



A THOUSAND TINY PAPER CUTS

**The Subtle, Insidious Nature of Spiritual Abuse
and Life on the Other Side**

KATHERINE SPEARING
Founder of Tears of Eden

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Review Copy. Not for Sale.

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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

A Thousand Tiny Paper Cuts

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Details of most locations have been obscured and names of people have been changed to protect privacy except pertaining to public figures or where permission was obtained. Most conversations are recounted how the author remembers them, and situations are written from the author's perspective, encompassing the author's opinion.

While the content addresses trauma and the dynamics of abuse, it is not a substitute for individualized care. The reader is encouraged to consult a mental health or medical professional before adopting any principles or suggestions offered in this book.

For more resources on spiritual abuse, see www.tearsofeden.org.

To work with a mental health professional specializing in spiritual abuse recovery, consult www.traumaresolutionandrecovery.com.

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DEDICATION

*To every woman who didn't fit in the church,
Whose questions got you kicked out of Sunday school,
Whose power got you labeled bitch and Jezebel,
Whose ambition terrified the power hoarders,*

Who stopped waiting for a seat at the table and built your own table.

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FOREWORD

June 2, 2000. My best friend and I were leading the rest of our high school class out the doors of our gymnasium where our friends and family would shortly follow. Pictures, hugs, and lots of tears would commence, and congratulations would be offered because we had all just graduated. As my best friend and I burst through the doors, tasting our first moments of true adulthood, my head intuitively turned to the right—toward the highway. Going either direction on this highway led out to a life that was bigger than what this tiny town could offer.

I felt my heart pulling toward the highway. I knew life was bigger than what I had been allowed to imagine. But I was at a crossroads—an existential crisis of sorts. I had received acceptance, scholarships, and financial aid packages from every college I applied to; I wanted to go. But no matter how excited I was or how many conversations I had, my parents simply were not going to let me go away. Instead, I was allowed to go to the local community college and live at home, waiting for my future husband to appear so we could get married and begin our own family.

The knowledge that life was bigger and that there was more “out there” never left. But I had to suppress the hope that it built in me as I was told by all of the influences around me that my highest calling was not to do, or go, or be. Instead, it was to stay, to submit, to bear. At seventeen years old, I didn’t have the resources or mental fortitude to put up a fight, so I complied.

The hope, though, never went away. Eventually it motivated me to get my bachelor’s degree and then my master’s. It motivated me to leave my community and start life on my own ten years after I longingly looked at the highway on the night of my high school graduation. That hope became the quiet engine of my healing—a journey that meant recognizing

the traumatic impacts of high-control religion, patriarchy, and relational dynamics rooted in power and control. A journey that eventually taught me that healing is a living practice rather than a destination where we arrive.

As a psychotherapist and trauma coach, sometimes my clients will ask me if I have magical powers. I usually chuckle, but I know what they mean. They are wondering how it is that I can predict, with accuracy, the next moves of the individual or group that is perpetrating harm against them. They are stunned when I invite them to be on the lookout for specific behavior, language, or relational patterns that may occur—only to witness those very things firsthand in their life between sessions.

Abuse and dynamics of power and control are a lot of things. They are harmful and insidious. They create long lasting impacts. They make you feel crazy. One thing they are not? Creative.

Unsurprisingly, I don't have magical powers. However, I do have over two decades of experiences in professional, clinical, and academic settings and even more in personal experiences that have taught me exactly how dynamics of power and control work. Regardless of whether the perpetrator is an individual, a group, or an entire system, the playbook is the same. They abide by specific patterns and habits, which are easy to track when you know what you're looking for.

However, until the last decade or so, this pattern recognition has not been focused on religion. Culturally speaking, religion is often an untouchable institution. It's personal, sacred, and often the basis for one's identity. Examining it, let alone critiquing it, has not been taken too kindly. And yet, that is exactly the problem. When harm hides behind holiness, it becomes even harder to name—and even harder to leave.

Dynamics of power and control within religion are virtually the same as dynamics within relationships (such as domestically violent relationships). But within religion, there is an added component: God. When the abuse and control is sanctioned by God and the people he has put in

authority, to question it or push back often equates to sin. And with sin comes spiritual consequences.

What makes religious abuse so dangerous is not just the patterns themselves—it's how effectively they hide in plain sight.

When a partner isolates you, controls your access to resources, shames your feelings, and demands obedience, we call it abuse. But when a pastor does it? We're told it's discipleship. When a parent enforces silence and submission using scripture, we call it righteousness. When an institution strips you of your agency, your voice, your body, and tells you it's God's will, we are conditioned to praise it as holy sacrifice.

The truth is, spiritual abuse often looks like faithfulness on the outside and feels like death on the inside. It's a slow bleed. A thousand tiny paper cuts, each justified with a verse, a prayer, or a smile, until one day, you wake up and realize you've been hemorrhaging for years.

That's what Katherine captures in these pages.

As I read, I found myself nodding, wincing, tearing up—because these are not just her stories. They are ours. They are mine. So many of the same scenes, the same silences, the same shame showed up in my own life. I recognized the gaslighting cloaked as concern, the coercion baptized in Scripture, the hollow applause for obedience that cost me my voice, my dreams, my body.

Katherine gives language to the invisible wounds and fractured identities left behind by high-control religion. And she does so with a rare mix of wit, honesty, and tenderness. This book is not simply a memoir. It is a mirror, a map, and a companion.

Healing from this kind of abuse requires more than logic or theology. It requires grief. It requires community. It requires body-based healing, spiritual reclamation, and deep permission to rage, to rest, to imagine a life outside of control. It asks us to deconstruct not only what we were taught, but how we learned to survive inside it.

Because the impact of spiritual abuse is multidimensional, our healing must be too.

This book will not give you neat answers. But it will give you language. It will give you resonance. It will give you back parts of yourself you didn't realize were stolen.

Whether you are just beginning to name the harm or are years into your healing, may this book serve as a companion. May it remind you that you are not alone. And may it point you back to the sacred truth that your story, your body, your voice, and your freedom were never the problem.

They were what the system feared most, because they are the very things that will set you free.

—DR. LAURA ANDERSON, LMFT
PSYCHOTHERAPIST, AUTHOR, AND FOUNDER OF THE
CENTER FOR TRAUMA RESOLUTION AND RECOVERY

SPIRITUAL ABUSE GLOSSARY

benevolent sexism: When a man appears kind and thoughtful but his actions increase the inequality between genders. In patriarchal spaces, there's an emphasis on men protecting and taking care of women, but this often happens in a way that removes a woman's agency and increases the man's control. Benevolent sexism can be seen as control in the name of protection and care.

BITE model: Steven Hassan's model showing that cults control Behavior, Information, Thoughts, and Emotions.

Christian patriarchy: An ideology that espouses that God made men the head of the family and the church and that God made women to serve men and raise children.

clergy sexual abuse: Sexual activity between a clergy person and a member of their congregation (adult or child) who is not their spouse. Includes physical and nonphysical interactions.

complementarianism: Theological belief in the equality of the sexes, but equality with different roles. Men are supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the home, and only men can be elders and pastors in the church. See also **egalitarianism**.

DARVO: From Jennifer J. Freyd, PhD. Stands for Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender. The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual who is confronting them, and then Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender, which happens when the perpetrator assumes the role of victim and turns the true victim—or the whistleblower—into an alleged offender.

egalitarianism: Theological belief in the equality of genders. No profession or role is off limits to someone based on their gender. See also “Complementarianism.”

financial abuse: Using finances to manipulate, coerce, control, and exploit. Common examples include regulating someone’s access to employment, creating arbitrary debts, withholding money rightly owed, renegeing on a financial agreement, and withholding money or possessions as punishment.

gaslighting: A manipulative tactic where an abuser sets out to make their victim question their sense of reality. If they can discredit the victim by appearing calm in the face of their victim’s emotional appeals, then most people will side with the abuser and write the victim off as unstable.

Jezebel/Jezebel spirit: A sexist insult usually aimed at women who do not fall into prescribed Christian feminine ideals.

phobia (post high-control environment): An extreme bout of fear after leaving a high-control environment. In the context of spiritual abuse, it is often described as a fear of God striking you down by lightning. It can present as panic, heart palpitations, sleeplessness, and convulsions. Typically, your mind begins drawing up horrible possible catastrophes that might befall you—the worst of which is that God has rejected you and you will never again return to God’s good graces.

purity culture: Religiously sanctioned regulation of sex, sexuality, and bodies. Common examples include shaming women for wearing clothing the culture deems immodest, shaming individuals for thoughts the culture deems impure, and punishing individuals for engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman.

religious trauma: The impact of adverse religious experiences, resulting in trauma in the body. May be a result of abuse or the result of

internalizing a harmful doctrine or harmful experience within a religious community.

somatic healing: A therapeutic modality of working with the body to access the trauma our cognitive minds can't reach. A foundation of this modality is the belief that our bodies are good and that the sensations in our bodies provide valuable information for healing.

spiritual abuse: Abuse that occurs within a religious context, including the deliberate use of God and a sacred text to manipulate, coerce, control, and exploit.

spiritual bypassing: Using God or scripture to avoid pain or grief, either our own or the pain of another. Can become abusive if someone is shamed for their expression of pain or grief.

stay-at-home daughter: A woman who is required by a specific Christian teaching to stay under her father's authority (often required to remain in his physical home) until she is married to a man.

survival response: A physical reaction, often involuntary, to an unsafe situation, real or perceived. Commonly known as fight, flight, or freeze. See also **trauma response**.

toxic positivity: Positivity at all costs, even in the face of grief, trauma, and abuse. Always finding the silver lining to the point of dishonesty about difficult circumstances.

trauma response: An involuntary bodily reaction to an experience that reminds the person of a time when they were unsafe. Indicates the nervous system has retained damage and is unable to determine that the body is safe in the present day. The individual must actually be safe in order to exhibit a trauma response; otherwise it is a survival response. See also **survival response**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHERINE SPEARING is the founder of Tears of Eden, a nonprofit supporting survivors of spiritual abuse and is a Certified Trauma Recovery Practitioner with a Master of Arts in Religion and Cultures. For five seasons, she hosted the groundbreaking podcast *Uncertain*, pioneering pivotal conversations around abuse in churches. In addition to working with survivors of trauma and abuse, she is an author, sought-after podcast guest, and advocate for women reclaiming their autonomy after systemic oppression.

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