of the city.”

What was the actual sin? Well, it was essentially a sin of lack of hospitality with an extreme dishonor to male visitors. A man being raped by taking the place of a woman was culturally detestable, which is why Lot offered his daughters to the men of the city. Women during the time were also viewed as lesser socially, which would make sense to the offensiveness of the rapes comparatively.

To support this understanding of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, a similar event happened in Israel, too, where the offense is a similar lack of hospitality and rape. In Judges 19, a Levite with his concubine (a female) is passing through Gibeah of the tribe of Benjamin. They choose to stay in the land of Israel rather than a non-Israelite city. An old man exhorts them to not spend the night in the square. The men of the city come down and wish to rape the Levite, and instead, the hospitable old man offers his virgin daughter. The Levite gives them his concubine, and they abuse the concubine until daybreak when she is found on the threshold, dead. The Levite takes the corpse home and cuts it into twelve pieces, dispersing it through all of the tribes of Israel that they might know of this grievous offense to their brethren who sought refuge. This is similar to the Sodom and Gomorrah story and has nothing to do with gay people.

Clobber Passage Number Two: Leviticus 18:22

I discuss this passage with passage number three.

“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”

— Leviticus 18:22

Clobber Passage Number Three: Leviticus 20:13

I discuss passages number two and number three below.

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

— Leviticus 20:13

Anti-gay idea: Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20 both relate similar language, where the prohibition of sexual behavior between men is displeasing to God. Therefore, anti-gay readers read it at face value as would make sense.

Pro-gay idea: Per Kathy Baldock’s book, it is also possible to consider the passages culturally as the purpose of this law was both to “define the way in which the Israelites were to serve God... [and] establish clear boundaries and prohibitions in order to keep the Jews holy, separate from, and undefiled by the surrounding cultures.” Pagan practices were “taboo in Israelite society, where Jews were not to eat fish with legs, have clothing from more than one fabric, or fields planted with two kinds of seeds. Same-sex behavior was a common pagan practice, and therefore strictly forbidden for the Israelites.”

There are some laws that I believe the Christian church today largely elevates above others from the Old Testament, Jewish moral law. It is no longer unacceptable for a woman to engage in sex during her period, for biological males to be uncircumcised, or for loans to charge interest.

Also, per Kathy Baldock’s scholarly work, “There is no prohibition against women having sex with women. Further, the Bible, in its totality, is silent on any imperative about body parts fitting together in a ‘proper’ way.”

Clobber Passage Number Four: Romans 1:26 to 32

The apostle Paul seeks to introduce the Gospel of Jesus by establishing the moral depravity of non-Jewish people who had lost their way.

“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

“Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy,

murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."

— Romans 1:26 to 32

Anti-gay idea: The case is made that the passage is straightforward and that male-male and female-female sexual relationships are unnatural. Male-female sexual relationships are natural.

Pro-gay idea: Paul's point in this passage is to illustrate moral decay of Gentiles. He sets the stage for the reader seeing himself as imperfect no matter how hard he tries, and he shows the need for Jesus to lead the audience out of this darkness. Paul follows this passage with the Gospel.

I draw most of this information from Kathy Baldock's discussion of this passage. Paul explains a divergence from a moral code that the audience would understand. Paul speaks to a Gentile Christian audience, not a Jewish Christian audience. Morality to a Gentile is different from morality to a Jewish person. Therefore, Paul does not appeal to the Law of Moses. Instead, Paul appeals to the law of the Greco-Roman Stoics. Within this system of morality, what would moral decay look like? "Natural" and "nature" may bring to mind biological references to the modern audience, but this was not written to 21st century America. "Natural" and "nature" for this reader refers to something different, essentially any sex with passion and not intended for procreation.

Two points I'd like to make:

If you want to live according to the Greco-Roman moral code – and I don't know why you would since it's arbitrarily from another culture – but if you did, you could decide to never enjoy sex and to never have sex without trying to produce a child. In this case, per this passage, Paul would say that you would have a consistent case for being a Greco-Roman Stoic: you'd have passionless sex and would not be a hypocrite by forbidding same-sex behavior as well.

- Do you want to be a Christian or a Greco-Roman Stoic?
- Do you want to live like a Greco-Roman Stoic?
- Why do you want to be a Greco-Roman Stoic?

It's your decision.

Paul isn't putting any obligation on the reader in this passage. He's simply stating that this is what imperfection looks like and saying in layman's terms: "Roman's reader, this is what

perfection looks like to you. You're not perfect. You can't keep a moral code, no matter what moral code it is." I don't think that failure to achieve perfection would surprise anyone. This passage illustrates what Greco-Roman imperfection looks like.

"Paul couldn't prick the conscience of the Gentiles by writing to them about breaking the Law; he had to use words, scenarios, and principles from ethical foundations that they understood...For one who followed Stoicism, to be in harmony with nature or to act naturally, meant keeping a moral convergence of all three of these: individual self-control, compliance with social-sexual norms, and sexual acts for the purpose of procreation... All the behaviors are called 'shameful' because they are lustful...and not procreative."

— Kathy Baldock, *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon*

Clobber Passage Number Five: 1 Corinthians 6:9 to 10

Paul speaks to the Corinthian church. I discuss this passage with passage number six.

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

— 1 Corinthians 6:9 to 10

Clobber Passage Number Six: 1 Timothy 1:9 to 10

The apostle Paul speaks to his mentee, Timothy, who is a pastor.

"We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine."

— 1 Timothy 1:9 to 10

Both 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy speak to sexual relationships with two notoriously difficult Greek words to translate: *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. That much is certain. Both *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* are used in the 1 Corinthians passage. Only *arsenokoitai* is used in the 1 Timothy passage.

Anti-gay idea: A dominant modern translation is before you (NIV), where it makes a simple case for the anti-gay reading of these passages. As stated before, “homosexuality” did not appear in the Bible until 1946, and variations off of this precedent followed in popular evangelical Bibles where these two words appear.

Pro-gay idea: Per Kathy Baldock’s scholarly work, let’s briefly look at 1 Timothy 1:9 to 10. There is no exact correlate to modern English to express the precise cultural concept of what Paul referred to back in first century after Christ. *Arsenokoitai* likely refers to a power-dynamic sexual relationship, which could easily refer to pederasty that was rampant in ancient Greece. It’s also possible that it was in reference to men prostituting themselves to climb the social ladder like I know you’ve probably seen in the tabloids, such as in Hollywood scandals where someone sleeps with someone to get the job – the “director’s couch.” That’s hardly a blanket, unnuanced prohibition against homosexuality across the board.

Also, in reference to Kathy Baldock’s work – looking at 1 Corinthians 6:9 to 10 – both *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* are used. I explained the use of *arsenokoitai* already. *Malakoi* refers to personality and physical characteristics of “weaklings” or lacking a spine that could be further interpreted as “effeminate, those who make women of themselves,” etcetera. In 1958, 1972, and 1989, *malakoi* was translated imprecisely from a descriptive adjective into an accusatory noun respectively: “those who participate in homosexuality,” “sexual perverts,” and “male prostitute.” The point is that the word *malakos* “encompassed traits beyond just sex roles,” such as softness and moral degradation.

Does pederasty, male prostitution to gain social status, or moral softness have anything to do with committed same-sex coupling? Perhaps it does. Perhaps it doesn’t. It’s your choice. At the very least, there is dishonoring of people involved – whether self or others.

I’d like to include a final quote to discuss the social context in which these difficult passages were translated:

“Recall that the late 1930s saw the beginning of discrimination against “sexual invert” [a German word since “homosexual” was not a mainstream term yet] by medical professionals, law enforcement, and the mainstream culture. By the 1940s, the [American] government joined in with deliberately discriminatory policies. By the 1950s, the Lavender Scare was in full swing and the “sex pervert” paranoia became sweeping the country. By the late 1970s, when the conservative Christian community turned its full focus on ‘the homosexuals,’ the word

arsenokoitai, without benefit of any additional historical information or biblical scholarship, came to be translated, almost universally in English versions of the Bible, as 'homosexual.'"

— Kathy Baldock, *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon*

Since there is disagreement on what *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* mean, there is variance within English translations as to what these words mean in the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy passages.

This ends our discussion of the Clobber Passages. Let's move on.

Do What You Want to Do: The Law of Liberty, Obeying, and Going Back to Church

I have a thinking client. He thinks a lot. He spins in his mind for the whole hour I'm with him on our weekly video call. His name is Kyle. He talks about wanting to read his Bible, but then he doesn't want to. He wants to go to church, but he doesn't want to. He wants to get milk at the store for his cereal, but he doesn't want to. He wants God to reach out to him and make him okay, but he doesn't know if that's right.

"Am I wrong about God? Why am I asking this question again?"

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

He's one of the bravest guys I know. Kyle intends to build a new life for himself, and he's doing it. He's wrestling with the idea of doing what he wants to do. Is it right? Is it wrong? Is it safe? Is it stupid? Am I hurting my crush because I have feelings for him? Am I wrong to withhold how I feel?

This is what happens when you live by the law, expectations, or any standard that you can't meet. You're never going to be perfect. You're never going to know the "right" way of doing things. You're muddling through life like the rest of us.

What's the way out?

If you did your homework for the prior steps, you now have higher self-esteem because you respect your feelings. You know your thoughts. You know your needs. You're not afraid of the needy person you are. You meet your needs. You have a cleaned-up life. You have no

obligation to reconcile with people you once had issues with. You feel right with God after reading this chapter because you're right – finally!

“Wait, that's not right. It's not about being right.” He snapped back into reality.

“It's about being right with God as a Person – in relationship,” I told him.

The homework for this situation is to write a Two-Point Journal Entry in the morning when you first get up.

Ask this: “What are two things I want to do today?”

Then ask: “God, what are two things you want me to do today?”

That's it. Listen in the quiet. Listen with intensity. I believe God will speak to you. Write down the items that come to you. Do them while listening to God. It gives you something to do if you're a chronic overthinker. Trust God knows something good for you to do today. Baby steps, but your whole life can become like this. God will speak to you all the time if you listen. You might have to shut up, though. Letting God have your plans still ironically gives what you want. It's a free way to live.

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

— Psalm 37:4

If you struggle with feeling like what you want is wrong, then it's time to talk about the Law of Liberty. God isn't shutting you down. Your attempts at being right are shutting you down. Seek God. It clears everything up.

You can investigate the book of Romans yourself if you want to read about the Law of Liberty beyond this discussion. Jesus lived the perfect life. I believe He brought the Holy Spirit so you and I can discern daily decisions with assistance from God. The “Law of Liberty” is a term that states a paradox where Jesus established liberty for those who follow Him to such a degree that it supersedes any past or future system of morality in place – i.e., Biblical law or social expectations. The apostle Paul states that following Jesus and enjoying this freedom is not license to abuse a good thing. I think you can easily understand this concept in terms of a loving relationship, much like the one we've been talking about already: relating to God as a Person. Just because a friend or loved one trusts you doesn't mean you get to abuse their trust.

What happens when you abuse a loved one and use them?

You lose them. You lose connection. You lose intimacy. You lose the goodness that they give you on a daily basis. Do you think that you'll see the goodness of God if your conscience

isn't right with Him? I know that I won't. I think that discernment within a loving relationship – a friendship with God – is the measure of morality as a Follower of Jesus. Right and wrong is between you and God, and that's a great responsibility you bear.

Where can my living in freedom go wrong?

Sometimes I let outside issues affect my quality relationship with God. Here's a simple example. My personal Facebook recently crashed because within one day, 4800+ people friend-requested me for the complimentary copy of this book pre-book launch. The number of direct messages was unreal. I felt frazzled as the unanswered friend requests climbed beyond 1000, and I got distracted for a day. Everything froze, and I couldn't click anything on my profile. I scrambled to create a business page and redirect people there. I looked at my phone for a whole day. What if my boyfriend expects to see me and I'm looking at my phone? I might need to explain, especially if he's cooking for me! What if God expects me to check in with Him as usual to ask if I'm doing a good job? I ask God regularly, "How am I doing?" God likes to tell me I'm doing a good job. He'll be waiting, and it's up to me to fill Him in on how I'm doing. That's the kind of relationship I enjoy with my boyfriend and with my God. That's an outside circumstance that affects my quality relationship with God.

Sometimes I let my own desire to work for what I want get in the way of asking God what He wants for me to do. If I do something that wasn't to build God up or give Him glory, it's up to me to make an amend. Here's an example: I decided to power through work instead of choosing to open my Bible, pray, and take a nap. Even though God is infinite in time, He still wants to be with me. He also wants me to take care of myself. I'm not good to Him if I'm unwell. He wants to see me thrive.

I would go further to state that doing good is not an obligation you have towards God. God loves you anyway. It's all about the expectations you set for the relationship. God is fine with you changing the expectations for the relationship, but the less I give, the less He can give back to me. He trusts me to follow through in our relationship. He expects me to communicate.

If you feel compelled in your relationship with God to do something you deem "good," a good work is a gift of love to God your Friend. There is no obligation in acts of love. You're not obligated to perform favors for God. You're not obligated to kiss a loved one. You do it because you want to. When you give freely at the times you want to, it yields joy. You have a relationship of love. Loving is a free gift. God gives freely to you. You give freely to God. In more mature

relationship, we often trust more, and I give the gesture of love even when I don't feel like it. I trust through experience that I can give more because I know that the other person won't abuse my generosity. God is the same way, in my experience.

You're still not obligated to read your Bible.

You're still not obligated to go to church.

Now you're able to, though, without fear.

You may follow Jesus if you wish. If you continue to follow Jesus, act on what you feel compelled to do as an act of love – a gift for Jesus. Try asking Him what He'd like you to do today. Give it as a gift, even if He tells you what He would like. If you're not looking to get anything in return, then you're safe from developing resentment for not getting what you want. Try asking for guidance. You'll be surprised what He says:

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

— Philippians 2:12

To live in relationship to God is to “work out your own salvation.” As for “obeying,” I believe this is listening to guidance from God within your relationship: “what would you have me do today, Lord?” Following through can only be if you want to with no expectations. Perhaps God is good enough and kind enough that He has your best interests at heart.

I also believe that “obeying” includes listening to a human being. You might go back to church at this point in the process if you want to. You put yourself under their authority because you respect the leadership. If your intent is to honor the person you trust – whether God or another authority – then follow-through is secondary. It's up to you to decide if follow-through is right or not between yourself and God. Perhaps God will disagree with the pastor? It's possible. Intend to build up, and you'll be golden – regardless of your decisions. You'll respect yourself.

The apostle Paul, who wrote Philippians, guided the church who submitted themselves under his authority voluntarily. It is helpful to join a community that follows Jesus, provides guidance, and simultaneously encourages you to “work out your own salvation.” This is a lot of independence that Paul encourages his congregation to take on!

As I have contemplated going back to church, I have looked for three things:

1. Church leadership that I respect

2. Church leadership that steers clear of giving approval or disapproval if two gay men walked in
3. Church leadership that gives support, affirmation, and permission to follow my conscience.

The reformed Presbyterian leadership I have known is not leadership I respect right now. I honor them. I don't respect them because they haven't respected me in my relationship to God and what I feel, think, and need. Perhaps it comes down to beliefs not being compatible. Most people don't know how to live without approving or disapproving. They don't know how to trust the intent of people – at least when it comes to gay guys from conservative Christian circles. I personally don't see a way that I would ever be happy in a church where I looked for approval. I seek God's approval, and if pastors and congregations disapprove, then they're setting themselves up for the same judgment coming back to them. It's only a matter of time before those who judge become judged themselves.

The goal isn't to be a bad boy and buck the system. The goal is reassessed motivations for why you're doing what you're doing. God only wants me to do things in service to Him as acts of love – not acts of servitude and fear. Jesus paid for all of the mistakes I could possibly make. I'm here to listen to God and live freely.

Following Jesus into Impractical Life Choices

There is no wrong way to be a Follower of Jesus if your heart is in the right place. If you're a follower of Jesus, you'll imitate the person He was. You imitate by listening for Him in relationship. You'll listen to Him to do what He bids and do what He does.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

— John 10:27

Friendship with Jesus is trusting, warm, and relational. If I feel God bidding me to do something in daily life, I try to follow through and do the random errands that may include something like talking to a stranger at Starbucks. Who knows where it will lead?

Do you think that Jesus is always practical?

By most adult standards, no. Check this next story out.

In John 3, Jesus walks on water. It's dark and the middle of the night. Peter hears John say, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:7). While Peter's physical sight, or emotional or even psychic acuity,

may not have been as focused as John's, his faith was equally strong for his way. He brashly jumped *onto* the ocean as he walked on water. Peter trapsed his way out over the dark water towards the figure he trusted to be his Savior's. And it was, Jesus. There was no doubt. At one point, Peter looked away, and that was when he had problems. He learned to keep his eyes on Jesus in his walk. I love how impractical and unique this episode of the Jesus-story is.

Consider this in your Bible reading: These stories are REAL. These people are REAL.

Why would Jesus have you do something crazy in your life while you are so focused on getting all of your holiday-pay hours, rolling over your sick-day leave to the next year, billing health insurance correctly, and making the many appointments of your busy life?

I need some order in my life, I don't know about you. I don't want chaos. Nevertheless, Jesus is a paradox. He tells me to judge with right judgment. The greatest are those who serve. The last shall be first. Jesus shows that following Him while defying the law of physics – expecting a miracle – is the path of faith. No matter where it leads, believing is the source of peace and a happy life.

Jesus calls you to craziness if you're open to the great callings that seep quietly into your consciousness. It's not like Jesus invaded the ship and dragged the disciples out to sea. It's also noteworthy that only one of the disciples recognized Jesus while a second stepped out of the boat without a second thought. Where were the other ten? Either not called, unaware, or unwilling.

Jesus's Version of Perfection and “Doing the Wrong Thing for the Right Reasons”

To read your Bible or go to church again, follow Jesus in your time.

One of the benefits of this type of re-entry into the religious community is that you can focus on what matters in Christianity – following Jesus. Everything else that has ever developed out of the Church, even in the later books of the New Testament, I venture to say is less central to hearing the words that come from the Mouth of God. After all, the Epistles (later books of the New Testament) were written as the early church did their best to Follow Jesus. In the context of knowing Jesus as a Friend, I'm confident that you'll feel more at peace branching out to the rest of the Bible in your time.

Jesus says nothing about homosexuality – especially nothing about monogamous gay relationship.

In fact, neither does the rest of the Bible, technically, as we've seen.

You're safe to spend time with Jesus without hearing anything bad about being gay. If you're still on the fence and "aren't quite straight," you don't have to worry either. Jesus only seeks relationship with you.

If you're afraid of being wrong, recall the Law of Liberty section above. Also, consider the idea that God is big enough to cover our mistakes. As a person, He's the world's best Manager. He always knows when inventory is low. He'll put the fires out. He can create out of nothing. Our job is relationship and honest intent to follow Jesus. Try talking to Him or seeking Him in the ways we covered in step 3. The rest follows.

What if Jesus leads you to do something wrong?

"Ah, that would never happen!"

Well, actually Jesus was perfect. But the hypocrites of His time got angry that He somehow made it okay to break at least one of the Ten Commandments.

He kept the entire law while breaking the fourth commandment when He worked on the Sabbath – repeatedly.

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it Holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the Sabbath is that of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work."

— Exodus 20:8 to 9

He kept the law because His heart was in the right place, given to His Father to do His will. The external appearance was not the criteria for His keeping the Law and pleasing God. He was right in His conscience. His response to people objecting to this law-breaking was to say:

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

— Mark 2:27

I find it incredibly refreshing to come back to the Bible in relationship. It clears up the fear of being wrong about the hard passages that everyone is arguing over. Unfortunately for people who want control and to make sense of everything in the Bible, I'm going to burst your bubble. Jesus isn't the only person who "did the wrong thing for the right reasons." There are countless saints who God Himself praises.

How could they get away with this? Jesus says to, “Judge with right judgment.” That’s how. You’re asking the wrong question. It’s not about the law – ever. It’s not about expectations – ever. It’s about following God as a Person.

Here are many examples of shrewd saints, and God looked on their hearts.

Judah refused to give Tamar his third son, so she acted as a prostitute and seduced Judah to get impregnated. She didn’t have much choice, given the time period. She wasn’t condemned for this. It’s hardly moral by traditional church sensibilities today.

Rahab was an actual prostitute who lied to her civil authorities, hid foreign spies, was not an Israelite, and God saved her life for her conduct. She lived the rest of her days outside the main camp of Israel, and she was a direct ancestor of Jesus. There’s no condemnation here. I think it’s interesting she lived outside the camp. I’ve gotten used to feeling at peace outside the camp as a gay Christian. Did she continue working as a prostitute? Who knows, perhaps.

David was chosen as the youngest of eight brothers. Samuel anointed him as king, a kid with adult brothers lined up in front of him. Can you imagine? I’m the second of eight kids, and I can only imagine how this would go down. Not even Samuel was impressed, and God said that man looks on appearances, and He looks on the heart.

David engaged in polygamous marriage relationships. Was this morally right? There seemed to be no moral objection given his relationship to God and the cultural context. David took Abigail to be his second wife after God killed him. God only had a problem with David’s sexual relationships when he killed Uriah to take his wife, Bathsheba. That wasn’t okay, and we can clearly see that David’s intent was not to serve God or people in this dark story.

David honored those in authority. He always honored Saul even though he knew he was meant to take his place as king. David also honored the priests. Still, he ate the Bread of the Presence from the Temple of God when he was in a pinch. He needed something to eat when fleeing Saul. This was holy food, and for some reasons the priests thought that even though it was only for them that giving it to David was okay. Why? I’d say his heart. David intended to honor all.

Solomon followed suit with hundreds of wives and hundreds of concubines. I can see that there were consequences for these many relationships. Still, there is no condemnation.

Daniel was taken into captivity and accepted a pagan name of Belteshazzar. His only moral objection in a completely non-Jewish society – aside from serving God only – was to have a

vegetarian diet. Is that part of the moral law of the Old Testament? Possibly, he saw that he could avoid dietary issues. It's not certain. However, what is definitely part of the moral law is not engaging in dark arts of the wise men: astrology, divination, study of animal entrails, rites of purification, sacrifice, incantation, exorcism, and other forms of magic. Yet, Daniel trained in these and surpassed all the others in his service to five different kings as world powers shifted between four empires.

Would Daniel have known how to read tarot cards and read astrology birth charts to divine the future? He was faithful in his heart to God. Perhaps, I will never know for sure. It's reasonable to think he did some version of these.

Esther was a pretty, Jewish girl also in captivity during the reign of Ahasuerus of Persia. The court eunuch – probably a gay dude – favored Esther because she followed the advice of her uncle. Mordecai told her how to best prostitute herself to the king for a night so that she would win the lottery of becoming the next queen of Persia. Counting the odds, that doesn't seem like an effective way to get married, and it certainly doesn't seem moral. They both had immense faith. Mordecai exhorted Queen Esther as strongly as possible to risk her life by entering the court of the king uninvited to set up a plot for saving the Jewish people from genocide. Queen Esther was not too proud to take the throne while remaining in service – her heart given to God.

That's what I see.

In stark contrast, here is an example from Acts 5 where Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of land. What did they do with the proceeds? They gave them to the church. Yay, except Paul struck them dead. First Ananias died in front of Paul. Then his wife came in later, and she died at Paul's feet, too. That seems like a mean thing to do when someone gives you a lot of money.

What happened here? They did the *right thing* for the *wrong reasons*. By appearances, they were doing something good: sell land and give money away. Secretly they saved some of the money. If they intended in relationship with God as a Person to serve others and build them up, then it shouldn't be a problem to give away some money and save some money. Since their intent was to lie and trick people with hypocrisy – appearing more generous than they were – it appears to have been a death-sentence.

As I look at these examples, I tend to think that the externals don't matter as much to God. You know if you're seeking to turn to God and build Him up in relationship. That seems to be the

only thing He wants. If you want to spend money on yourself, that's no problem. Just don't lie to God because He's a Person. No one likes to be lied to.

Questions of Marriage, Divorce, Co-Habitation, and Gay Marriage

By now, you must know me well enough to know that I'm not going to give you a straight answer as to say: "this is right; this is wrong; you should do this; you shouldn't do that." Perhaps I'll be criticized.

I have to say, "I don't care." I believe Jesus was criticized as well.

I don't see Jesus telling people: "Here's the Law! Follow it!"

No, He says to follow Him – not the law.

In John 4, Jesus talks to a woman who had five husbands, and the one she lived with was not her husband. He talks indirectly – in this personal story with a lady who was doing her best – about how she should deal with a situation of multiple marriages, multiple divorces, and a situation of co-habitation.

What would you expect the Perfect Human to say to a woman like that?

It's surprising. He has no specific instructions:

"Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true... Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.'"

— John 4:17 to 18, 23 to 24

What does this mean?

As best as I can see, Jesus instructs her to live in relationship with Him, trusting that He will provide her with fulfillment and direction in how to live life. Her life looks like a mess, and He isn't worried. He doesn't tell her what to do about her five husbands or the dude who isn't her husband. She realizes that He doesn't shame her for this either. She goes into town unafraid – where everyone who once looked down their noses at her must know her – and shares the relationship she has with God:

“Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.”

— John 4:28 to 30

The woman must have been firm and persuasive, hardly the person she usually was who avoided the crowds. She met Jesus at a well in the heat of the day when no one would go. She’s not worried about lining up lawyers to straighten out divorce litigations or to divvy up the assets. Jesus does not talk about legal process at all. That’s not Jesus’s focus in the slightest. He encourages relationship and for her to trust that He will provide Living Water that satisfies her. It’s up to her to decide what to do within this relationship she now has with Jesus.

In another situation, Jesus is presented with a woman caught having sex when she isn’t married. His response here is not condemning either:

“Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’”

— John 8:10 to 11

Can we agree that Jesus is perfect?

“Yes.”

Can we agree that He kept the moral law perfectly?

“Yes.”

How does he tell this woman, “Go now and leave your life of sin?” What does sin mean to Jesus?

I can’t get over how Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly and yet broke the law – at least the fourth commandment. Jesus’s intent to love God and love His neighbor was pure. I would return to the past section where I discuss the principle of “doing the wrong thing for the right reason” to know more of what Jesus deems to be sin. If you follow Jesus, then you aren’t living under law or social expectations anymore. That’s why He introduces relationship.

Therefore, I believe sinning as we follow Jesus is to turn away from relationship with Him. He has the rest covered. That’s the only thing I can do to mess things up for myself. Even then, God is big enough to cover mistakes.

Lastly, here’s what you’ve really been waiting for!

“Am I for gay marriage?”

Eh, here's another non-committal answer from me. My beliefs aren't important for you, for this book, and especially for this chapter. You're not looking for my approval or disapproval. I'll give my support, affirmation, and permission to follow your conscience so that you believe in the Bible that you read.

Instead, in the wisdom of Socrates, I'll answer your question with another question:

“If you think that marriage is only between a man and a woman, does that automatically exclude other committed non-man-woman relationships within a larger marriage definition?”

For the sake of argument, you say: “Yes, gay marriage is excluded from the marriage definition.” That is your conclusion.

Here's a follow-up question: “If you believe in a marriage definition that excludes gay marriage, does this exclude a separate relationship definition entirely that prohibits gay people from having a happy life together where they honor each other?”

For the sake of argument, you also say, “Yes, non-man-woman romantic relationship is fundamentally wrong and therefore anything else is bad and excluded.”

I want to point out that this is a total of two conclusions – and arguably two assumptions – that you have made. You have taken two conclusions out of the Bible, human conclusions, that are not stated explicitly in Scripture. These are two human assumptions that you're right and that others are wrong. Does this give you the right to judge men, women, or intersex people who can't get married this way?

For some reason, people believe that they can conclude what marriage is not. At the same time, they're unwilling to accept that they're making fallible assumptions about what is right and wrong for other people's lives. Is this arrogance? Perhaps it's arrogance. Perhaps they are more right than me. I don't really care because I'm not asking for approval. I know their life is going to be a lot harder because where do these assumptions stop? How far do human definitions go? How many expectations are you going to pile onto what the marriage commitment is supposed to be? Are you allowed to use birth control? Are you allowed to stop having sex altogether? Are you allowed to enjoy sex? Are you allowed to be a stay-at-home father? Are you allowed leave when you're married in an abusive relationship? Are you allowed to remarry if you do leave an abusive relationship? Are you allowed to get a divorce and still think well of yourself because you didn't

stay married for life? What is actually the standard here? Are you allowed to use sex toys? Are you allowed to masturbate while married? Where does this end?

I respect this choice of belief: marriage is only between a man and a woman. I respect this choice of belief because you're another human being who deserves respect. I'd respect it more if you owned the fact that you're making assumptions from a document that you and I can both read. To say gay relationships are fundamentally wrong and bad without owning your assumptions makes you sound foolish.

If you think I sound like a moral relativist, I saw this coming. I believe that there is absolute right and wrong, and I believe that Jesus knew this, too. You and I don't live in world that functions that way. There is imperfection and gray area.

Do I believe we should always strive for right and avoid wrong?

I don't think that's the right question to ask. It's not a helpful question. If you focus on rules and regulations versus honoring commitments and relationships, then I see this focus on life leading you into hypocrisy like the scribes and Pharisees. You'll experience lifelessness and judge people in order to feel some sense of security and positivity towards yourself. It's simply not productive to stay fixated on law or expectations. It's more productive and more helpful – in my opinion – to focus on relationship because that is something that allows for freedom and for God's assistance in the tricky situations of life. Jesus is not concerned about people maintaining perfection anymore. Jesus knows that relationship with Him is the only way to navigate life in this imperfect world where it isn't possible to love people using perfection anymore. If we lived in a perfect world, then perhaps it would be possible.

The Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are perfect. It would make sense they live by the Law, but I still doubt they focus on it. They don't need to. They're naturally perfect and don't need it.

I hope that made sense. I conclude as I have many times before: follow Jesus in personal relationship. After all of that discussion, I'm ready to come to a conclusion about our gay marriage discussion. The Bible doesn't explicitly address what marriage is not. It simply says that a man and woman come together, and the two become one flesh. There are plenty of permutations of this model through the Old Testament of God-fearing people. Recall the examples of the shocking lives of people in the last section who God never condemned for polygamy? God had special favor for

many people who were not in a committed, consecrated relationship between one-man-and-one-woman.

In my experience, the establishment church and churchgoers assume that they know what marriage is not – without question. That's some confident assuming, perhaps arrogant.

Are human assumptions from God or fallible people? That's a rhetorical question: human assumptions are human. Humans are fallible people. Therefore, human assumptions are also fallible.

What Jesus Has to Say to Eunuchs (Modern Gays?) and Modern Eunuch Rights

Let's close this chapter with bringing the discussion back to marriage and human rights in present day in America and the larger world. I'll discuss what I believe Jesus says specifically about gay people at the same time.

The Bible does suggest a natural order for the world because God created man, male and female, in the image of God – per Genesis 1:26 to 27. Nonetheless, Jesus talks about eunuchs that can't be part of that natural order.

“What's a eunuch?” you ask.

Bluntly, a eunuch is someone who has been castrated of their sex organs, no biological way to procreate. I extend the definition more broadly to someone who can't have children for various reasons – due to something Jesus says in a moment. If you carry eunuchs over to the next verse of Genesis 1, how would they respond to this proclamation of their role in nature:

“And God blessed them [man and woman joined in marriage], and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it...”

— Genesis 1:28

Eunuchs have valuable lives, too. In what way, precisely, should a eunuch – who by definition can't have children – become married, have children, and exert his influence on the Earth? Firstly, back in ancient times, they would not have been first candidates for marriage when procreation was so essential to carry on the family line. Secondly, are all eunuchs people who cannot biologically procreate, or might they also be people with various other realities to consider, such as those whose feelings forbid it – like gay people?

Jesus says:

“For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

— Matthew 19:12

What I get from this verse is that Jesus says, “There are a lot of reasons people can’t have children.” I also see that He knows it is very hard for them. He implies that He knows that some people can’t accept whatever reality this is. It seems that some people can’t accept eunuchs as eunuchs – people who can’t marry and have children as people who can’t marry and have children. Jesus helps us go through grief to accept reality. I’m no theologian with a degree. I read the Bible and pray about it.

If a parent has a child who was born in some way that keeps them from having children, perhaps that parent should lead the way in accepting reality and showing the child how to do it. If you are farther along than someone else, it’s your job to help them if you feel compelled. That’s why I wrote this chapter for you. I believe you’ll share it with someone.

Are people who are unable to have children – for any reason – any less human or deserving of making life choices in freedom while following Jesus?

I know you probably do have children, by the way, my dear reader. You are a gay man who is a father, and you’re not as uncommon as you might think. Let’s broaden that question for freedom-loving Americans. For some reason, you and I live in a world where people think that their beliefs must be imposed on others. This isn’t America. I would also say that this isn’t Jesus.

“Hey, America, you have a Declaration of Independence that states no one is any less human than another.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

— United States Declaration of Independence

You’re like every other normal person, a human being who is fallible. You can choose your belief and see if it works. That’s why I say that the question of right and wrong is irrelevant. It’s a question of appropriate or not within your relationship with God now. I propose a path forward

where you genuinely seek wise choices, pursue honesty with yourself, and show up consistently to act according to your conscience.

Maybe I'll dress up as a gay Pilgrim for Halloween 2022 and ask my boyfriend to dress up as Squanto. He's not Native American, but it's close enough. He's good at gardening, I think. I'll have a gathering of people for Thanksgiving, and we'll step across a creek to freedom since there's not another continent to go to anymore.

I will say that I'm an advocate of LGBTQ+ rights because I'm an advocate of people having rights. I think that's rather American.

Just stay in your lane.

Chapter 9: Step 6 – O – Open Your Heart to What You Used to Dream

“Imagine who you are, what you’re like, as if your memories were entirely wiped. That’s who you truly are.”

— A Friend

It’s important to become a child again so that you can rediscover your innate ability to open your heart and dream like you used to. As an adult, this means that you have to give yourself support, affirmation, and permission to do so – both within yourself and through quality relationships, which will come in the next chapter.

I want to tell you my story of protecting my inner child again. Then I will relate a client story.

Suffering in Gayness Became a Stepping-Stone to Discovering My Inner Child Again

For most of my young adult life, I completely forgot that I had a heart with real dreams that God placed there. I was a kid once, and I forgot all about who I used to be. You may think that I had an exciting twenties journey through various careers and travels, and some part of my heart did shine through. I took some exciting turns. But I didn’t believe in myself, so I remained stuck in my ventures without achieving the success I wanted. I blocked myself from achieving my dreams due to disbelief. I was unwilling to stand up for my inner child who dreams inside of me. I made safe choices and went for money because I could never bear to ask myself what I truly wanted with commitment. I lacked commitment stick with the vision through the challenging times. I discovered that I have no room for doubt anymore.

Since I held onto the belief that I was – in fact – stuck, I stayed with a life of having no definitive answers as how to move forward. It turns out that there actually are no definitive answers philosophically. Do you like philosophy? All I know is that I exist right now:

“I think; therefore, I am.”

— Descartes

The rest of my worldview comes from choice of belief: I choose to heed some understanding I get through my five senses that God exists. Perhaps this is a sixth sense, which sounds like another book I'll write. I choose to follow Jesus, and this spiritual relationship orients me in the rest of my belief choices. Any fallible person who would tell me what the Bible means is a person who I can check up on by reading the Bible for myself. Since my Bible translation is fallible in a way that affects me significantly – anti-gay theology that only emerged after the 1940s – I have chosen to never seek approval and to invest in God through relationship. Eventually, I discovered the need for giving myself permission, support, and affirmation in my belief choices. I need more than approval of myself. I need active relationship that builds me up.

My spiritual life has helped me more than another person ever will. God used select people to show me what it feels like to receive permission, support, and affirmation. It was my journey to discover that I need God's approval over other people's. I think that as a child who dreamed, I intuitively knew that God was there as my friend. I didn't like to read, and I didn't like to read the Bible because it was another book on the shelf.

Anyone else from my family and church, I felt, had clear direction on how to make steps into a happy, normal adult life: primarily marriage. I talked with pastors about 1 Corinthians 7's praise for single people, and those conversations were shut down in the same way that no one preaches sermons on why people should remain single. I think that a lot of preaching is to the crowd, and the crowd gives funding. Gay-struggling, Christian, single, and divorced people probably aren't the most lucrative demographic. It's not an image that hypocritical people aim for, so why would they want to focus on it?

I get it. Out of necessity, I've discovered that the social outcasts can thrive outside the conservative Christian church. I actually don't have a ton of experience with other branches of Christianity because – even though I'd visit – I'd only ever attend anonymously between God and me. That's simply where I am right now in my journey. I never wanted to be seen until I was strong enough to handle more rejection.

I lived in the anti-gay camp of Bible-readers for most of the eight years I traveled the world – hoping my problems would go away on their own. I felt angst and stuckness because I was afraid to dare to think for myself. I would be punished like I had been. It was a difficult place for me, and I did not thrive. I suffered with no progress. I became cynical. I was willing to be honest, and I

worked in the ways I knew how. I saw failure. I wanted to give up. I also am not a person who gives up.

I believe I suffered primarily because I did not find much support or love in my family and church for how to move forward with a happy life. I accept that most people were ill-equipped to help a gay guy because they didn't understand the situation. I don't respect ignorance and unwillingness to listen or learn. People insist that they already know everything they need to know: lazy and scared. It was hard to see my siblings and friends getting married one after another. I denied myself the right to think about romantic relationships at all – no dates, no letting myself feel excited or enjoyment of crushes, no meaningful socializing or anything of that nature due to indecision and paralysis. I felt lonely.

I quite literally watched life pass me by. The only support I got was people telling me I was doing the right thing. I asked myself:

“Will I be proud of myself at the age of thirty?”

“No,” I eventually answered. “I’m more afraid of people than I feel brave to stand up for myself and follow my conscience. I don’t respect this about myself. Even if I feel alone, I have to stand up and live.”

I’m about to turn thirty. I feel proud of myself because I started thinking for myself.

People, including a Christian psychiatrist once, had warned me about considering certain ideas and thinking them through – like the idea that I could actually be gay, that my feelings aren't inherently wrong, that sexual orientation is normal and permanent as the scientific research seems to suggest, and that trying out dating men could actually meet one of my human needs. These people preaching what I call “A Doctrine of ‘No’” reasoned in a rational way within their rigid mentality. They expressed the danger of never being able to come back to the way I used to be after having certain life experiences.

I sense feelings coming off of people. I watch them. I study them. I went on to investigate what I imagined their fears to be. I want to rise above the status quo. I can't let debilitated and stubborn people bleed into my life. I now believe I grew up in a pervasively fearful way of life.

Yes, the world is dangerous and violent.

Should we respond with such fear?

I don't think anyone will be happy with underlying fear.

The conclusion I accepted for myself is that God will lead me. He will protect me – even if the love of family, church, and now this psychiatrist was conditional. Their fear blocked their ability to love me. It still hurts some days. I grieve it and move on. I cry a lot more than I used to, and I think this is a very positive thing.

“If you start going on dates and getting involved with guys, then you’ll never be the same,” said this psychiatrist. “It will be harder to make life changes in the future if you don’t want that life anymore. What if you decide you want a wife?”

While this may be true, do you ever really get to sidestep living life by choosing to do nothing? Do your choices ever protect you from the life experience you gain by doing something else? If I had remained a stuck individual, I would probably not have a liver at this point, and I would probably have other chronic health problems including alcohol-induced diabetes or gout. Thanks, medical school!

I may have ended myself as well. Suicidal thoughts emerge from feeling trapped, and it’s the mind’s logical next step when it sees no other way out. It’s a very logical symptom. The remedy is to find the way out. I believe I have.

I have honored my feelings, honored my thoughts, honored my needs, honored my family, and honored my church. Caving to people’s approval is not honoring them. Respecting them as human beings with feelings, thoughts, and needs – and as people with individual consciences – is to honor them. Disagreeing with people has nothing to do with honoring or respecting them.

I decided daily to be brave, and that’s worthy of praise. In response, I have only ever been undermined – even in writing this honest book to relate my experience. I used to want my people to make space for my feelings because that’s what a quality relationship provides. I don’t believe that I had quality relationships. My relationships continued taking and did not give back in support. I gave out support to my conservative Christian family and community. I felt heartbreak to receive virtually nothing back. I’m used to silence. I’ve heard that deafening silence for years.

If you wish to live in the anti-gay camp from last chapter – no matter how long you wish to stay there – please know that you have a quality relationship here who will give you value back. I won’t try to change you, change what you think, or manipulate you by threatening you with disapproval. I will make space for your feelings because they are real, no matter how you choose to respond to them.

It's your turn to start dreaming again. That's why I've made this safe space – to give you permission, support, and affirmation. Again, I dismiss your desire for approval. You cannot seek approval if you ever want to see your inner child. That kid that you are has to be protected. You are the only one who can protect him. He only comes out to play when it's safe.

The Client Who Protects His Inner Child

I had a client named Tiago tell me once that he was always a loner. He remembered being that geeky little gay kid who would go and talk to random old people. He'd visit the people sick in a nursing home.

He told me it never bothered him to wander around alone. He was always happy until the age of nine or twelve. He had early memories of grade school. He once received a flower from a boy when he was about five years old. He took it home, and he drew it.

His mom came in and saw the flower and said, "It's good. What are you doing?"

"I'm drawing."

"Well, that is very, very good."

He spent hours on that picture of a rose. Somewhere along the way he stopped drawing. Life became difficult. It wasn't practical to spend time on something that wouldn't provide a paycheck.

As you come out of taking an inventory by being honest about your angers and fears, grieving, you've likely had to spend some time alone. You've probably taken your version of a pilgrimage journey. You have articulated who God is as you know Him as your Friend. Then you've gone outside of yourself to forgive. You have no ill feelings. You give your gift of reconciliation by sharing your heart with the people you choose.

You went away. Now you've come back.

You've even thought of going back to church and seriously reading your Bible again in a way that helps you. That means that you've likely come back a different person – a strange person to the people who used to know you – including your wife. She just doesn't know what to think at this point. You were gay and behaving, very quietly. Now you're gay and happy, and that's frightening – to her at least. It's likely that her heart is broken because she hasn't felt like she could trust giving her heart to you. Because she's scared, that spreads to the rest of her relationships. Your kids might feel it, too, and yet it's the younger kids that you watch the most. You want that

uninhibited happiness and peace they have. You want the joy of going after your dream as a mere interest, a flight of fancy. It's such a carefree way to live.

I'm here to tell you that growing up doesn't mean that you let go of that life of dreaming and exploring. It just means that you need to make time for being a winsome child again. Take it seriously. This is why your life has felt stuck. You haven't been playing enough.

My client, Tiago, is an undocumented immigrant brought over the border by parents who were doing the best they could. He never had a choice for his lot in life. However, he has certainly done a lot with what he has. He's had a very hard life of dodging major inconveniences while getting the best education he could with no qualification for any financial assistance. Not only did he go into survival mode, but he also went into full offensive mode to work as a political activist in his teenage years for the forgotten undocumented immigrant population. He's extremely smart, extremely skilled in many different career sectors, and he's been at the mercy of the legal system every time his temporary residency status renews. Going back to his home country – that was never his home – has never been a good option for him. What would he do there? There's no family and no life there. He had a lot of reasons to close his heart and to never open it up again to what he used to dream.

But even if you survive and meet your basic needs, does life matter if you feel dead inside?

He discovered the answer to be, "No."

At one point, it got difficult when he was making his vision board for short-term goals in this step. He'd worked so hard to transition from the restaurant industry into graduate school for computer programming. He had given everything he had. He felt emotionally and physically exhausted. He felt spent, and he couldn't sleep enough. In that state, he didn't have much to give – much less to himself or his inner child. He stood up for himself. He decided to face new, deeper fears that he hadn't given much attention to before.

His attempts at following the next exercise for the dream board hit an intense block of fears. He still has these two outstanding tasks on his dream board. These two require him to face old fears to achieve victory:

- Move through the final computer science boot camp to become a block chain programmer
- Take the steps to achieve permanent U.S. residency status

It's not comfortable to do intense technical training programs. Neither is it comfortable to move through the legal process. Both are expensive.

For the purpose of discerning how best to love himself, I decided to help by using one of the techniques that I had used for myself. I was scared of using it for my gay Christian clients for fear of frightening them away. I did a tarot reading – a ten-minute audio recording to provide clarity for the querent who needed to know how to move forward in terms of a literal nightmare he related to me. The clarity that the reading provided for Tiago allowed him to realize that he could think up good plans for himself and cleverly avoid certain fears because he's good at coming up with creative solutions.

Avoiding fear is not a good thing. We learned that a long time ago.

He had learned that facing fears is the way to be happy. As he moved from a state of surviving to thriving, he wanted to live again and have long-term happiness: not burning the candle at both ends. He decided to take his current graduate degree in computer programming to start a business on the side. He envisions picking up his next certificate in block chain programming in the future. Then he also decided to face another fear by asking his boss, a successful restaurant owner, for a massive raise. Tiago is a fantastic restaurant manager now.

His high self-esteem – built through working these steps – allowed him to choose his beliefs about God. He also felt free to choose what he wanted to do with his life. Before, he felt distracted by other valid concerns. Old fears no longer served him. Tiago had healed his heart. Now he decided to support his inner child. Now he has a conversational relationship with his heart. He stays in touch with his feelings and is a better crier than I am.

Tiago has more stories, and these are all the details he wanted me to share. I want to celebrate my client by emphasizing how brave he was. Tiago is a gem.

Confront Fear as a New Dreamer: Two Ways

I used two exercises with Tiago to confront fears in the moment. Life isn't easy for me either. I use these regularly. I continue on my quest for the dream of this book and making a difference:

1. To conquer fear in the moment, close your eyes and meditate by visualizing with all five senses the worst possible outcome. While seeing this horrible image, see yourself remaining calm. God is there. You survive. You're okay.

You're prepared for the worst because you've seen it. Going there in your mind releases the fear of the unknown. You're free. If it does happen, then you've already rehearsed the situation mentally, and that's good, too.

2. To conquer head-spinning overwhelm, stop your racing thoughts. Ask yourself with the palm of your hand close to the end of your nose, "Am I aware?" Stare at your palm and notice how it hurts behind your eyes. "Am I aware?" Then remove your palm, and your mind will have receded leaving you in clarity and awareness of the moment. Now you can act in freedom again. Your mind is not real. Your mind can stop if you want it to.

Tiago is well on his way to having the life of his dreams. Not only does he have a successful restaurant career and computer programming business, he also has an achievable plan in process to get his documents, have the freedom to travel back to his home country for his own pilgrimage, and no doubt many other opportunities that I've always taken for granted. He's industrious, that one. He finds so many opportunities that I didn't know existed.

My First Taboo Tool: Chakra Healing and Meditation

I have found it helpful to visit chakra healers, tarot readers, and study astrology charts to help unearth my heart and get a context for what I'm dealing with. The reason I went to the chakra reader was because I wanted someone to do something that had not been done before. Everything I had tried had not worked – to have the heart that I knew I used to have. I did not know what I wanted. I lived in a place of not knowing, and it haunted me. I used to always know what I wanted. My psychiatrist back in 2016 had asked me what I wanted, and I did not have an answer. I blamed it on depression at the time, but chronic illnesses have a cause. I consider a lot of depression to be chronic illness. I had made some career changes, yes, but my heart didn't burn like it did when I played piano as a kid. I pursued excellence through performance opportunities in high school and college. I had experienced heartbreak around never getting into piano competitions. I always had had financial worries. My heart had been broken, and I wanted it back more than anything.

I believe that a broken heart will cause chronic illness. I also believe that healing a broken heart will heal a lot of chronic illnesses – especially depression. This is my own theory, and I see confirmation that this is a wise idea to use with clients. Heal heartbreak and reduce chronic illness. I think chakra aligning can help heal heartbreak once these earlier steps are completed.

It is said – unfortunately I can't cite this but I read or watched YouTube videos on this – that African Americans, as a demographic of the U.S. population, have the strongest root chakra. Essentially, I take this to mean that they're more naturally "down to earth" and open that way. Culturally, different people groups live and move through their days in their own expressive ways. They find it acceptable without thinking about it to be "down to earth" or "expressing passionate emotions." The most passionate people I've ever met are Cubans. Mexicans are right behind them. I think it's interesting that white Caucasians are generally seen to be the least aligned in terms of their energy centers. As a demographic, they are generally the most reserved culturally. They excel in reserved manners, discrete emotions, and as a southerner myself, I can say they are generally indirect. They don't say what they mean. Is that a positive, to not say what you mean? It's just a reality. It can be charming and polite.

I brought up these expressive differences between people groups because I found that making friends with people different from me to be helpful in learning to express myself. I have felt more comfortable in my own skin both from aligning my chakras and from spending time around other types of people. I felt permission to be more expressive in various ways.

There are six energy points from the base of the spine to the crown, which sits on top of the head. Just because this concept of chakras and this type of energy healing originates from ancient India doesn't mean that it has no scientific relevance. People talk about the realities of life from different perspectives. Science is simply a willingness to assume that things will happen the same way under the same conditions. That's why I believe there is a basis for chakra healing as well as other alternative healing methods. I believe that my openness to other cultures and becoming friends with different types of people has allowed me to release tension that I have held in each of these six energy points.

Now that I'm more released in my root chakra, I feel a lot more secure. Now that I'm more released in my sacral chakra, I feel less unexplained fear that would drive me into addictive behavior and compulsive habits of self-harm – including negative thinking or using substances to escape. Now that I'm more released in my solar plexus chakra, I feel more vitality and enjoy better digestion. Now that I'm more released in my heart chakra, I feel more passionate and like the kid I once was who loves people. Now that I'm more released in my throat chakra, I feel more confident to speak, sing, and communicate directly. I've grown to say precisely what I mean without fear. I know that I'm a great communicator. Now that I'm more released in my third eye

chakra, I trust my intuition and see confirmation that my perception is accurate. Now that I'm more released in my crown chakra, I feel more of my burdens lifted because I trust that God will take care of all my concerns. I feel connected to God as a Person.

Through that process of chakra healing, I learned meditation techniques that allowed me to get myself centered by focusing my attention on those energy points in my body. Practically speaking, I found it helpful to use these points where I would focus as a way of stopping my brain from thinking. As I learned to dream again, I realized this:

"I am Carter Holmes. I am happy and at peace. Happiness and peace are who I am. I am safe in God, and I am happiness and peace. Any other thought that comes by is external to me. My mind is not me. And any other feeling that comes by is external to me. I don't have to affix myself to any of it."

A lot of my agony came from me fixating on memories that would pop up or thoughts or disturbing questions that I couldn't answer like:

"Am I right?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Am I safe?"

"Am I okay?"

All of these questions were based in the feeling of fear, which is not me.

Meditation was crucial for me to allow my brain to rest. Then I can daydream.

I have found that "I am" statements do change the way I think. In the context of meditation, these statements and choosing thoughts to think that support these "I am" statements will result in a new mentality.

Consider this internal dialogue:

"I am a healer."

Breathe.

"I make an effort as I discern God bidding me. I speak to people and give them time. I hear them tell me that I've changed their lives. I receive confirmation from other people in their lives that I've helped them relate intimately again. I have brought them back together in God's power by using my gift of loving people."

Breathe.

"I am a healer."

Even making a recording and listening to this I Am statement followed by a logical chain of thoughts gives you such a healthy, nutritious mentality for your self-esteem.

I Am statements can truly be anything, and you can choose what you think. You can create a new reality for yourself from your thoughts. It has nothing to do with inventing fantasy and believing in it. No, no, no. You have an infinite world in front of you and an infinite mind. If you focus on negative, you will see negative. If you focus on positive, you will see positive. If you focus on a future, ideal vision, you have an honest shot at achieving it. Your dream can come true if you believe. You actively believe by living in your thoughts and meditating on them. You take action based on the thought that “this is going to happen.”

Whether you’re aiming for a dream or seeking peace only, meditation can help. Maintaining a sense of peace during the day is a realistic expectation for you through implementing meditation techniques within the day. I can remain in a state of serenity.

Breathing exercises – such as Wim Hoff’s breathing techniques – also are helpful to reset the body’s state to a place of emotional neutrality and mental clarity. You clear your mind of racing thoughts.

My Second Taboo Tool: Tarot Cards

You’ll be asking how a Christian can use tarot cards, no doubt. I figure if Daniel could be trained in these skills, then I can, too, especially if I have a talent. My only requirement is to follow Daniel’s example of seeking God only, the Christian God I know as a Person. It feels seamless to me. Tarot cards are an extension of the same prayer life I already have enjoyed and leaned on for years. Before reaching a point of desperation, all I knew about them was to stay away from them. Once I confronted my fears and brought God into the situation, I decided to develop the skill. I did get freaked out at one point early on where I did a yes-no spread.

“Is this Jehovah?”

“Yes.”

As an intuitive person, I felt it was a little off. I asked the next question:

“Are you lying?”

“Yes.”

I had goosebumps all over me.

I reflected. I've always known that God takes care of me. God takes care of my mind. He's protected me from hurting myself and taking my own life. He's also shielded me from others taking my life, detaining me, and probably even kidnapping me. I was in some dangerous situations.

If I ever saw people scared of something, I generally would investigate as a younger version of myself. I felt that was my job – to investigate. I'd already been the gay Christian, and I investigated the Bible and read books on that. I'm already a black sheep. Appearances aren't the concern anymore. I came to peace with what I believe for myself.

When I came to tarot cards, I wanted to know why I was scared. I believe there is a real danger to invite people into your life who do not love you, which is the next step 7. I also believe that there is a real danger to invite spiritual entities into your life who do not love you. That's where my line is. I seek the Christian God. I still pray the same way all the time. When I didn't have anyone to talk to, I found tarot cards to be helpful. I navigated through maddening situations with my folks. I know I'm loved, and I put myself in places where I feel it. I became very skilled and developed my own meanings for the cards as a Christian. You may be spooked. I understand. I've come to peace with the idea that if God is leading me to a useful method of helping myself and others to be brave, then I will do what I believe I need to do.

I read tarot cards intuitively, which means that I refer to the images and to God in prayer. Whatever God places in my mind is what I trust – much like my conversational prayer relationship has always been. As with all relationships, it took time to develop trust and confidence. Prayer required consistency to develop confidence. Using tarot cards as an extension of that also required consistency to develop confidence. I started out studying the traditional meanings of the cards and the symbols that appear there. My tarot reading helped me a lot when I was scared to talk to pastors, visit with church people, and read my Bible. I specifically found assistance with understanding the facts of confusing situations. Tarot reading gave me healthy thoughts to think.

My step work was not as organized as yours is, so the step before (step 5) on Believe in the Bible You Read took quite a bit more time for me to parcel out. I sifted through many books – some offensive and some supportive. I felt challenged to discern the helpful truth as authors constantly mix up objective ideas versus emotional calls to action. In my experience, most people – including authors – have an agenda for what they want you to believe. I actively try to avoid this agenda in my book. My agenda is to give you permission to choose what you believe.

I feel a much smoother life now since I'm content with what I believe. That's why I don't read tarot cards for myself as often anymore – it's just not needed. I have prayer, and that's plenty for myself.

However, for my clients like Tiago, I find tarot cards useful. People often don't come out with the whole truth or even if they do their best, they're still confused about their situation when in a painful and challenging place. I can get a very good sense of where to lead a conversation in a client call so that you will focus on what is important to move forward with getting past fears. Usually, these challenges come back to fears. If there is a more confusing situation with a lot of moving parts, I can perform a more extensive reading that provides insight into the larger situation. These details include the past, present heart of the matter, overlying issues, underlying issues, the main challenge, the journey, immediate advice, external circumstances, hopes and fears, and the outcome. That's a common spread to throw.

In your working of this step on believing in your dreams again, sometimes a client will feel upset and can't pinpoint why. If you don't have any success in figuring out why by using the Feelings Journal to pinpoint your thoughts and needs, tarot cards can help me think through issues with you because a reading can lead you through thought processes.

The cards themselves are just paper. Any sort of discernment I get comes from a spiritual connection, I believe. I only ever pray to Yahweh Jehovah God since I'm a Follower of Jesus. If I was never supposed to do this, I don't believe I would have ever been successful. Love abounds.

My Third Taboo Tool: Astrology

I started studying my birth chart both for Western Tropical Astrology and Eastern Sidereal Astrology years ago to help me understand my complex family situation and how I relate to everyone. The world has changed so quickly from my grandparents' and parents' generation to my own. In my family, there was a lot not said that I needed said. I'm a unique human being, and other people have different needs. I found it difficult to accept that some people are only able to provide what they can when I wanted something different. Others may get what they need without having to search, but I had to leave to find the love I need to thrive.

Eastern Sidereal astrology comes from ancient India, unlike Western Tropical astrology that comes from ancient Egypt, Greece, Babylon, Assyria, Rome, and more. They both share in common the twelve zodiac signs that you probably already know. In addition to these, Eastern

astrology also has an additional twenty-seven constellations called nakshatras. These special constellations each have a mythological story that adds a personality component to the part of the person's birth chart that lands here at the time of birth. There's even a smaller section of each nakshatra at that specific point in the sky called a pada that further specifies the nakshatra that falls within the zodiac sign. It can get very detailed.

As I looked into my chart, I found it helpful to know what kind of background my relatives came from as I came into my adulthood and built my new life. I was raised with many fears, and it's just a fact: no blame to anyone. I had an entirely different childhood experience from siblings in a different position in the birth order. Of course, I have things in common with them. I love my family very much. I found motivation to continue my astrological studies because I wanted to have constructive, factual thoughts to think to take ownership of my life. I wanted to understand why my adolescence and early adulthood was so confusing. It's confusing to everyone. I just found myself in foreign countries and feeling at home there, and that always bothered me. Per my chart, work with foreigners and travel in faraway places makes complete sense. That gave me a bit of peace since I felt pretty weird for gravitating towards those choices.

I was also raised zealous for religious studies – reflected in my chart – which was a double-edged sword. I had a lot of pride and judgmentalism to deal with through my step work. I used to be a very judgmental person.

Studying my Western birth chart was helpful to me to know the context I lived in growing up. I could see more the role I played as what felt normal to me: the helper, the healer, the encourager, the restricted, the non-speaker, the listening, the hungry, the one predisposed to bad habits like smoking and eating poorly until I grew out of this restriction mentality, etcetera. I knew where to grow.

Eastern astrology birth chart analysis provides even more information. It centers on early life, your early adult life, and life after marriage or age thirty-five. There's more to this topic than this overview, but I found these themes to be most helpful to feel more grounded in my place in the world and in long-term career pursuits.

I'm meant to work outside of the duty of nine-to-five by traveling, dealing with people's relational conflicts, working with chemicals (pharmaceuticals), and curing illnesses from a non-traditional approach. I heal by using alternative methods and nurture people emotionally with

kindness, mentally with philosophical ideas, physically with food and other medicines, and spiritually with the gift of insight that I've been given. That all came out of my birth chart.

Journal to Start Dreaming Again

I used my methods for Tiago's situation, and I felt like it might be better for him to speak to someone that wasn't me. I suggested another professional, who is a Christian, and he agreed. They had mutual friends from church, which was a happy surprise.

There's never any pressure to accept these methods if you don't want them. As I took Tiago to a chakra healer and psychic that I know and respect, I explained that for a family that can't or won't communicate, it can help bring closure to have someone affirm the facts as you understand them. That's what he had as his goal for this visit. He left grateful.

He grew up in a family that didn't talk about feelings, honest insecurities, or needs.

After this visit, I led Tiago to journaling again for the purpose of actively daydreaming about what he wants.

Show up.

Pen to paper.

Write one thing.

He sped through this bit after getting over a hurdle of new fears and new grief. He almost immediately went on the Vision Board and Dream Board components of this step.

The Vision Board

Vision boards are short-term goals. I have nine categories with example entries:

- Wealth: (e.g., Affirmative dollar amount per month or savings goal)
- Reputation: How I want to be seen? (e.g., Positive role model for the coaching or mentoring industry)
- Spiritual: (e.g., Reading scriptures for certain period of time, fulfilling a responsibility in organization, feeling self-respect and peace in your beliefs about God)
- Relationships: (e.g., Significant other, date night, propose, have a hard talk)
- Health: (e.g., Release pounds, go to gym certain number of hours/days per week)

- Love: (e.g., Strengthen the love in my life – towards self or other)
- Career/Education: (e.g., Become best-selling author, apply to school, gain certificate)
- Hobbies: (e.g., Stuff I like to do)
- Travel/Fulfillment: (e.g., Experience different cultures, experience new place, reach self-actualization goal)

Put this in plain sight so that you see it first thing in the morning and last thing before going to bed. Take time to enjoy daydreaming and visualizing in your daily meditation time. What does it look like to have these things now?

You are what you think about. Your brain gives you exactly the thoughts you put into it. If you say you believe something, then meditate and speak aloud those thoughts that a believer of that thought would dwell on.

If you focus during your day on what you don't want, then you'll get what you don't want. If you focus on your vision board items during the day, then you'll get a life that builds itself around what you dwell on. If you believe you have it already, then you'll take natural steps without angst or fear.

That was the short-term goals of the vision board. I find it easier to start with short-term goals and then move on to long-term goals. Long-term goals will go on your dream board.

The Dream Board

When I created my first dream board, I considered more loose categories of my childlike dreams. These are long-term wishes for the future like the kind of house I've always wanted. When I used to play The Game of Life boardgame, I used to love the Victorian house as a kid. When I grew up, I saw a lot of old Victorian houses in upstate New York. I judged myself for liking them. I don't judge myself anymore, and my coolness is its own type. My inner child still likes a tower and a spiral staircase, and for some reason they make me feel mysterious and magical inside. That Victorian house ended up back on my dream board. I also dreamed of having a Siamese cat, an Italian greyhound, and a Standard Poodle. I've never had a dog of my own, but my parents were awesome to help me get pretty much every other type of pet on the face of the planet.

The dream board – especially – is a longer-term project that becomes more colorful as you become intimate with your inner child. You'll find new items to add when you don't judge your feelings. Express curiosity about the desires that pop up. You may feel silly initially. Focus on playing with the idea instead, and that silly or shameful feeling will fade.

For instance, one desire I have is to walk in the rain in every new place I move. I also always wanted to use the penny smasher at museums. I wanted to get the cherry ICEE. I only ever had the Coke flavor for some reason. I wanted to get a pair of tennis shoes with metal grommets that stick out – I'll draw you a picture of it. I couldn't afford them once in my teenage years. I want to get lava lamps again. I also liked the idea of having a refrigerator dedicated solely to drinks of various types – especially root beer – that visitors might like. I always loved going to a refrigerator for a drink as a little kid. I also wanted to have fresh flowers – lots of them. I wanted a pool in the back yard with tiki torches and a tiki bar.

What else? I want a tree that turns orange in the autumn in my front yard. I'm not sure what kind of tree it is, but I used to climb one at my grandma's house.

I want to feel happy and at peace – all the time. I know it's possible because I can imagine it.

Once I had completed both my first vision board and first dream board, my dream board items came true quickly. If you believe and put down what you truly want, then you can ask God for what you want. You can get what you want.

On the dream board, it wasn't a day after gluing down the picture of a happy gay couple that I met a guy without looking – who I've been with longer than anyone I've been with in the past. He gave me the gold, Mariner chain necklace that looked just like the picture I glued down, a complete match even down to the black V-neck T-shirt that I was wearing the day he gifted it to me. I started eating better. I also got the white house. I'm renting a room out of it for now, but I got to live there all the same.

I have new things on my dream board now. I'm updating my vision board quickly as well. Some items take longer to work towards than others.

When it's in my face – what I'm working toward, what I want – my life becomes exciting. I have a lot to talk about and feel good about when I'm with people.

I can share my desires and dreams with people in conversation because I've taken the time to articulate what they are. I meet my need for self-esteem and self-actualization with people. I can share my heart in a new way – yet again.

I have a lot to talk about, regarding my life, clearly.

“I want __, __, __, and __.”

The remarkable thing is that when you go into the world talking about what you want, people will help you get there because they want to. People are out there who love you. It's a fact that you will discover for yourself in the next step 7. People want to be a part of your passion for life.

As you become the kid you always were and open your heart to what I used to dream, you may find yourself acting like the kid you once were. I doubt he'll seem childish because you've done all of these steps before. You'll seem childlike because you believe. You'll be more inclined to play with others.

As my inner child, I work to myself. I also make time to play with other people.

I still like going dancing at dance clubs.

My inner child is happy on the dance floor with strobe lights – drunk with being tired and up past his bedtime of course.

The One Gay Guy in the Bible and the First African Follower of Jesus

Do you dream of doing something great and inspiring with your life to help people?

I wanted to close this chapter by celebrating the story of the one featured individual in the Bible who I think might have been gay – the Ethiopian eunuch. I believe gay people who follow Jesus are going to become more and more important these days. The world needs help through hope. I believe this story is in the Bible to inspire Christian gay people to make the most of their happy lives.

Do you think that the Ethiopian eunuch remained single forever?

Perhaps he did, or perhaps he didn't.

Is it likely he found love? It's certainly possible. There are no details recorded beyond this single encounter.

God works through people. I love how God reached out and sent an apostle to a specific foreigner who was heading back out of town – back into the desert. God used the Ethiopian eunuch! There is no other account of the message of Jesus going into Africa. It's interesting that this passionate man remains nameless as well, as if his being both African and a eunuch is especially important for us to know:

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’ So, Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip, and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.’”

— Acts 8:26 to 39

Did the Ethiopian eunuch become a pastor? He seems to be the only recorded way for the Good News of Jesus to get to Africa. He worked for a rich lady. He sounds like a gay man to me. Who knows these things, and, yes, this is purely conjecture and going on a hunch. The story is still a standout in the New Testament to me. The Ethiopian eunuch must have been an independent-minded guy to travel on his own internationally to take his faith seriously while an outsider of Israelite society. I can think of a lot of passionate outsiders today. I know them. They're real people

like you. It's so peculiar that both the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip were ready for God to use them abruptly.

How many times do you think the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to know more about what he was searching for? How long do you think he had to search before he finally found someone who knew what they were talking about? How many people shut him out and pushed him away? He was in Jerusalem, after all, a populated city. He didn't belong there.

He did belong as a follower of Jesus. God made sure he found what he needed.

I find this to be such an encouraging story. He must have felt alone, and a friend came out of nowhere and helped him. Philip was willing to answer the call and be a friend. The Ethiopian eunuch was a dreamer, no doubt, or he would never have made the journey to the land of Israel.

Chapter 10: Step 7 – W – Wait to Hear God in Relationships

“Doing what you need to do helps other people do what they need to do.”

— A Friend

I would like to be Frida Kahlo’s client if I could. But she’s probably done with men, and the only other thing she would do is paint me a picture that I couldn’t afford. On top of that, she’s deceased as of 1954, born in Mexico and died in Mexico. I’ll just go with the wisdom I have from her now. I feel like Frida’s known for being intense, but I like to think of her artistry and life as authentic. She allegedly said this:

“I won’t ask you to do anything, not even be by my side forever. Because if I have to ask you, I don’t want it anymore.”

— Frida Kahlo

The context for this quote is when her heterosexual relationship – her enduring love relationship – had broken down. She speaks of love, and I think that it’s important to note, yet again, that love is a gift. There is no obligation in acts of love. Loving is a choice. People choose to love back. Seeking love is a misnomer because all you can do is put yourself out there and love people. If someone wants to love you back, they will. If they don’t want to love you, they won’t. If you keep your lighthouse light on, I believe that the right people will come forward as you love yourself first.

Congratulations, you’ve been loving yourself through the first six steps. You’re well on your way to finding the love you need to thrive.

As I was talking to a friend about this quote, I realized that even though love itself is a gift – and that all acts of love are also gifts – I believe that as trust increases there are new possibilities.

Do you know any long-term married couples and lovers who ask for what they need of one another? I do.

I said in a past chapter that there is a difference between a gesture of love and asking for a favor. Most people go out into the social world, whether in dating or new friendship, by asking for a favor.

“Would you do me a favor? Please love me for life.”

It’s no wonder that most dating doesn’t go great. The favor that most people end up getting is quick sex or something else material. If they don’t get either of those, they express anger and

nastiness. If they do get these things, they remain stuck in the endless cycle of asking for more favors thinking that they have found love. I don't want that to be you.

You want to find the love you need to thrive.

I think that there has to be an established and trusted love connection where people give to one another freely. Both people – or a person and God per the previous steps – need to learn to respect this consistent free-giving behavior in the relationship. Then it's safe to ask for what you need and want with no strings attached. The bond of love is there already. I don't quite agree with Ms. Kahlo on this one in the context of mature, loving relationships. I think it's possible to ask safely for what you want while you maintain those love relationships you need for a happy life. Nonetheless, Frida wasn't speaking from that place of a healthy, mature love relationship. She spoke from a place of heartbreak. I'll honor the quote as she spoke it. For the end of old love, new dating, and new friendship, you can't ask for love. Favors are not love. Thank you, Frida!

I want you, my reader, to find and build mature love so that when you express what you need, it won't come across as a favor. No one will feel the need to perform an exchange of services if there is confidence that neither of you think of the other person that way. You'll learn to love first without asking and without expectations. In the final step, you'll be in a place where you have safe people who love you. You can voice what you need. No favors, only love. You need people who want to give freely.

Loving Clients as a One-Way Street: You Have Needy People, Too

There is no judgment. It's important to see facts as they are. Some relationships are one-sided, and it's a gift to be able to help people. Quality relationships are the subject of this chapter because you need people to give you support, affirmation, and permission as you dream again and live out that life of your dreams.

One-sided relationships are not appropriate forms of quality relationships. They are a different category of relationship entirely: meaningful work.

Do you think I like all my clients?

Are you scared I'll say, no?

I love all my clients.

Don't be afraid. I used to be afraid of people liking me or not liking me. It was because I felt afraid they would discover that I didn't like myself. If I didn't like myself, I needed other

people to like me to make up for the difference. Unfortunately, other people can never make you love yourself the way you need in order to feel high self-esteem, high self-confidence, and invaluable to the world around you. That's your job, and that's why you've done all of these prior steps. You're choose to do what you need to do.

That's the way self-love works. I have to prioritize never deserting myself – my heart – and never deserting Little Carter – my inner child. Then I don't need other people to like me, and I'm not starving for attention and love.

I am happiness and peace. My mind is a separate construct that is not part of me. My thoughts operate in the front of my mind, and I don't fixate on them. My thoughts are like running water. The river rocks are the true creek and lie underneath. The water runs over it. My emotions act the same as that flow of thoughts. Sometimes there are nice glints of sunlight on the water, and sometimes it's crummy leaf-goop that gets stuck between the surfaces of the pebbles that I would like for people to see. My beauty gets covered up by my persistently fearful thoughts and feelings. You know how to deal with this already from prior steps.

The grossest of all my leaf-goop is anxiety that spills out on people. My chakra healer, Heather, recently reprimanded me rather bluntly and sternly when I had had a hard week. I felt for sure she was going to coddle me in some way. She didn't though.

Tuesday, I called: anxiety spillage.

Thursday, I saw her in person: I had straightened up, but she had more to say.

"I don't deal in anxiety," she told me.

Then she continued to tell me harsh truths about life.

"Isn't this what you wanted? No is a word that you need to get used to hearing. Harsh criticism is something you need to get used to hearing. You need to develop thick skin and resilience."

I used to be extremely sensitive because I felt so scared that I wasn't loved. What love I did have, I feared would be taken away once I stopped pleasing people. Now I am resilient and feel thick-skinned because I commit to believing that I am. I choose to believe and take actions as such a person. I choose to think thoughts like this, and I get more mentally strong every day I choose to do what I need to do:

"I am resilient and thick skinned. I am thinking a new way. I get better at thinking stronger the more I do this. I am strong. I am well. I am happy. I am finite, and God's power fills me. He

takes care of everything when I let go. I perform best and live happiest when I let go of everything into His care. I believe that I'm loved and connected with God in friendship. I believe I'm loved more than any displeasure of the people around me. No one can hurt me unless I give them the power to do so."

I continue thinking thoughts like this actively, speaking aloud. This is why prayer can take up a lot of time. You spend time practicing, and you get better. At some point, I do feel calmer and more confident. Honesty is key to thinking well and having it change your emotional state.

I like myself. I like the person I am: happiness and peace. I like myself.

Take Responsibility for Your Own Happiness: Bringing Past Step-Work Forward

I believe that as you get better at identifying yourself as happiness and peace, that you will like yourself, too. You'll go beyond liking to being in awe at how much you enjoy life and how much serenity you have to give other people when you're available for yourself first. You choose to show up for yourself first – daily and moment to moment. You check in with how you feel because you respect your feelings. Your feelings tell you about the reality of your experience.

You're not latching onto thoughts racing.

You're not latching onto negative feelings as they come by.

You're not latching onto memories that surface.

You return to primary happiness and peace. You return always. It's just a matter of time.

Traumatic memories, I thought, were me. I've had to realize that they have shaped me just like the water carves out the riverbed. I've grieved losing so much of what used to feel like me. But that violent current of water isn't me. The flow of life just created a new, polished surface that is beautiful and unique.

Nothing painful, nothing that arouses fear, and nothing that stirs up anger in me is part of me. It eventually washes away, especially when I take active measures to give it away as I have in the previous steps. You've done the same. You're separating yourself from the current of life more and more by the day.

This is the main step where you take your work out into the world. Wait to Hear God in Relationships is a big step because the client in this story gets on my nerves. He has taken this

staying and leaving concept to the extreme – to where I get the sense that he’s trying to use it as a power move.

Let’s recall your issue, the one I’m helping you with:

“Should I stay with intolerant family and church or leave to find God’s love and a happy gay life?”

Staying to appease and please is not a long-term option. That’s based in fear.

Leaving as a threat to the people who are intolerant is not what I am teaching you either. That’s based in fear.

Breaking up with your boyfriend as a threat is not what this is about. That’s based in fear.

I’m not about fear here.

I had to direct Diego – when he broke up with his boyfriend abruptly – to consider the reason why more closely. Both people respected each other. My client had several deep fears in the last step to deal with when he attempted at opening his heart to what he used to dream.

He had long-term fears that kept him from progressing in his career and a life of freedom. He confronted those fears and seemed to move forward. Go Diego!

Are you going to bring your past issues into your relationships with others? You’ve dealt with them. You know what to do. Keep doing it.

You Can Trust Yourself in New Love Relationships: Respect Other People’s Things

In this step, Diego decided to invade his boyfriend’s life and obliterate boundaries of respect. He reached out to his boyfriend’s non-affirming, anti-gay parents in an attempt to make them understand. It seemed noble on the surface. Diego wanted to express the deep love he had for their son. But the good deed was selfish and about Diego getting to say what he wanted to say, not about his man who trusted him – in short, impulsive.

As I’ve gotten to know Diego’s boyfriend, I know that he’s done his best to forgive his parents by holding only positive feelings towards them. His parents have not tolerated honest conversation for about a decade at this point, and that makes reconciliation – building trust – nearly impossible. The next best option was firm boundaries of not speaking about personal life. That keeps the peace and protects all from being torn down. Diego’s boyfriend already knew he couldn’t

share his heart with his folks and feel acknowledged. Therefore, it feels painful. Pain hurts him. He's not ready to attempt more reconciliation. Diego had to learn that he couldn't control the response of his boyfriend's parents either. Now he accepts that.

"I'm in a positive relationship with my parents where I don't talk to them, and they don't talk to me." Diego's boyfriend said, "They and I have no ill feelings towards one another, but there's no heartfelt sharing. The conversation can only tend towards opinionated argument and disagreement. They don't want to hear about my feelings, thoughts, and needs."

There's nothing for Diego's boyfriend to do. Why would Diego then go and do something impulsive that could stir up more trouble?

Diego had good intentions.

He was wrong that way, to go behind his boyfriend's back and think he could make something different happen. It's not his family, and it's not his business. My client could have asked if he wanted to speak to his boyfriend's parents. But he didn't.

You must respect other people's things. They have no option but to raise their boundaries and love you less. If you disrespect people, you make it impossible for them to give you love safely. Do you want love? Respect people's things.

When the boyfriend came to speak in person, Diego became argumentative and defensive. Diego decided to break up then and there because of reasons that he didn't want to tell me clearly.

"Meh, pride, stubbornness, embarrassment, sadness that he could lose his loved one for the hurt he caused. He ripped open an old wound." I thought. I already knew.

Diego said something like his boyfriend – the injured party – was intending to hurt him back. All his boyfriend seemed to say was that it wasn't any of my client's business to talk to his parents behind his back.

As you can see, my client is currently working this step of Wait to Hear God in Relationships. There was no waiting in this story. It's been a bumpy road.

Wait to Listen for Direction: The Sacred Pause Revisited

I know from experience that it doesn't work so well when I come up with a plan. Then I independently try to navigate confusing interpersonal relationships. I tend to lose focus and get upset when I'm on my own and disconnected – stuck in my head.

You heard me talk about The Sacred Pause once before in a previous step. Let's apply it to dealing with real, live people out in the wild. This is a concept that I learned from twelve-step that comes mostly from Al-Anon. Give yourself five seconds before taking action to reflect on God. Breathe. Establish some distance from the issue at hand before making a decision. It allows for God to come into the situation and relieve stress. I also called it Letting Go last time I talked about this.

I have no way of knowing where Diego was mentally when he made the decision to break up with his boyfriend. But his boyfriend didn't do anything wrong.

I hope they get back together because I believe they love each other. I think they both understand the concept of forgiveness and reconciliation enough to where they can make a mature, loving relationship work if they want it. I know they both want love. People hurt each other in relationships. What's essential is to reflect on God and give one's heart back to God again – per your prior steps and in the pattern of giving away your angers and fears inventory. No matter what happens, God is big enough to cover your mistakes. He'll help you navigate situations with other people you love.

Continue to give your heart to God: what you feel, what you think, what you need, and even what you want. Need is what brings people together in relationships. You want to meet your needs.

Why Amends Don't Happen: Wanting Misery versus Wanting Happiness

Unfortunately, a lot of relationship conflict comes down to wanting to be right versus wanting to be happy. People who insist on suffering are suffering because they want to. They insist on focusing on what they don't want, and so that's what they see. If people focused on what they did want, then instead of focusing on being right:

“They owe me this,” or “They owe me that.”

In this situation, instead, they would focus on what would make them happy. They would find it.

I believe Diego needs to tell his boyfriend that he was wrong, give an honest amends, and that would be it. Let's reconcile already.

I can't make my clients do anything. You cannot control anyone either. I strive to remain a person who never pushes anyone to do anything either. I will speak from my experience and say:

"This is what I have done in the past. Do you think you should do something similar? Why or why not?"

Diego has gotten a lot better about waiting for God in his relationships. Usually, for him and everyone really, it's anger that gets in the way of letting go and giving one's heart to God to ask the most important question:

"God, what would you have me do right now?" That is The Sacred Pause.

If it's not anger or fear that's blocking a person from doing the next right thing, I still think it's fear-based, but it comes down to unwillingness to say the words:

"I was wrong."

Diego wants to be right. He wants to remain miserable. He can't be right, and only he can accept this. He does not want to say, "I was wrong." Diego wants to be right more than being happy. These words are an essential part of making a good amends, which we discussed in step 4. Until he says these humble words, "I was wrong for __," I don't think they'll be getting back together. You have to respect people's things so that it's safe for them to love you freely.

This story about my client is essentially about making an amends, and as you enter into this new life, I think that you'll find that amends are one of the first types of situations you'll find yourself in. You're waiting to hear God in order to do what's better for the other person.

Perhaps you're not like me. I had a ton of relationships to clean up, and I thought I was done in step 4. However, I'm an imperfect human being and I still make mistakes. I still need to make quick amends going forward. I accept I'm imperfect. If people love me, there's nothing to fear. You are imperfect, too.

After amends, is there still a place for this Wait to Hear God in Relationships principle?

Absolutely, there is.

Waiting for God in Your Relationship to Yourself

Waiting to hear God in your relationships starts with waiting to hear God in your relationship to yourself. God has your heart if you gave it to Him: your feelings, the thoughts prompting your feelings, and your needs. That's steps 1 and 2. This is an ongoing, daily process.

If God has this, then he's in touch with you at a core level. This allows you in a situation with a human being to act marginally sane versus freaking out or remaining indecisive. You are your biggest enemy, which you already know. That's not to shame anyone. It's a reminder that you'll never have the relationship or friendship of your dreams if you don't deal with your stuff. You won't have a heart to give.

Go out into the world now. Maybe you're reflecting on your terse relationship to an organization like a church or school. Maybe you have the opportunity to get a new pet. Maybe you have a choice for eating out versus eating in. Maybe you want the perfect wine selection. Maybe you're embarking on the all-important event of getting *another* drink at the dance club. Whatever it may be, waiting to hear God in relationship to yourself is an essential, non-stop conversation in your life that allows you to remain in-touch with reality and not make impulsive decisions.

This is the antidote for being stuck in your head. This is the antidote for circular thinking. This is the antidote for wanting to run away. If you're stuck in a dark cloud, try talking to God per step 3 and come back here.

Waiting to Hear God in Relationships also allows for peace because you have affirmation outside yourself from another – who is not a human being and not finite. He doesn't get tired and is always there. You don't have to protect yourself because He will hold your concerns in His care. I don't have to fear I'll piss Him off, either. He and I enjoy a quality relationship and understand my limitations. Recall that I can never seek approval from another human being – only from myself and God. Otherwise, I'll always be at the mercy of someone else. I'll always fear not getting approval. I won't be free to act. I will be stuck in angst. I won't feel like I have the love I need to thrive.

You must choose to give your angst away in the ways we have learned in previous steps, to God and others. Otherwise, you will stay stuck. You'll feel stuck again because every day is a new day. It's okay as long as you have reasonable expectations for the work it takes to maintain a happy life. Accept the work. Do it if you want to be happy.

God speaks within your relationship to yourself. It's an ongoing relationship as you give your burdens away. God needs glory as a Person with needs, and He wants to receive what you deem to be your garbage. He wants to help you. He enjoys taking the trash out. His ability to help you is His glory.

When you speak to yourself, you must continue respecting your things – just like you respect other people’s things. You want to feel loved. Respect yourself by dealing with your stuff per the previous steps as anger and fear comes up. You want others to love you back. You respect the hell out of people and give them the benefit of the doubt. You recognize their limitations and accept them. That’s the closest you can get to winning love. Love is a free gift, but you remove your issues that in the way of receiving the gift.

If you don’t respect yourself by honoring your feelings, thoughts, and needs as you go out into the world in this step, you won’t feel safe to love yourself. You won’t receive your own love for yourself. I believe you’re speaking to your heart and to your inner child when you choose to respect yourself and your limitations. This is that Holy Triangle I mentioned early on: God, my heart, and my inner child. In all of my step work up until this point, I now see a distinct image of myself that came back to me from when I was younger than the age of nine – before I was aware of the fears of life. I was a unique, unstained, free person who fully enjoyed living. I didn’t know fear. My brain probably hadn’t developed in the prefrontal cortex to have awareness of the risks of life. That’s neurology class, which I only remember as a blur from medical school. I think that’s right though.

My inner child was happiness and peace. That’s the person I talk to when referring to myself in saying:

“How are you doing, Little Carter?”

He just looks at me and bobs around in his winsome, wordless way.

I know how Little Carter looks. I know how he responds. I know how he lights up. I know what words he likes to be told. I know how he likes me to relate to him. Can you see your inner child and how he scurries through the world?

The Inner Child Sketch

At this point, I want to propose another exercise for you. Create an Inner Child Sketch of yourself.

What do you look like before the age of nine?

How do you feel?

What do you believe about yourself?

What do you do before you ever became aware of the concerns of life and developed fears?

How do you respond to the fears of other people as you learned to fear them, too?

How can you approach your Little Self in a reassuring manner to ease those fears and comfort your Little Self? You now have your past step work as tools to protect yourself from angst.

What image, words, sounds, and feelings come to you as you choose willingness to stand by your Little Self to defend, shield, and comfort him?

Do you choose never to desert your Little Self again?

I know that my Little Carter felt afraid that I had forgotten about him. He is a gentle, sensitive child. He needs my adult maturity and faith to protect his innocent essence. He needs me to entertain him, play with him, muse with him, and encourage him to imagine so that he feels safe enough to dance around freely again. I feel like a genius and fully like myself when I'm so centered that I can see my Little Carter enjoying life. He gives me ideas for what I like. I know how to play again.

With Diego, I was watching a quinceañera video last night of his niece, whose dances he had choreographed. I realized that somewhere along the way, I had felt dry emptiness and cynicism, a painful dread in social gatherings. I preferred movies, practicing piano, and fantasies as an escape. When I stood with Little Carter in this moment, he wanted to join in this party event I watched on the TV. Little Carter has no concept of time, social anxiety, or criticism of his body and how he moves. He is pure joy, and fully free. If I create a safe space and stand with Little Carter, he will come out and redeem these situations. I dare to love real life as much as I once did as a child.

If you're an artist, you can draw your Little Self. You can journal about your Little Self. I like to converse on the page, writing a dialogue between myself and my Little Carter. I write in a stream of consciousness manner in the journal, and the most profound interactions occur when I don't judge anything. I just enjoy his presence. I come back to the transcription later and accept it for what it is. I believe in the real Little Me inside. He'll never go away because he's the most authentic core of Big Carter.

If you love meditating, I recommend visualizing yourself and seeing yourself. I do pray with God and converse with Little Carter in such a way, by seeing them as if they were real because I choose to have faith that they are. I see confirmation that my Friend as God and Little Carter are indeed there. Visualization may be the most powerful way of connecting to the truth of your experience.

God belongs in the conversation between Big Carter and Little Carter, too. It's a three-way conversation.

God is a Person. He will always provide input if you let him into your life with humility by giving Him your heart and bringing him into your most vulnerable and intimate self. The more you do this, the more specific and higher-quality God's input can be. It's like any other quality relationship with another person. People can talk to you about you when you show them yourself. God will build you up because you will do good things for yourself when you heed God as He speaks to you. The more you do good things for yourself, the more you build yourself up. The more you follow through on doing what you want to do, the more you'll see that you want. You'll have an increased appetite for life. The more you build yourself up, the more qualified you are to go out with daring and stand up for yourself and never desert yourself.

God is the one who is the Power behind all of this progress into your happy life. You surrender to God. You invite God in. God remains with you and your inner child. If your inner child feels happy and safe, you will feel happy and safe.

Once that mature, loving relationship dynamic is established – which happens in an instant and become a life-long project – you're well on your way to taking this three-way conversation between you as an adult with your heart, your inner child, and then God out into interactions with other people.

Bring Good People and New Things into Your Happy Life

You start with a simple question that you may have forgotten from earlier steps. Whenever you approach a new person or thing in relationship, it's essential to ask:

“What builds me up?”

You know how to determine what meets your needs. You know that your feelings are intelligent. If you feel happiness or joy, this new encounter builds you up. If you feel anger or fear, there is reason to pause and analyze what specific need remains unmet. It's possible that the fear is within, and you deal with it so that you don't push a good thing away. It's also possible that the fear comes from outside as a warning that this will hurt you. It may be wise to raise that high boundary to love yourself first. You don't need anything external to be happy, and you are free to choose who comes in and who does not.

Here are some other examples. Consider your relationship to a food, which builds you up or perhaps tears you down. Taco Bell has always been on the fence for me. It's so fun, and I also know that too much of a good thing won't stay a good thing. What about your relationship to a vacation? Does this choice or that choice of destination build you up more? How does it feel? You're very intelligent, much more intelligent than your active mind. Your active, thinking mind – as we've talked about – is an illusion in fact. If you stop thinking, you don't cease to exist. If you stop thinking, you still feel. Respect the hell out of your feelings. Develop curiosity for how much they reveal to you. Consider your relationship to movies that build you up or tear you down. Sometimes horror movies are wonderful. Sometimes they're a bad thing for me. Consider relationship to people, who might feel a little scary as strangers at first. You discern that this is a fear to surrender to God. Give a tiny piece of your heart and see what happens. Do you feel built up by this new person? Perhaps you have a new friend.

The more you practice this skill of waiting to hear God in your relationships, the more you'll feel at peace. It feels like waiting for an awkward period of time at first. On some days for me, hearing God is not clear. Those are the days I know that God is teaching me faith.

On other days, it's extremely clear. I'll be in a conversation with another person, and I feel like the words are fed to me. I know what to say to the person, and I also know if it's safe and builds me up. I feel secure to share a little more of my heart with this person to establish a little bit more trust and vulnerability.

Life, ironically, is about waiting. Waiting is enjoyable if you play along the way. It's a humble place to be waiting. But it's also a safe place because you're waiting on someone you trust, God as a Person. While you're waiting, you're freed up to listen, to have fun, and to enjoy life. I believe that you will find a comfortable lane that you live in on a day-to-day basis where you feel locked in and propped up by God as happy and peaceful.

Any other feelings and thoughts that deviate you from happiness and peacefulness will fall away. You'll return to happiness and peace because that's the glory you were created for.

Waiting to Hear God through Obstacles

Waiting is the path forward. While you're waiting for direction, enjoy the people and things around you. There are always little snags in life. When it comes to waiting, one of the primary snags that has tested my faith has been not hearing God the same way, when I want to hear Him,

or not at all. It's in those times that I choose to believe He's there. Then I take the actions of someone who believes He's there by doing any number of things.

What would you do if you believed God as a Personal Friend was there?

What would you do if you believed He would speak to you in just a moment?

Well, what do you do when you sit in front of a person and you're waiting for them to speak? Perhaps you speak to them. Perhaps you ask them how they're doing. Perhaps you thank them for coming. Perhaps you make a plan and ask them to come along.

It's not about doing something to get something in return. You learned in a past chapter that an exchange is not an act of love. You don't want favors. You want love. You cannot grasp at control and create a business transaction where you win in the quest of getting the feedback from God that you want. You will only find fear.

Loving God – in terms of waiting for Him to speak – means that you gained enough familiarity with this person that you know how He is. You know that He'll do exactly what is best for you, even if it's frustrating that you don't have the clear word exactly that you would like. You can rest assured that this is exactly what you need right now.

Everything is exactly as it should be.

Perhaps you have exactly what you need to speak to the humans around you.

The simple point is that God is there, and that God speaks. God gives you good things. God is not a terrorist. It's your job is to walk in the direction of your dreams. It's His job where you arrive.

Advanced Christian Doctrine, God's Personal Involvement in Your Life, and Ongoing Reservations about Trusting

I grew up in Reformed Christianity, a division of Protestantism that makes the effort to return to uncompromising positions on beliefs about God and the Bible. These beliefs originate from the Protestant Reformation where Martin Luther led a movement to separate from the Roman Catholic Church in 1517. Because these people protested an established, imperfect human institution, the group became known as the Protestants. Despite my own ideas about God as a Person, I feel grateful for the religious education I received. Now I'm humble and secure enough to criticize it if I need to. I'm not scared to consider that imperfect people developed these

interpretations of the Bible, even if the ideas are very intelligent. After all, they protested and left the imperfect church where they came from. They should expect to be protested themselves. That's who they are in their faith tradition.

I mention my faith background again because you're taking your personal relationship with God into your real life. You have skin in the game now. I have not addressed a common concern within the Christian person's psyche.

"Do you believe in predestination?" I ask.

Predestination is "God's most holy, wise, powerful, preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions." I quote the Shorter Catechism that I memorized when I was twelve. Basically, God has a plan for every single detail that happens in our world according to this idea. I used to feel afraid to say, "No, I don't believe in predestination." It's not that I want to say, "No." I just want to be able to say whatever I need to say without fear.

Now you can, too.

Predestination is a topic that a lot of Christians disagree on. It's not essential to following Jesus in personal relationship. Don't worry.

I don't claim predestination to be right or wrong. The primary objection people have to predestination is that it seems on the surface to take away their free will. If God has already planned everything, then how could you have the freedom to act independently? We're done talking technically. You can put the theological textbook down for a while and rest assured that you've given it the thought you need to for now.

Now let's talk in terms of common sense. Let's say there is a God who is All-Powerful. You don't have to believe it. Let's just consider the idea.

Now let's consider a God who knows you personally and one that you can know personally: a mutual friendship. As two persons in this relationship, there are needs on both sides. Needs bring relationships together. I said before that I believe God is a Person needs glory. You can value Him like a Person who can take away your burdens to be happy. You can value Him for far more, I would imagine. That's your business. It's your relationship with God to pursue.

I think that God needs glory, not in a shallow or vain way. The nature of God is that He would be worshipped. I give Him glory. If I don't support His needs, He will find someone who will – just like I do in my search for quality relationships. I need to have my five primary needs

met: physiological, safety and security, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. You learned about your needs in step 1.

It's a balanced friendship, I think. I support his need for glory. He supports my human needs. I'm pretty sure that I didn't find my needs met at church. That's why I felt like it wouldn't stick. If I want to go back to church, then I need to know what my needs are so that I can allow church to help me. Perhaps I'll find ways of serving to meet others' needs. That's the final step 8.

God isn't about forcing you to do things, go places, and be around people that don't meet any of your needs. He's kind. He knows you. He gives to all of your needs if you ask for what you want. It's up to you to ask God what He would have you do today. He'll lead you where you need to go.

That's why I seek to do His will – what He would have me do in a situation – to give Him glory. It's a gift to do anything morally right that would please God within our relationship. I seek to build God up and build people up. It's a gift. There's no law, no bondage, no obligation. It's a gift of love like giving your loved one a flower from your morning walk in a field.

I mentioned predestination because a lot of people where I come from derive comfort from the idea that God has already worked out all the details of life. There's no chaos in God's eyes.

The point is not to debate this idea. I care about asking you this:

“How does an all-powerful, all-knowing God who knows you as a Friend impact you personally?”

Idea you can throw out if you want to: God has made a plan for all people, all animals, all leaves, all pebbles, all water, all thoughts, all emotions, all needs. Every intent and action are planned out.

Perhaps God has ordained my life. I think it's more helpful to focus on the relationship perspective between you and God. He knows you and can predict with infinite knowledge what choices you'll make. It's not about controlling you. In the same way, spouses gain increased familiarity with one another and can know what they'll say before they say it. When you become more intimate with God and people, you'll know them in a familiarity way. You'll know what to expect from them because you have spent time with them.

That's how I reconcile the seeming paradox of predestination – God having a plan – and my own free will – me having choices. God is in relationship with me. He's familiar. To the same degree He knows me and knows what I'll do, so also I can gain that familiarity of Him. I can know

to some great degree what He will do and what He will sound like when He talks to me. I recognize the sound of His Voice, in reference to Jesus's words about being the Good Shepherd.

As you wait to hear God in relationships, I think that you will find your pattern of conversation with God. If there's no space in your busy mind, it's worth fixing that problem for yourself so that you can make space to listen. My recommendation is to meditate as you learned in the previous step 6.

Talk to God.

"What is the next right thing to do?"

I believe you will become more aware to observe people around you. You'll observe needs. You may even be compelled to go talk to people, depending on what your gifts are. I would go talk to different people. You would go talk to different people from me. That's a good thing.

If you're out in nature, I think you'll be compelled to go observe something more closely, to find curiosity in it. God can speak to you through an autumn leaf.

None of this is from exerting your willpower. This is all from a place of joy and from getting your power from elsewhere. God needs your glory. You need His love.

Life is about waiting, and waiting is good.

Chapter 11: Step 8 – S – Serve through Loving without Agreeing

"If you don't love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an 'Amen' up in here?"

— Ru Paul

“Two cigarettes a day keeps the doctor away.”

There's my dark humor for you.

It's my response to feeling deep hurt, anger, sadness, and overwhelming emotions. Yes, it's step 8 – the final step – and I'm still a human being with problems. I deal with them as a discipline of happiness every day.

Yes, I know smoking is bad for your health. No, I am not a medical practitioner. Yes, everyone is doing their best. Yes, you're safe here to be a mess. No, I never tell my clients what to do – except that if you want to be happy you have to do the work. That's my version of a safe space. Yes, I show them the way I know.

I make it as safe as possible to make new decisions.

Developing the Discipline of Happiness

I have a confession to make. The client, Diego, from the last chapter was my boyfriend, Gallagher. You met Gal back in chapter 3 and heard about our issues in chapter 7. I have to keep it interesting, and truly, Gal has changed so much that he says his old self is gone. I've seen it. He deserves a new name for this chapter. It's fitting that I refer to him as a separate person entirely.

Gal underwent that full metamorphosis that you're going through. You're about to exit as a happy butterfly! I see it!

As I write this chapter, I'll leave you hanging for fun. I don't know if he and I will get back together. Oh no!

He went and talked to my parents – who I have a hard boundary of not speaking with – behind my back. I had never introduced them. He didn't have their contact information. He didn't have a right to do that. He fished it up from somewhere.

The futility of connecting with my parents for reconciliation on a heart-level and getting past disagreement is what prompted this entire journey for me. I conclude your journey with this

step of Serve through Loving without Agreeing because I had to develop this muscle in order to maintain healthy boundaries for myself while also keeping hope for the future. I'm not willing to write anyone off.

Despite hurt I may experience, my grief through accepting reality has directed me forward towards my path to happiness that I believe you can follow, too. I am that riverbed that's carved out by my emotions and thoughts. The water runs every day. To some people, the river looks smooth. If you look deep, though, you'll see that the riverbed is rough and torn out. I am the riverbed, and I am beautiful.

I am happiness and peace.

I have come to peace with the fact that God has planned out how He will shape me in this imperfect world. I also believe that I have complete free will within my personal relationship to Him.

As I started out saying in this book:

"I don't claim to be right. I don't claim other people are wrong. I only claim what I believe and find confirmation to be true based on my experience."

I'm a scientist of non-objective life experience. I collect real data that I can't quantify in numbers. My readings come back as happiness, joy, and peace. I know I'm on the right track.

People who remain closed-minded and feel threatened by me when I speak suffer a loss. It's their loss. My loving is good. I have a tremendous amount of value to offer the world.

I show up and open my heart where I'm welcome.

I also can close my heart to other people and still show up where I'm not welcome. It just takes a lot of energy to be around unsupportive, non-affirming, and non-permissive people. If God leads me to go places where there is antagonism, I can choose how I feel. I have the power to choose what I believe. In a stressful situation, I can believe I am loved stronger than other people's desire to make me feel the opposite.

I don't think most people are malicious. I think most people are slaves to their fear and their anger, and they insist on staying in ignorance because they don't hurt enough yet. Once the pain of anger and fear rises beyond what they can bear, then they'll listen to others.

Today, I am my own client as I go out feeling rather heartbroken, and my job is to serve every day – whatever I go through – by loving without agreeing. As I get better at working this

step, which is the culmination of all of these steps, I have learned to start my day by resting in the fact that I am peace and happiness. In God, there is no fear.

Any thoughts or feelings that would deflect my path from peace and happiness, they are just part of the imperfection of this world. They will – with God’s help – be lifted and roll away like water in a river.

I don’t judge my feelings. I value them instead and respect them for what they tell me: my thoughts and my needs. I feel them and maintain my belief that God loves me. I take the actions of love towards God by conversing with Him as if I were a person He loved. I take the actions of love as if I believed. I do believe. I act.

I also don’t judge my decisions. I speak to God in the moment, and I make decisions as best I can with humility by giving my heart to God. I keep finding that listening to God’s recommendation for the next right thing ends up producing the outcome that gives me the most happiness. God’s way is better than my way. Who am I to judge His way? Rarely is there a decision that I have made where I regretted it when I ran it by God first. Staying in a place of happiness and peace, bound up in God, I feel secure in my decisions. I’m able to ask myself this:

“Am I aware?”

Taking that Sacred Pause from the last chapter allows me to be aware of the people and facts of the situation. I get space from my thoughts and space from my emotions. I allow God to be there, and He provides His input. My inner child is there as well. Without words, Little Carter provides his input so that I act true to myself with God’s feedback.

The other two elements of loving without agreeing are the following:

1. Do not judge other people’s feelings. Accept their feelings for what they are and believe them.
2. Do not judge other people’s decisions. Right now, this one is a tough pill to swallow.

I pulled up in my car around midnight to Gallagher’s house where he lives with his two sisters Phoebe and Filipa. He was moping there and said, “I couldn’t sleep and wanted to be honest that I already talked with your dad and brother.”

“Alright, you wanna reach out to my folks with whom I have a firm boundary? I don’t give any energy to them. This is all your idea. It’s not mine. You broke a tremendous amount of trust with me, and I have no way of knowing what you’ll decide to do next. The only way you can make

this particular situation right is by finishing the job. Go knock on their door. Go talk to them in person. Tell them what you want to tell them. I'll respect that for what it is. At you have balls. You can confront people. It doesn't correct the situation. It doesn't correct my trust. But at least I'll respect the fact that you followed through on your conscience. It's not for you to decide what is right for what is mine. That's between God and me."

Gal has built a lot of trust with me. This was a challenging situation for me to be in. I don't give up power easily. God has shaped me to where I give my power to Him as best I can every day and ask him:

"What's the next right move for me?"

The following night, Gallagher went knocking on my parent's door. I double-checked with my youngest brother to make sure the parents were home. I frankly don't know how it went down. I told him, "Look, Gallagher, my boundary stands. I don't give any energy to my folks, and I also don't give energy to them even if it's through a loved one like you. I don't want to hear anything about it. All you did was prove that you can finish it, show up, and confront people in person. Now I'm blocking you on my phone."

As I wait to hear God in my relationship to Gallagher, I discern that his relationship to me tears me down.

Moveable Boundaries: Managing Your Life of Happiness

It's not rocket science. With less trust, the boundary goes up. More boundary means less intimacy. Less intimacy becomes necessary when people don't support your needs. In this case, my primary deficient need became the need for safety and security. I had to meet this need myself because I love myself first. I set a high boundary by blocking Gal for about a week. I control when I talk to people. I control when I let them in. Your boundaries are you own. You don't seek anyone's approval.

Using the pattern of "not judging" for step eight, let's work through this.

I don't judge Gal for his feelings or his decisions. I see thoughts flow by that would judge his value as a human being. That's a completely normal response. I choose to actively think thoughts that value him as a person and give him the benefit of the doubt. I want to forgive and have positive feelings as quickly as possible. I want to think about his positive intent because that's the basis for the highest quality, mature, and loving relationship you can build.

Who knows how this will turn out? Perhaps he will in some way earn back trust. I don't see a way based on how I feel right now. Just because I don't see a way doesn't mean it won't happen. Not seeing a way has not defined my survival or happiness in the past. I trust God with my heart, and I expect Him to lead me in a good way. God is a good Person to me.

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.”*

— Proverbs 3:5 to 6

For now, I have to respond faithfully by loving myself and loving God more than anyone else. Gallagher is largely out of my life.

Then there's the added fact that he acted completely insane:

“I'm ripping off the band-aid and am breaking up with you.”

That was his response when I asked him about his intentions because I was not okay with what he did. I did nothing wrong. But one thing I do know, he will own being wrong just like I do if he wants to be with me. Words are powerful, and they are not just words. They're your personal property. You better not leave dangerous words lying around that can damage what matters to you. If you say words that aren't okay, I'll probably bring it up to you and give you a chance to explain your intent. After that, you're either in or out. I have no time for not being happy anymore.

“Does it build me up or tear me down?”

I don't judge his feelings that prompted his actions. No doubt, he wanted to fix my family situation as much as I have for the last decade. At the same time, I also have to respond to his feeling to love myself. I was torn down. I have to protect myself.

Commit to Not Judging: A Dog Story

Talking about loving without agreeing might seem like an open-ended assignment to you. How do you implement rules of negatives? By that, I mean to ask how you implement these four negative rules?

Don't judge your feelings.

Don't judge your decisions.

Don't judge other people's feelings.

Don't judge other people's decisions.

How do you do something when you're told not to do it?

It's like being told to not think of a pink elephant. It's virtually impossible for your brain to do something constructive based solely on a negative. You need something affirmative to replace these negative rules, and then you'll get there.

As an illustration, I used to not like dogs much because I didn't understand them. During the writing of this book, God found me a place with a Siberian Husky named Kit. I can't think of a dog breed that would be more useful to break me in to knowing a lot about dogs. That dog required me to set boundaries: boundaries, boundaries, and boundaries.

I can tell you that Kit loved me a lot. I think it's partly because I set boundaries and loved him for heeding them. It had one – well, almost two boundaries but really just one.

He had one rule, "Don't come in my room."

Kit would act up everywhere, and its owner, Titus, didn't know how to train a dog. It's not like I do either, but I researched huskies. The dog would not jump on me and not come in my room. (Those were the two rules.)

Kit was annoying as hell otherwise – probably because he needed more exercise and space to play – but I learned a lot about the character of a dog, which is genuine. He just wants love and to please. Do dogs develop unresolved grief? I'm not sure. They can have traumatic memories that shape their future behavior. Unless a dog is wounded, he generally lives in the moment based on my experience. I'm not a dog psychologist. I think I do know this much, that Kit didn't think intellectually about what happened yesterday. He was much more focused on right now. That's why he was always happy.

Everything in life – no matter how great or how happy – needs boundaries, except God.

It was interesting to see how this dog would light up. I wouldn't judge Kit for his nature, which is seeking love. It took a while. I had to overcome my resentment at this dog that invaded my space when dear ole Titus wouldn't do anything about it. Once I accepted the facts of the situation, I loved Kit for who he was. I appreciated him. Then I set boundaries. I felt like I could see his heart light up.

Kit loved me very much.

“He is sad to see you move out,” said Titus. “Actually, you’re the best housemate I’ve ever had, and you’ve helped me change my life just by living here this summer while writing your book. I’ve made so many improvements.”

Wouldn’t that warm your heart? You would have loved Titus and Kit. In fact, I believe you do.

Test Quality Relationships: See If They Break

I suppose it’s time to implement one of my life hacks: try to break your quality relationships.

When you build trust in a quality relationship, it’s important to see how much it can take. I’m not saying to go and violate trust. Instead, I’m saying to test it for its maturity. See how much of your self-respect your friends and significant other can take. See how much space each relationship will create for your feelings, thoughts, and needs. Do it in a way of simply sharing your life. It’s not a conquest in a love relationship. Try trusting them.

That’s what a quality relationship is. It literally gives you quality back. If there’s nothing coming back, then it’s not a quality relationship. If there’s no trust, then it’s not a quality relationship.

The one way I see my relationship coming back with Gallagher, who I love much, is if I can trust him again. The truth of the matter is that I continue overcoming many fears around trusting people. I don’t trust easily. What builds trust with me is when I consistently see someone’s intent being positive to build me up.

Trusting isn’t safe. It’s a question of whether or not you trust someone’s intention and their ability to support, affirm, and give permission for you to meet your needs. Are you willing to let them try?

Ideally, I think the next level of maturity for me would be to trust other people’s judgment to the point that I let them take the reins. I need to trust them with what’s important in my life.

I accept the fact that my way of living my life is not the only happy way to live it. I know what works for me in my world of one. That is the life that I have constructed through working these steps for myself. As you implement this step in your growing quality relationships, you’ll find that other people’s methods can be very helpful to you. I’m joining my world to others now,

and now I have to bend to the people who love me. I have to trust them with my needs. It's an honor.

The Judgmentalism Inventory

The only way I know to be happy is to love myself without judging myself. The only way I know to be happy with other people is to love them without judging them either.

As you complete this step, I'd ask you to make a new type of inventory. However, don't sit down to do it. Carry your notebook with you through the day – or do it on your phone. It requires some practice to become aware of when you're tearing yourself down and when you're beating yourself up. I want you to spend a week on this. Daily, in the moment, pause when you sense you're beating yourself down. It feels like angst, and your head is spinning. You may not feel a specific emotion, but it's very negative: pinpoint which self-destructive thoughts you're seeing in your mind's eye.

“What feeling and what decision are you judging yourself for?”

Once you've done this for a week, ask if you feel in your heart that you've done a thorough job. If not, repeat the process for a second week.

Once you've completed this assignment of loving yourself without judgment, I want you to take the next week – or even two, however long it takes – and in the moment set out to humbly note when you're tearing someone else down. You feel negative when you judge people. That may come as a shock! You'll feel afraid, most likely, because when you judge, it's a certainty that judgment comes back to you. You're afraid of losing love. You feel fear. Note when you feel disgusted. Note when you feel angry. Note when you feel afraid of somebody.

Does someone else's anger make you want to shut it down?

Does someone else cutting in front of you in traffic make you want to get them back?

Does someone else, based on their appearance, make you want to laugh in a mocking way?

Does someone else, based upon their terribly annoying and opinionated nature, make you want to shut them up?

To be happy, there's no room for any of this as far as I have learned.

As you implement this step more, I think you'll find that it's a preferable way to live. When you love people, remember it's not about a transaction. You will, through experience, gain trust in how life works. You'll see for yourself that with your fundamental belief that you are happiness

and peace that you're effortlessly loving people without judgment because you're happy. Love will come back to you effortlessly as well.

Love may not come back directly through the immediate person you're loving. Other people are always watching. Other people are always feeling you: when you're in a room, on a computer, on your phone.

Even if you're not interacting with people, you're always indirectly interacting with yourself and with other people around you. Based upon how you interact with yourself and other people at all times, you are either tearing them all down or building them all up. People will feel something safe. They'll realize that it's safe to give to you, and they'll want to give to you.

One positive aspect of Gallagher's relationship to me is that he has taught me to show up and stand up authentically. He's the most admirable man I've ever known. He's also encouraged me to love people without judging them on a whole other level. When I first left home in 2016 – broken down after coming out and feeling suicidal – I was still a judgmental person coming from a judgmental community. I quickly realized that in my group of one, I was not going to survive out in the larger world by judging everyone.

I had a huge piece of humble pie.

The people that loved me the most, who showed me love and support first, were people I had grown up judging.

I choose not to feel bad about myself – past, present, and hopefully future – because I am happiness and peace. I don't judge what I do either. Even when I used to judge people and ridicule them in my mind, I don't judge my past self. I was doing the best I could.

Being in relationship with Gallagher – being out openly gay, socially, and happy – has had me show myself to the world in a new way. I'm with someone of a different ethnic background, race, socioeconomic status, and native language from mine. All of these visible differences were next level in me seeing for myself the power of loving without agreeing. I love without judgment. There is potential for love everywhere!

Loving without agreeing required huge growth from me. It wasn't possible to be happy unless I took the actions of loving people different from me. Those unkind thoughts would get in the way of me sharing my serenity with others and doing what God would have me do.

Holding Space for Hurtful People: Recognize Childlikeness versus Childishness

As I grow in the area of holding clear, moveable boundaries, I find myself wanting to have more mental strength to tolerate being around intolerant people. I want to be able to show up in intolerant and antagonistic settings because there are people there who I still love very much. I see us being immensely happy one day. Reconciliation starts once they give me the benefit of the doubt and set their judgment aside for a moment to see the human that I am.

I have found it helpful to take the acceptance of facts from step 2 – where we talked about grief – to another level. I think that it's possible with very high self-esteem to develop a resilient mentality that allows you to think of certain hurtful people as compassionately childish. It doesn't matter who they are, whether family or authority figures. It's possible to honor them as people while protecting yourself with accurate thinking.

“Who is this person to you?” I ask, “Who is the person you want to reconcile with and they won't give you a chance?”

If you can answer the question of who this person now is to you, I think you'll be surprised to find that you may be the parent in this situation. Even if they are your parent, they are now acting like the child. It may take some grief to think of someone you once looked up to differently. However, it will help you to consider yourself a parent to someone acting like a child. I consider stubbornness, persistent fear, and closedmindedness to be childishness.

I not saying that people who have growing to do are acting childish, however. It's all about intent – as it always has been. People who are willing to grow deserve a lot of respect and should be celebrated. You and I are both in the growth process. I consider willingness to grow to be childlikeness.

I believe people who deserve the status in my mind of being childish are ones who are unwilling to grow. They act foolishly because they think themselves to be better than others. They show their childishness when they don't like other people's feelings, thoughts, and needs and use that as an excuse to mistreat and disrespect others' humanity.

That's what children do. They act selfish.

If you have a childish adult on your hands, then you are the servant in that relationship. It may change, but you have nothing to gain from them. You have everything to give. That's an honor, to have love to give.

I believe that the safer you become as a servant through loving without agreeing, the more people's fear will melt around you. They may very well wake up because of your love. Your love could set them free.

Chapter 12: Am I Ready to Decide if I Will Stay or Leave?

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

— James 5:16

I help people.

It’s what I do.

I hope you’ve been helped. Perhaps you’ve been healed. I have been praying for you.

At the least, you’ve felt loved. That’s no small thing. You are loved. It’s as certain as the sun.

“Believing people love you is a choice.”

— A Friend

There is no time to delay living out your life because you’re not guaranteed another moment today, much less tomorrow. If I hadn’t had my step work in that situation with Gallagher and my parents, then I would have responded in anger and unproductively returned the gesture to end things with him by not talking to him anymore. I’m not that person anymore. I don’t have fear in my life. I’m not alone. You aren’t either.

Choosing to Believe a Fearless Life Is Possible

I relaxed on the porch with a friend. Peter chimed into another train of thought. “Do you live a life completely without fear, Carter?”

“Yes, I do. I’m not perfect, but I can do a pretty damn good job of not ever having fear in my decisions or in the human moments with people. I put in the work.”

“I’ve always felt torn inside because I’m gay,” reflected Peter. “It sounds like the people you come from are outspoken and have godly values. I want godly values, but I’m gay. It’s ‘this or that.’”

Do you resonate with your world being “this or that?” I do. The world you live in is extremely “this or that.” People want you to believe what they believe, and if you don’t, then you’re one of the other people.

“I understand this dynamic you’re talking about well, Peter. I lived in it, and I’m from that family who I agree with on a lot of things. But regarding the gay thing, I think they believe I’m one of the other people. They have no idea how to love other people, especially those who don’t agree.”

“Yes, I get that.”

“I accept that this is a way of thinking, ‘this or that.’ I also believe that I can put that thinking aside and have a completely legitimate thought process that is my worldview. I can choose a different set of beliefs and thoughts. I simply don’t think about the ‘this or that’ dynamic anymore. I have a solid, one-way thought process that works for me. That’s to love and never allow fear to sit in my psyche. I deal with fear, and that’s how I’ve become free.”

This is what works for me. I don’t waste energy thinking about what doesn’t.

The dark, evening trees rustled as Peter and I talked more about things like conspiracy theories, the latest viral plague, and the imperfect church (lower-case c) versus the friendly and unified Church (capital-case C). Gay people that I have known feel like they aren’t allowed to hold certain values that those who persecute them hold. I’m here to tell you this is simply not true. No one has a monopoly on God. You are coming out from being stuck in a “this or that” way of thinking.

You don’t have to stay stuck. You have right now. You have your existence, your feelings, your thoughts, and your needs that you can honor. You can build your life starting right now, and once you’re aligned with honesty around what you want, you’ll be amazed how quickly life happens for you. I emphasize:

“Life happens for you and not to you. Happiness is not a reward. It is a consequence.”

Happy Endings Do Happen

At long last, I’ll relieve the tension and tell you that Gallagher and I are back together. I believe he’s the love of my life. I don’t know why. I accept what I know now. In my heart, I know. His intent, honesty, and effort to examine himself and make an effort humbles and honors me. I feel my breath taken away. The intent to build up is moving. I feel stronger. I feel like a better man without focusing on myself to do anything. I didn’t know love like this was possible. I naturally act like the man that I always wanted to be when I’m around him.

Gallagher honors me, and I trust his honesty, his reasons, and his efforts to bring me into his issues that he needs to improve. I don't need perfection. I only want honesty and effort to have positive intent. I want him to put me first, and I'll put him first, too.

Living with Sad Realities for Now

In contrast to this honorable relationship that I'm experiencing for a first time, I receive messages from my parents that feel the opposite. I'm still in progress with step 8 where I build up the resilience to spend more time around people who don't feel supportive. They simply don't know how to respect people who have different beliefs from them. All I can say to my mother is this:

"I love you, and I hope you're well. You don't want to hear from me or hear what I have to say. There's nothing more for me to say, then. You say you're grieving. I have clients now, and I tell them that if you never accept the facts as you understand them (the fifth stage of grief), you will forever circle through the first four stages of grief: denial (insanity), anger (which can become chronic resentment), bargaining (trying to change the world and manipulate it), and depression (a lifeless place to remain). I will never tell anyone what to do or what to believe. I deliver the truth as I understand it. I love you and hope you're well."

I am doing better now and feel happier than I have ever felt. I still feel heartbreak and sadness in interactions such as these. That's why it hurts me to interact with my parents. Nothing changes because they don't want to change. I have to let go and take care of myself. I'm alive; therefore, God wants me to live. I have to work through my feelings, and it hurts.

As for my dad, he sent out a group message about his and my mother's will being updated for my seven siblings and me. I made a difficult decision in prayer.

"At the bidding of the Lord, I politely request to be removed from the will of Judd and Revela H. I have been dishonored as the man that I am. Love is not a weighing factor in this decision. I love my biological family. All further inquiries on this subject or any other by Judd or Revela may be directed to my partner Gallagher M. who will mediate on my behalf. My siblings are not included in this mediation directive. Gallagher may be contacted at the following number: ____."

Did I ever think that I would remove myself from my parents' will?

Never.

Why did I do it?

I discerned if the arrangement built me up or tore me down from step 7. I can't keep putting myself in groups of people where interacting on a casual basis causes me so much angst and suffering. I care more about honoring the person I believe God wants me to be than having stuff and relationships outside myself.

"Carter, why are you recovering for the next five days from talking to your parents?" Gal asked.

"I suppose I need to accept the facts of the situation." I return to the process. "Any interaction with Mom or Dad hurts me. I feel it. I don't have their support, and cutting off any obligation to communicate sets me free from giving energy to this situation. To maintain positive feelings towards them, I must not speak to or see them. I care more about forgiving than being part of the family will. I want to be happy."

I simply don't have space anymore for people to tear me down. I feel shocked that I'm strong enough to apply this to my mother and father. I accept God fills the gaps in me as grief continues. If He bids it in prayer, He will give me the strength to follow through.

I deserve to be honored and built up by the people closest to me. I do not wish to associate myself with anyone who rejects me. I am honest. I am happiness and peace. I care about people who are not honest with themselves. I'm also not stupid and accept reality. Per my step one story, I don't have time for people – to try and build quality relationships with them – who are no longer willing to be honest with themselves. My life has been too hard. I have suffered too much. I am too happy now, and I have too much to live for. Life is too short.

"Also, Gal, do you know what was happening that night when I was absorbed and giving my energy away to this family drama?" I asked.

"No, what?"

"My other housemate John had made a shepherd's pie." I cried. "Here I was, spending my energy dealing with people who do not add to my life or to my happiness in the slightest. They take it away, and it also does them no good. My energy is completely wasted because they don't want what I would give them. I've proven the cycle over and over."

I want to spend my life eating shepherd's pie with people who love me. I don't want to miss out on any blessings that God has coming my way. I love myself and care about myself too much now.

It Costs You and Me to Take No Action

I told Gallagher the other evening, “I trust you. I want you to know the impact that my mother and father make on me. I have a hard boundary of not interacting with them for a reason. I have spent literal money on therapists, psychiatrists, and most recently this year being in the hospital because I let them put me there. I cannot handle the emotional strain of the constant tension with them. I want you to realize that if people don’t respect my boundaries, I have to think of myself. I will lose literal currency – literal money! People who don’t serve me are costing me thousands of dollars. I love you more than things, and I trust you. Thank you for acting as mediator for me and for protecting me from having to interact with them. I’ve never had help with this before.”

Even though life is going well, and I take action to live today to be happy, I still struggle. I have to be consistent with the work of maintaining a happy life. That’s a lot easier when you have supportive people around who love you. I finally have this because I’ve made room for it by cutting negative people out of my intimate life.

Today, feelings of despair hit me regarding the will. I love my family very much. I love them without agreeing. I love myself more. I was editing this book, and I felt completely leveled emotionally. I rushed home and couldn’t get up off the couch. Luckily, I had new people to talk to. I couldn’t speak, and all I could do was cry. I decided to write a poem:

*“I feel bereft of feelings now,
I lost my family past somehow;
When now it's finalized, I bow
And feel dishonored in this cloud.*

*Impossible has been my life
To know my kin and without strife;
I hurt like ice lies on my eyes
And I can't see a happy life.*

*I feel I'm bursting at the seams
And what I knew is all a dream;*

*We're out of milk and out of cream –
I wanted more than what it seems.*

*I cry a shower from times
I stood up strong and held two dimes
When those I loved had only grime
to forward. All I did was mime.*

*I've lost the life I never had,
And what was safe is very bad
For now, I live in nowhere fad
And drift from here and lollygag.*

*I cannot bear the weight of shame
And cut my losses from the game,
Though home is gone and not the same
I feel this death as ugly fame.*

*I need my love to let me fall
And catch me while he's standing tall.
I'm out of life to live; I'm raw,
And calmly screaming, 'help me doll.'”*

I want to share it with you so that you know that you're not the only one who goes through heartbreak. It hurts. There are no words. For Pete's sake, I'm supposed to be a Happy Gay Christian Hereafter! Yet, I still have my moments. Fighting for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is not free.

**Your Foundation is a Starting and Ending Place: Happiness, Joy,
and Peace**

Facing discomfort eventually returns me to a durable sense of joy and peace that I know from life experience is always there once the pain is faced and weathered. I'm not scared of sadness, and neither should you be. Stick with me, and it will get easier for you. Sadness lifts because you are happiness and peace. All other feelings and thoughts are just passing water over the riverbed that is your true self.

You have everything in this book that you could need to begin the journey that took me eight years to traverse. I also did it this year in eight weeks.

Can you do it?

I believe you can.

You may have some insecurities about how or where to start. Just read the chapters in order. It's all there, and I only have three rules.

1. Show up when you say you will
2. Pen to paper (physical pen and paper matters)
3. Write one thing

I got myself massive results in eight weeks earlier this year, as I related in Chapter 3. I'd give you eight to twelve weeks if you're diligent. Most of it you can do on your own, and that's a happy thought. I would encourage you to work with a Guide, however, for steps one and two. You don't need an extremely skilled person. You can follow the directions I outlined in those chapters. The most important thing is to speak the truth of your inventories by reading the words off of your page aloud in the presence of another person. If the person has experience and can comment to give you feedback, that's even better. My book tells you what your Guide should give as feedback to you in these exercises. I can't emphasize enough how important another person is, however. You face fear by being open with someone. You gain a magical sense of connection and belonging from this event. You will respect yourself and have greater self-esteem and self-confidence after speaking bravely aloud with someone – I promise you.

Every time you deliver an inventory is an event. Each inventory outlined in this book will change your life.

After this, I believe you'll see the need for taking a meaningful pilgrimage alone. Do you need help with planning one? Perhaps you feel like there are so many questions. Don't worry about any of them for now. You'll find that a desire to go somewhere comes to you if you do the step-

work in order and return to your quiet place free of anger and fear. You'll learn to play again. Your inner child has ideas.

Your Heartbreak Can Be Healed

Is your heart scattered around? You're not alone in that. Places and things that have been meaningful to you will come back. You'll want to go on random trips. You'll just want to experience all of your senses in these places. If you continue with investing in the God you know as a Friend, you will have a beautiful conversational relationship to bring into these places. You'll think of them fondly rather than run from them as you have in the past.

You will have pieces of your heart to pick up because you're a majestic human being. You have cared about many things you haven't talked about. I'm certain of that. You have a deep heart. The separate twinkly parts of your past life are like stars, and they will emerge as you move past the brightest ones first. Your heart will fuse back together. I'm sure of it because if it can happen for me, it can happen for anyone.

I used to think that broken things weren't as good as unbroken ones. Now that I accept life on its terms. I see confirmation that this belief is true: a heart broken and healed is far more profound, brilliant, and happy than a heart that was never broken in the first place.

You've lived thus far, and if you have heartbreak, I'm proud of the man that you are. You have so much to offer because you have God to discover in the healing. You'll see the value that you as you progress along this path. You'll have so much to say in love to others. You will be essential to other people's lives. People will come to you for your life experience.

Your Dream of Finding a Partner Who Is Kind, Handsome, Hot, Funny, and Wise

Dare I say, there is a special someone out there who I believe needs you, too. I've thought a lot about codependency in relationships. I believe that almost all relational issues get solved by focusing on healing heartbreak instead. I know that it is never okay to go to my partner or friend when I'm angry or afraid with the intent of running from my feelings. I can't look to others to make me happy.

No one makes me happy.

I am happy alone. He is happy alone. She is happy alone. They are happy alone. I help them cultivate their happiness. People help me cultivate my happiness.

“How could a partner need me, then?” you ask.

Your ideal partner will have issues of his own that he is healing from. He will have regular human needs unique to him. If he’s already healed, then he can always use help maintaining a happy life every day. If he’s not in a good place, then you can open the way for him to help himself. Everyone has vulnerabilities that need protecting. If you’re doing the work of healing yourself and living your happiest life, then you’ll attract someone of equal quality to you. He will be able to help you in your path because he also has experience with your problem and believes in your solution.

That’s how people need each other in a healthy way. Each takes charge of his happiness. People then have the ability to help other people take charge of their own happiness.

Do you need help on putting all of this together?

Let’s get on with the final chapter where I recap everything. This book isn’t the end. It’s just the beginning.

Chapter 13: Believe In Your Value, Faith, and an All-Powerful God

“Life happens for you and not to you. Your efforts define you. Not the results. Happiness is not a reward. It is a consequence.”

— A Friend

If you take the path I took, you have a more direct path of these steps. I’m confident that you will have a way that you can see to escape your agonizing situation of not being able to stay with the people you love. You will understand how to leave to go somewhere you don’t know. It felt impossible for me. The life that I have now, I could never dream of. I feel like that’s a stereotypical thing to say. But it’s true. Perhaps that’s why happy people say it.

It took a lot of faith for me to keep asking God for the next right step forward during the months of writing this book and reworking these steps for myself again.

How do you feel about asking, “God, what is the next right thing for me to do right now?”

“Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.”

— James 4:8

I’m confident that He will answer. The more open you are to different sensing of His presence, the more ways you’ll sense Him answering you. It could be audible in a non-hearing way: I can’t explain it. It could be through another person. The key is to feel comfortable and at peace with your beliefs about God and cultivate a knowledge and familiarity of his presence – like being with a friend who you pay attention to.

There were a lot of Christmases I would go home, and I didn’t have much hope to feel connected to my folks. There were a lot of weddings I went to for my siblings where I would watch them get married. I would commit to being happy for them. It drained me. I still wanted to love the people in my life. Family relationships are important to me – so are brother and sister relationships of my faith family. I need connection with God, and I need connection with people.

I understand that your first task is to take a large step of faith for yourself. You choose to believe that your faith in this way of life will work. That’s when you start changing things. It feels daunting.

I would say to be kind to yourself.

Your Risk for Two Types of Relapses

Watch out for two kinds of relapses.

Firstly, I definitely had relapses into looking for the approval. Remember, only you give yourself approval. No one else can give you the approval to make you happy. You'll fall into fear of losing that very approval you worked so hard for. Only you and God can give you the approval that makes you free.

Secondly, watch out for relapses into support systems that don't provide support, affirmation, or permission for you to do what you need to do.

If you slip into this second one, you'll find yourself drained – even if you're doing well for yourself and doing what you need to do. People can wreck your life if you don't have strong, clear boundaries. Other people resisting your growth will make your progress exponentially more difficult. Your mind is a sponge, and the thoughts and attitudes of extremely negative people do affect you. They wear on you.

I'm reminded of when I was discharged from the hospital earlier this year and the doctors strongly urged me to go home. To them, it seemed like a good idea because there were humans around me. To me, I couldn't think of anything worse than being around the people who stressed me out and emotionally drained me the most. Even though I didn't look to them for approval, I also couldn't look to them for support, affirmation, or permission. Look at people's actions, not what they say. Love is what you do, followed by what you feel as a result. Love is not what you say. The words are the least important part of love, kind of like non-verbal communication in conversations. If you can see intent through actions, then you understand people well. You will know if they are taking actions to support you and build you up.

How Bad a Relapse Can Get

When I lived in that space back home as a recovering patient, the emotional stress while already physically weak caused me to hurt myself to cope. I'm not alone in this experience. I know countless people who used to hurt themselves and they now thrive. Whether it's drinking too much or some other habit you're not proud of, perhaps you'll become aware of how some people don't encourage you to do what is best for you. Some physical distance from such people is very helpful.

Regretfully, I learned the hard way – again – that when I’m around my family as I allowed them to treat me, I hurt myself. I can’t blame it all on them. It’s simply a bad place for me to be. I feel like I follow their example in devaluing myself: how I feel, what I think, and what I need.

It’s not like I had good choices upon discharge from the hospital this year. I had let them into my life very deep, and it’s hard to detach from intimate relationships. You know that breakups are difficult. Family drama is similar.

I picked up smoking cigarettes after being a happy non-smoker for three years. I wasn’t home for a day before that happened. I gave up because I was worn down. I’m proud of my weakness and am kind to myself. I’ve done my best. I learned something more important than the relapse into cigarette smoking:

“Choose your support system wisely.” That’s a note to self. It’s a serious note to you.

Be on the lookout for relapses into seeking approval and relapses into unhealthy circles of friends that do not give you support, affirmation, or permission.

Imagine the Possibility of Family Outside Blood Family and Your Home Community

The truth is that oftentimes family isn’t able to give you what you need. Do you realize that Jesus’s family also couldn’t give him what he needed?

“For even his own brothers did not believe in him.”

— John 7:5

Jesus’s family was the group of people that least supported Him. As for His hometown of Nazareth, He faced a similar experience:

“And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.’

And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”

— Matthew 13:57 to 58

Jesus stopped giving energy to people who would not listen or believe. The lack of faith from his family, community, and synagogue baffled Him.

If it amazes you – as it has amazed me – that Christians are unwilling to hear you and unwilling to hear your testimony of God’s work in your life, don’t let discouragement sink you into despair. You’re not the first person to experience this. That’s an encouraging thought! It means you’re not alone.

I’m right here, too, living a happy life. It is worth the effort.

I believe following Jesus rather than any people or any organizational church is a privilege. If in the course of these steps you decide to take a complete break from Christianity, I’d say to be kind to yourself there as well. I would also remind you that God is patient. The God who deserves your heart – which to some might sound like a sacrilegious thing to say – but the God who deserves your love is a God who loves you infinitely. He’s more compassionate, more patient, more merciful, more peaceful, more loving, more giving, more good, more gentle, and more self-controlled than anyone I know. He’s infinitely so. He’s the one who shows me the hope for the future, the hope for eternity.

This life can end right now. It can end in twenty-four hours, forty-eight hours. As I have gotten my life back and handed it over to a God, I trust in relationship because He deserves my trust. I realize it’s more important to say what I need to say to people so that if I were to pass away, I would have no regrets. At this moment, I’m grateful that God has given me the bravery to stand up and talk to my father and mother, saying what I would wish for them to know:

“Thank you. I love you. I hope you’re well.”

Mom and Dad are the people I have been most afraid of losing. Their approval, affirmation, support, and permission are what I have been most afraid of not getting – approval being the worst. I can’t go for the approval from anyone aside from the God I follow. I can get the affirmation, support, and permission if people want to give it. If they don’t want to give it, then I must leave them behind to become happy, healthy, and built up with high self-esteem.

Your Fear of Not Getting Approval

Even if you don’t feel like you can live without seeking a person’s approval, I assure you it’s possible to work through those insecurities to be free. The love of good people help it feel more bearable to make the transition. Soon, love will entirely replace your desire for any approval because you’ll feel safe.

Even if you don't feel like you can live without the affirmation, support, and permission from loved ones, I assure you it's possible to find the right people once you aren't looking for approval anymore. It's possible that you may be judging the people who are out there, available, and willing to love you the most.

That's what happened to me.

You don't have affirmation, support, and permission to make decisions out of your conscience. You love these people much who won't or can't give you what you want.

What do you do? What do you say?

"I may have it someday, or I may never have it." You muse.

"Thinking 'what if' is a waste of time and energy." I respond to your circumstances now.

I must let go of needing approval from anyone. I must let go expecting affirmation, support, or permission from these people I love. I accept the fact that my loved ones do not support, affirm, or give permission for me to do what I need to do. I seek support, affirmation, and permission elsewhere, and these former most-treasured relationships move to the outside of my social circle. I still love them, but they're less important than they used to be. I am less intimate with them. I share less of my life with them.

You can do this so they don't tear you down. You can love yourself and God more than anyone else. You may have that relationship with intolerant people in the future. For me for now, it's time to move on because life is short. I can't wait any longer.

How long is long enough to wait? Are you content to continue with the status quo as it is?

That's for you to answer.

Your Dreams and Why They Matter

Your dreams matter. Do you have vague, distant heartbreak that is so far in the past that it feels almost irrelevant? I'd invite you to consider that it might be more relevant than ever. Your greatest strengths lie behind your fears and grief.

I have dreams for the future. I have old dreams that are being reinvented. I want to bring back all of that piano practice I did growing up that God used to get me full scholarships to high school conservatory and college. My new voice for singing and speaking, I want to use that, too. During the years of hard times, I developed many skills that I find useful now to combine with the

those buried in the heartbreak of my youth. I have foreign language skills that I now use every day! I would never have studied so many languages if I hadn't been wandering the Earth like I did.

I have dreams of traveling more, which I wouldn't have had if I never went through that heartbreak and left a piece of me behind. I had freedom to travel even though I didn't always see it that way. I have dreams of being a more fully actualized artist as a musician and an actor. I know quite a bit about the acting and modeling industry now. I have dreams of cooking again and enjoying more food. I used to do that in my youth with my family since I cared for my siblings and took care of a lot of young kids. I have dreams of maybe having a child one day of my own. Who knows?

I have a dream of adding to the welfare of others.

I care about people after this period of hardship. I never used to care about people. I'm so grateful to have something to offer to them. I never thought I'd be a person with so much value to offer others.

Have you experienced hardship? That means that you also have wisdom to share. The more that you see it for what it was, the more you'll see just how much value you have in your experiences. If you have value, you can invest in various ways. That's new life material there.

Do you believe it's possible that your heartbreak allowed you to build some new aspect of your life that you would haven't been forced to learn otherwise? Is it possible that the younger version of yourself – the inner child left behind in grief – could be added to the person you are today with your present adulting skills?

I have a dream of helping someone like me when I needed help.

What is your dream?

I used to think that giving to others was an unfortunate reality of being happy – because I didn't want to give. I was starving, so it makes sense. Giving is one of the best ways to feel joy. It takes time to feel full. Now, I'm motivated to work hard because I want to have a lot to give people.

I do what I like to do.

I hope you discover that there is a ton that you love to do. I hope you get back in touch with what you like to do. That's a good life, doing what you want to do.

I pursue the dreams of my heart, and that gives value to the world.

You have a lot to give back.

I look forward to seeing the most real part about you. That's what friends do; they make a safe place for honesty. Your heart is a gift to receive. I gladly receive it.

Thank you for knowing me, and I look forward to knowing you, too.

Peace.

Acknowledgments

*“Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stands in the way of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And on his law he meditates
Day and night.
He is like a tree
Planted by streams of water
That yields its fruit in season,
And its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
But are like chaff that the
wind drives away.
Therefore, the wicked will not
Stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the
Congregation of the righteous;
For the Lord knows the way of
the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will
perish.”*

— Psalm 1

It all started in the Sunlight of the Holy Spirit.

This book grew out of me like a slow-maturing oak tree with many branches. I didn’t know what growth to prune and what to leave. Most of it felt foreign. God knew. This book in your hands grew out of my aching heart. I didn’t know I had lost my heart. Then it throbbed beyond my ability to cope. I teared up on many park benches around the world while asking the unanswerable

question of “why?” The child that I used to be came back on his time – always gently. Little Carter trusts the God of his Understanding with perfect peace.

To God who came into my life when I turned to Him. Thank you for seeking me out and for waiting patiently. To Mimi for telling me on her deathbed the secret to a happy life. To Suja, who gave her life to heal the ones she loved while dying young from that same sickness. I pick up your reins again and pick up where you left off. To Luis, you brought my heart back from the dead. You taught me true love. I didn’t know human love could give my life so much meaning. You helped me talk out the wisdom of this book before I wrote, as I wrote, and when I re-wrote. Your listening ear and responsiveness were an indispensable asset in developing the last three steps of The RAINBOWS Process that forms the core trunk of this book: my continuing frontier as I reach out into the world with boldness. I’ve given your story a pseudonym of Gallagher, which means “foreign help.” You have helped me become the person I always wanted to be. Thank you for persevering.

To Michelle, for remaining my steadfast friend. I have called you Lucy, which means “light.”

To my sponsors in twelve-step programs. To the tragedy that has given my life meaning. To my powerlessness over reality that brought the Person of Jesus into my sad existence. To Powerlessness, you taught me that sunshine truly comes with the essential rain. To Suffering, you have been my greatest gift because you woke me up and forced me to learn the Secret to Live Happily. Jesus, you gave me a way to face suffering and walk through my days and to make every moment meaningful – and full of joy. You empower me to give myself to life again and to the people who need help.

To Duran Duran for creating my favorite song, Ordinary World. To Go Fish for singing You Are Mine that got me praying for the love of my life in Spain during the spring of 2014. To John Eldridge for writing Wild at Heart, which taught me to be a man when I desperately needed guidance.

To my mother who taught me to write with proper penmanship, to read books, and to play the piano. To my father who taught me to laugh, dream, and play with children. To my older brother who taught me to follow well. To my younger brother who taught me to venture out with boldness and give people the benefit of the doubt. To my sisters who showed me the patient beauty of friendship and nurturance. To their faithful love for their good husbands. My sisters, thank you

for sharing your hearts with me when you were tired and I was trying to hide my emptiness. To my twin brothers who become more unique and inspiring every day as they brave the world through their hearts. To my youngest brother who teaches me optimism and the joy of being an uncle. To my sisters-in-law who give themselves to their families and persevere.

I can't thank Dr. Angela Lauria with The Author Incubator enough for accepting my book pitch – for a third time – once I was finally ready to make a difference. You believed in my message and were real with me from day one. I felt seen. I chose to believe in more even though I couldn't see a vision for the future. I decided to become the man who wrote the book by taking responsibility for stewarding this message. You helped me rise to the challenge. I had to own it, and I followed your example. I have been met with overwhelming support of true friends who care about my happiness and well-being. Dr. Angela Lauria, Karmie Koen, Madeline Kosten, and my kind editor Cory Hott, thank you for always getting back to me. You answer my endless stream of questions. To Lisa Steele, thank you for being the Mama Bear that I needed during the writing process. I can't believe how far I've come with your support. To my fellow authors Julee Cruz, Dan Rubright, Susan Gibson, Corine Wofford, Dorothy Welty, Brenda Peterson, Kimberley Allen, Avadhi Dhruv, Shana Ross, Jenny Karnacewicz, Dr. NaNochka M. Chumley, Gopi Gita Schomaker, Kipp Harris, Sandra Branch, and Melissa Colleret, I've grown with you into a person who wrote my book. It's been an honor. I was a beginner among veterans, and you welcomed me. Thanks for your camaraderie and for letting me into your lives.

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To Depression, you convinced me to take a break from medical school. To Self-Doubt, you always showed up at my table and motivated me yet again to surrender to the power of God: do His will as I know it, not my own. Jesus, you continue to love me, and that's why I reach out in love to others. To the hospital staff who helped me when I needed it. To my psychiatrists, thank you. To my therapist, Eric Buell, LCMHC – I needed your support during the writing of this book.

Thank you for taking me as your patient this year. You helped me acknowledge the reality of my needs and to value myself as a human being. You enabled me to build a miracle of self-esteem when I started in a hole.

I ran from my story because I felt ashamed of my limitations. I had no answers firm enough for my desire to control minds and to be right. To Luis Aguilera Garcia, again, you have a remarkable name. I met you right as I began writing this book. I believe God sent you into my life because He knew that it was time for my miracle – for me to stand up and to be seen. You are a miracle. Your impact on my life has been a miracle. Thank you for helping me believe in myself and for seeing my soul. I love you. I always will. When success comes, I will owe it in large part to you. You taught me to persevere after years of not living, not committing, not seeing, and not believing.

To America, who desperately needs reconciliation within its own families – I hope you read this book if you want to. I pray that God gives my reader and myself a new knowledge of how much He loves each person. I pray that every person may find God's love and a supernatural desire for loving one another despite their differences. To my childhood friends and church, I'm grateful for you and am happy I have grown up to go a separate way. I hope to hear about your life adventures down the road as well. I pray that God would bless you with peace, joy, and closeness to Him. I ask God for the same for myself. I pray for boldness that my dreams will come true. Perhaps you may see a new way of believing in the future as I have discovered. My way isn't the only way, but it's worked for me.

To the Holy Spirit, please help me spread the love of Jesus. Help me surrender my desire to be right. Help me continue turning into relationship with Jesus every morning and at every moment of the day. Help me challenge others to surrender their desire to be right as well. Help me invite people into relationship with Jesus in a non-confrontational way to reflect your gentleness. I am a child at heart. Others can be as well. Children don't have to know anything more than the Voice of Him they trust. Help me to be willing to follow You. Give me strength to lead others back to You.

About the Author



Carter Neill Holmes calls himself a happy gay Christian hereafter because he's found a sense of home with himself where he can reliably take on life's many challenges in joy. As he approached his thirtieth birthday, Carter began this quest as an author, speaker, and healer for gay men to know how to love difficult relationships while finding the love they need to thrive. Through his experiences with real people and many strangers-become-friends, Carter developed The RAINBOWS Process: 8 Steps from Angst to Peace. The more he speaks to the men who need help, the more Carter realizes that you and he have so much in common and that building a life means building relationships. Carter accepts that every day could be his last and confronts his fears to become a message of hope. His clients are his inspiration. Carter also begins leading retreats to provide intensives to teach his clients in person. He has three performance degrees: Post-Grad Stage and Film Acting Certificate from Applied Art of Acting School in Dublin, Ireland, Class of 2018; Bachelor of Arts in Honors Music Performance from Wake Forest University, Class of 2015; and High School Piano Performance from UNCSCA, Class of 2011. Carter worked six years in pharmaceutical biotech and vaccine research labs. That's where he first dared to sing – in the sound-proofed clean room – to the wonderment of his engineering coworkers. Lastly, Carter is also a proud medical school, Deans List drop-out as of September 2022. Perhaps he will resume the path to psychiatry, which is one of his many dreams. For now, though, he believes that he helps more people as a brave gay Christian than as a psychiatrist. To Carter, it's all about God, his chosen family, and living today.

About Difference Press

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Thank you for reading this book.

I know that you are on the path to further expressing your power and story as an honorable man – Christian, gay, “not-quite-straight,” or something else. It’s your choice. You don’t want to limit your options for future relationships with family, church community, or your non-straight community. This can be a delicate balance, and I want to support you as much as possible.

Email me at carterholmes2@gmail.com for a free video class, to catalyze your success into a happy gay Christian life, however your dreams look right now. It covers the eight steps of this book that is The RAINBOWS Process – Eight Steps from Angst to Peace.

I’m passionate about helping struggling gay Christians who want to think for themselves and seek to achieve a high level of self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-actualization. Your peace is important to me. Your existence, your thoughts, and your feelings are a blessing to this world. Part of the income from this book goes towards a charity fund I have started that will survive beyond me to help gay followers of Jesus get on their feet in times of crisis. Thanks for supporting the new generation of people who wish to build a new, freer, and more honest world.