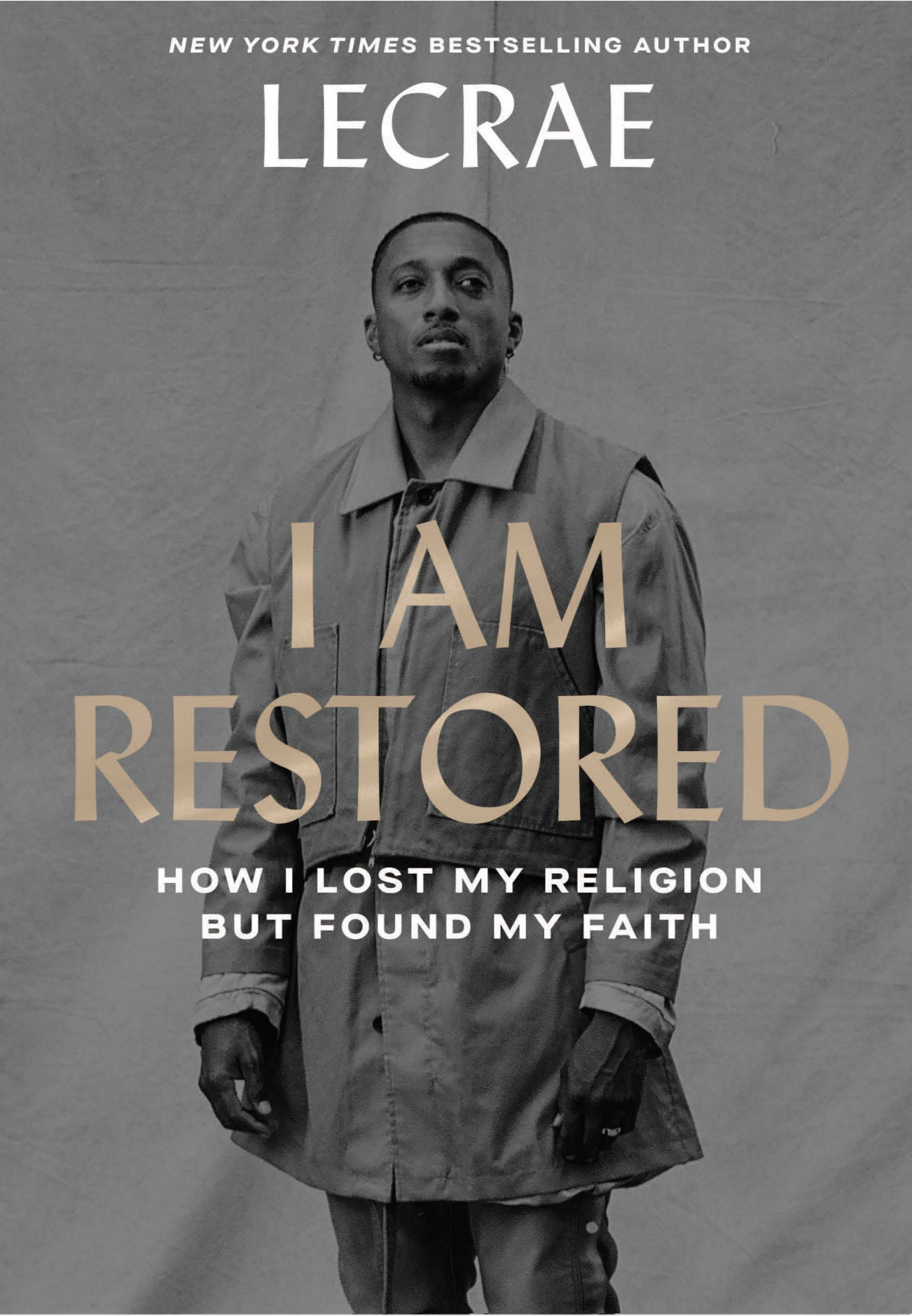


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LECRAE



I AM  
RESTORED

HOW I LOST MY RELIGION  
BUT FOUND MY FAITH

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RESTORED**

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**LECRAE**

**WITH TYLER BURNS**

 **ZONDERVAN  
BOOKS**

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*I Am Restored*

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## My Childhood Wounds

At the end of my book *Unashamed*,<sup>1</sup> I had arrived. Well, not really, but that's probably what some people believed when they read it. Maybe it's how I felt when I wrote it. It's easy to hear the story of that period of my life and believe that I had reached the pinnacle of my life and career. Sure, I had experienced life difficulties during my childhood and stared down the reality of abuse. I had encountered critics and detractors from my attempts to adjust who I was reaching with my artistry. I hadn't fully faced myself yet.

I had answered questions about my ministry authenticity and artistic legitimacy, or so I thought. My songs were being played on mainstream radio stations. I had connections in the very spheres I felt I had been called to. I had won countless awards, peaking with a coveted Grammy. I had it all, right?

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1 Lecrae, with Jonathan Merritt, *Unashamed* (Nashville: B&H, 2016).

That's how it looked from the outside. By all accounts, I was doing well, at the top of my game and ready to reach new heights. Even those who have been to the "peak" of their professions gave me acknowledgment and respect. But something was happening. An uncomfortable shift was taking place in my life and threatened to derail all the greatness I had achieved. All the awards and accolades can't hide the weaknesses of the heart.

I was broken. No, I still am broken. We always talk about our brokenness with a small measure of authenticity but as though it were something far-off that doesn't affect our families, our marriages, our well-being. The great lie of dysfunction is that things are "not that bad." Sure, I had respectable addictions to substances and pleasure. But I'm "managing." Yes, my relationship with my wife is in shambles, but don't worry—I'm "working on it." No, I haven't had a meaningful interaction with my children in months, but "I'll figure it out." I did not realize it yet, but dysfunction was subtly luring me into a pit of chaos, chipping away at my God-given purpose piece by piece.

You might be reading this book and expecting me to give you some clichés, to reference some of your favorite Scriptures out of context to tell you I overcame with sheer will and tenacity. If that's what you are anticipating me to say, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I have left that assumption of perfection behind. I am unwilling to act like I have all the answers just to preserve your perception of my celebrity.

It's easy for people to believe the myth that celebrity means healthy. But in our time there are many examples

that contradict that myth. Many celebrities, comedians, artists, politicians, and tastemakers have fallen to an inner turmoil and darkness that they couldn't overcome. The greatest voices have lost their will to speak. The most competent moral representatives have failed to maintain the standard they set for others. The most joyful people have drowned in a pool of despair. In the end, regardless of our popularity and professional status, we are only human.

Part of the difficulty of being a public figure is people not recognizing your humanity. Actually, the more dangerous part of being a public figure for me was not recognizing my own humanity. It's easy to point the finger at others, but I lost sight of myself. We are not immune to the crushing pain of our own human failings. No matter how successful we become, when the lights go off, we are forced to live with ourselves. Career achievement didn't protect Heath Ledger from the pain. Money and fame didn't insulate Robin Williams or Anthony Bourdain. It didn't protect Kate Spade or Don Cornelius. I read their stories, watched the collective trauma of their pain, and realized that there was something wrong with me too.

On the inside, deep turmoil was brewing in my soul, a restlessness that's hard to describe. I pushed it away for days, then weeks, then months and years. I suppressed my feelings of anguish because I was convinced I wasn't allowed to be vulnerable; or maybe it was because I convinced myself of lies that would soon unravel right in front of me. Whatever it was, a wall was quickly approaching, and I wouldn't be able to dodge it.

What makes a person healthy? What is the true meaning of being whole and complete as a human being? Some would say that it's all found in the way someone expresses their faith or their theology. Others would argue that health is a by-product of our physical conditioning and discipline. Experts in other fields might say that it's how closely we've achieved our goals and lived in our purpose.

I thought I had all that. I believed that my theology and methodology were correct and above heresy. I believed I had enough discipline to last a lifetime, and I had already achieved countless goals I had set for myself. So what was missing? I still wasn't healthy.

My soul was deeply disturbed. I slowly began to realize that I was facing something that I had failed to address with the right amount of fervor. I was dealing with trauma. In all my years of learning about theology, church, and the Bible, I hadn't heard anything about trauma or its effect on the human body, even though countless biblical characters clearly struggled with melancholy or depression. Elijah, David, and even Jesus wrestled with inner pain that drove them to their knees.

Recently I read a book called *The Body Keeps the Score*. In it Dr. Bessel van der Kolk writes about this reality, saying, "The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable."<sup>2</sup> That's exactly how I felt. He adds, "As long as you keep secrets and suppress information, you are

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<sup>2</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 197.

fundamentally at war with yourself.”<sup>3</sup> I felt like I was at war with myself too.

I was drowning in the chaos.

A few years ago, at the height of my career and the peak of my influence, I paused to look at my life and saw that it was in disarray. Initially I didn't want to overreact from where I was in that moment. Sometimes we have seasons of struggle or lapses in judgment that shift our life from happy and whole to complicated and stressed. Those seasons weren't unusual for me. But my assessment of chaos had little to do with a season of life. The turmoil began long before I identified it, like a virus slowly infecting every area of my life. I was caught up in a cycle of self-destruction that threatened to sabotage everything I had worked hard to create.

My “struggles,” as we like to call them, weren't just difficult circumstances or “trials” that we talk about in church services. My life was a wreck. I was a sickly mashup of addiction and self-medication. My vibrant and passionate commitment to being present for my family was now inconsistent at best. At first I just felt “off,” but then I had a few episodes of problematic behavior, and that quickly sank into a spiral of anguish that I thought I would never escape from.

But I'm Lecrae. Thousands of people look to me for guidance. They see me as a leader of a movement. Sure, I can have “struggles” (whatever that means in our Christian celebrity spaces). I could even have “trials.” That would make for inspiring lyrics on a new album and a provocative press tour.

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<sup>3</sup> Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 235.



But chaos? I can't have a life filled with chaos. I can't. I was terrified that people would find out that I was a fraud, someone who was just as flawed and human as they are.

Another part of me was just lost. I fluctuated between caring deeply about what everyone would think of me to refusing to care at all. In those moments I didn't even care what people or fans thought; I just wanted to be free from the pain I was trapped in. I was hurting and needed someone to show me the way out.

In the middle of all this pain, I realized that I didn't have the right "Christian" response to find the escape from my trial. This was probably the most haunting, hopeless part of my journey. The obvious remedies you always hear from fellow believers—"Just pray about it!" "Let go and let God!" "Well, maybe you should just worship God more and read your Bible!"—weren't reaching my soul. Something was missing.

I had no answers for how to escape my chaos and find healing. I didn't have a collection of Bible verses that would help me understand exactly what was happening or how I could experience true freedom. I felt stuck.

I finally discovered that I wasn't alone. Talking to my friends about my chaos led me to realize that many Christians operate in a functional state of chaotic living that has them bound and trapped in unhealthy patterns and habits without addressing deep root issues. We come to church every weekend and realize that a service is just a balm for the week, not a solution that gets to the root of our problems.

Most of the theology I learned was missing the right

categories for handling trauma in a healthy way. It only interacted with trauma when it was time to redeem it for the glory of God. But how do I live as a healthy human being? How do I handle trauma in a way that actually closes the loop of chaos in my life? How do I maintain honesty when even Christians cannot seem to handle the weight of my authenticity?

How is my traumatic history affecting and infecting what I do even as a grown man? How can I claim to be a follower of Jesus and an artist who represents him if my life is so broken?

The Christian response to pain is often characterized by three different approaches. Some Christians want to minimize pain. They try to pass over it quickly and move on to other concerns more worth their time. Like when people ask, “How are you doing?” but don’t want to hear the real answer. “I’m depressed, actually” would stun them into silence.

Christians have a disturbing habit of minimizing pain and making it seem less important than other concerns we should be focusing on. Entire movements of the church are dedicated to thinking positively about all of life and refusing to sit in pain for any length of time. But if I minimize my pain, how can I get past it? If I dismiss my suffering, how can it be redeemed?

Other Christians seek to overspiritualize pain. If God is good, what purpose is there in meditating on pain? They take Scriptures like “Be anxious for nothing” as proof that we’re not even supposed to acknowledge the presence of anxiety and the roots of our trauma. After all, if we just “keep our

minds on things above,” the realities of life won’t even phase us, even if they are difficult. So they say.

They boldly proclaim clichés like “God is going to work everything out for our good anyway,” and “Remember this body is going to fade away anyway.” In the end none of our issues will matter, so what purpose is there in even worrying deeply about them? Just quote Scriptures and remember who you are in Christ, right? How can I remember who I am in Christ if I don’t have the pathway to figure out who I am?

Another group of Christians seek to memorialize pain. They construct entire theologies that are rooted not in addressing pain but in obsessing about its reality. Even though I know firsthand that pain is real and was manifesting itself in my life, to sit in that pain without resolution would just be to make the pain that much greater.

Is there any hope for me? Is there any pathway for me to keep my faith in Jesus and be healthy? I was wrestling with these questions, and I wasn’t winning.



My chaos was eroding any signs of the healthy me. I learned to recognize myself in my flawed state and treat it as my default setting. I was coping with a number of addictions that I couldn’t find my way free from. I knew it was wrong, but I was in pain. When I wanted to feel numb to all the anguish, I couldn’t put down the bottle. I was drinking every night just to disengage from the depressive state. I wanted to mute my anxiety, to push it down as far as possible. It’s

one thing to have a few drinks, but I couldn't stop there. I went from functioning buzzed to getting full-blown drunk with frightening ease. When the depression was at its height, I would drink incessantly, not even worrying about what the consequences would be.

When alcohol wouldn't work, I turned to pills. The pills were supposed to help alleviate the symptoms of depression and anxiety. They were designed to make me feel better, but that wasn't working. I was popping the pills like candy, thinking they would stop the conflict in my mind. I would have bursts of hedonism, temporarily giving myself to all the forbidden fruits of my platform. At times a mixture of the pills and alcohol led to a severe lack of judgment and numbness.

These were just the tip of the iceberg. My family and friends could see the dark cloud emerging over my head that had hovered over my soul for years. A cloud of chaos.

Where does chaos come from? In some instances we are confronted with the consequences of our own chaotic decisions. We love to follow our own way, and that inevitably gets us into trouble. In other cases the only explanation for our chaotic situation is the broken nature of the world we live in. Sometimes circumstances happen outside our control or understanding. But most of us regularly fail to acknowledge the third source of chaos: the sins of others.

When I realized I was in the midst of my free fall, I knew that some of my own decisions created the foundation for the chaos in my life. That part was obvious. I was taught early in my walk with Jesus to examine myself first and see all the ways that my decisions were the cause of my situation.

I tried that introspection but couldn't get to the root of why I wanted to do any of the negative things I was doing. I had everything I thought I wanted: the acceptance of others, fame, success, family, and so on. Why would I want to sabotage my reality? As a "self-made" man, I had to come to grips with how the sins of others had created decades of trauma that placed me on the pathway to chaos.

I don't mean that I played no part in my chaos or that others are the sole reason why I made a mess of my life. I've never been one to blame others for the things I can control. I only mean that I didn't understand how the context of my past led me to the choices of my present. I didn't understand how much I was a product of the conditioning of my environment. I was challenged by specialists and friends to interrogate my past, to take a more honest look at my childhood. It took me back to a dark place, a place I thought I had overcome.



I remember how I felt immediately after she abused me. My body felt numb. Shallow breaths echoed throughout the pitch-black room as I sat on my bed looking down in shame. I kept glancing back and forth, as though I could find my innocence in the darkness. *What just happened? . . . Should I tell anyone? That was . . . a lot. Exciting? Weird?* I lay down in an attempt to process the rapid firing of all my senses. *Why did she do that? What is this feeling?* In that one moment, I was violated by a relative, someone who was assigned to care for

me while my mother was away. I was taken advantage of and no longer innocent. It would be easy for me to say that I felt dirty or that I knew this was wrong, but in that moment I'm not sure that I did. I was a kid without the proper categories for what was moral or right. Plus, there was no father to vent to, no safe space where I could freely speak my truth or even ask questions.

After this experience, my sense of what intimacy was obviously was more twisted than it should have been. I grew up quickly, too quickly. And without those transparent spaces to share my truth, I lashed out with outbursts of anger, distrust, and depression. These were my ways of dealing with deep inner pain that was suffocating me from the inside out. The depth of chaos this experience created has only recently become clear to me. I had to fully face it to realize that my body and my mind were still taking me back to those moments, even as an adult.

For years I kept my abusive experiences firmly in the past. "Yeah, it happened . . . but it doesn't bother me," I'd say. Part of my strategy was trying to hide from the pain of abuse, but another part was avoiding talking about something that I didn't have the categories to address. How could I address it? I treated my pain like it could be locked tightly in a box or hidden deep in the closet of my soul. "It doesn't bother me," I would say to people who knew. But it affected me more than it bothered me, creating decades of unresolved trauma, causing a ripple effect of chaos below the surface. I could hide it for only so long.

Growing up, if you experienced sexual assault, that was seen as a joke for our "boys," a badge of honor that we would

share to prove our manhood: *Look what I've done*. It's not really shameful to be molested by a woman in our culture. In a sexist world, these were bragging rights for young men to share in private moments. I took the experience to heart, believing that this was how I should act on a regular basis.

The experience of some survivors leads them to a feeling of internal judgment. They blame themselves because they didn't stop the abuse or prevent their abuser from taking advantage of their bodies. Shame forces them into silence about how abuse affects their lives. Abuse can create a blockade, preventing the healing they desperately need, all because they blame themselves for what happened. I remember hearing Dr. Christina Edmondson, a dean at Calvin College, say, "Dysfunction, sin, and trauma thrive in darkness, silence, and minimization."

My experience was different from others. I was silent about my abuse, but I didn't necessarily feel it was wrong. I wanted to feel that rush of pleasure all the time. I started having sexual experiences with friends and neighbors as early as the second grade. I let the distortion of that experience shape my humanity, my body, my soul. When you are exposed to sexuality that early without healthy categories, trauma is free to run your life.

To some this will be a startling revelation. After all, I've spoken about my sexual abuse before, sharing my heart in various formats, such as music and interview segments. The most famous example of this was the song "Good, Bad, Ugly." This was the first time I revealed my abuse in detail. I even shared more thoughts in my first book, *Unashamed*. Each time

I gave the circumstances surrounding my molestation, I was applauded for being vulnerable. “Wow, Lecrae is brave! A true leader!” In the case of the song, I was transparent for three minutes and twenty-nine seconds.

It is true that a survivor sharing their story is a powerful moment of freedom that they are not required to share. Most people can't comprehend how significant it is when survivors, especially Black men, share their stories. But my vulnerability was hollow. I only shared what happened because I assumed it would be liberating for my audience. Sharing my story was for the benefit of others rather than for my own personal healing.

*Healing.* For years, I never even knew what that felt like. I was a public figure, a professional artist, a record label owner, a husband, a father, the leader of a movement, and yet I didn't know what it felt like to walk in healing. The message of the gospel is that God is in the process of healing our brokenness, redeeming our scars. And I believed it and walked like it was already realized. *I'm healed!* On the outside I was looked up to as an example of strength. I accomplished most of my goals at a young age. I was on national television with the highest awards and notoriety. But internally I was broken, the kind of brokenness that slowly unravels rather than shattering in an instant. Most of my fans didn't know. Only the closest friends and family members got a front-row seat to my self-destruction. I was perpetuating a cycle of numbness to hide the weight of my trauma.

I realized that I didn't fully understand the consequence of what my abuser took from me. When speaking with



survivors, most people focus on the action of abuse but not on how we should live with the pain and shame. People who are unaffected by abuse have never had to think about having to function at a high level even while they're hurting or triggered.

Experts always say a child should develop natural coping skills, but there was nothing I could do to cope with this kind of abuse. In the aftermath of my molestation, I felt all my emotions at the same time. Anger, rage, confusion, sadness, and betrayal rushed to my soul. They almost overwhelmed me. But I took that nuclear emotional mix and pushed it right into my soul's closet. Even after I shared my story, I never really dealt with the trauma.

People know how to give sympathy for the act of abuse or violation. But they don't consider that most of us have to stay in the vicinity of our abusers. In one way or another, we are regularly reminded by the smell of their breath, their body odor, their laugh. We often despise their freedom to laugh or their ability to live normal lives while we scream inside.

Before the song, I never talked about my sexual violation with any detail. Thirty years after the incident, when the song came out, I was applauded. But again, it wasn't for me. It was liberating for my audience. When I spoke about my own pain, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement had not exploded onto the scene of popular culture yet. When these viral movements entered the public sphere, I looked at the uncovering of powerful people's sexual abuse and felt a sense of connection. I couldn't identify with the pain women feel in our misogynistic culture. I couldn't identify with the daily

calculations they are forced to make in a society that routinely disregards their personhood (a culture men regularly participate in). But I could identify with the circumstances surrounding my abuse. I was a child. I didn't know any better. I didn't know what to do.

The sexual abuse was enough to create ripple effects of brokenness that I am still working to overcome. I also had to confront the pain of my physical abuse.



I knew instinctively that I should run. With every step my heart raced faster. I knew this wasn't a normal chase. I had mouthed off to my mother's boyfriend again. And he was over it. Children know when adults are over it, when circumstances have pushed their tolerance limits. As I ran, I knew I was in trouble. I'm not sure how I ended up on the floor. Maybe I tripped down the stairs. Maybe in a fit of rage he pushed me down. But the wind was knocked out of me long before my back met the carpet. And then he was on top of me. His punches were relentless, an avalanche of fury. I couldn't believe it was happening. "Mom . . . Mom, *help!*" My thoughts—*I'm going to die right here*—transitioned into desperate screams.

My mother's soft touch felt like sandpaper when she rubbed my scars. "I'm so sorry, baby." I whimpered as her hands massaged my bruised face. I wanted to cry out, to let out a scream. I felt like my rights had been violated. *Does anyone really care? This isn't fair!*



In light of this, I always perk up when my kids tell me, “This isn’t fair!” I want to process that with them because, while I know that life isn’t fair, I don’t want them ever to feel like I did at their ages. Like they have no rights, no voice to appeal to those in power. That’s how every adult articulated their authority. “What rights do you got, huh? You pay bills around here? You’re just a kid. Shut your mouth!” In many ways, I saw Black parents mirror the message America spat to them. “Do you pay taxes? Are you a healthy contributor to society? Are you incarcerated? What rights do you have?” The trauma of systemic racism reached down through history to bring trauma to my door.

That wasn’t the only physical abuse incident I experienced. Tempers would flare. Windows would break. Bodies would hit the floor. More than once I gripped the handle of the knife that sat under my bed and stared at the door, waiting for hell to burst into my room.

After my mother’s boyfriend beat me, my mom separated from him for nearly a year. And in that time I was excited for it to be just us. In a weird way, there was safety in our isolation. But then he showed up with a video game system and some weak words of apology. My mom asked me if he could come back. What was I supposed to say to that? I was a kid. A ten-year-old shouldn’t make that call. Even if I didn’t want it, I wanted her to be happy. I just wanted to get out. I lived on eggshells and plotted vengeance.

I tell these stories because they are essential to understanding the personal chaos I would face as a grown man. I experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse all before the age of ten. I have spoken about this abuse before, but now my understanding of the effect is different. I've been in pain, trauma, chaos. Silently wrestling with myself as a Black man in America, I'm expressing myself as an act of resistance. A silent scream lurked in the back of my throat for decades. Amid all the shows, press appearances, and events, I was screaming, just not loud enough for anyone to hear me. I'm only beginning to understand the weight of all this years later. I grew up in an era when people would scoff at claims of "child abuse." Adults would say, "You want to know about child abuse? I was hit with a broomstick or an extension cord when my parents were mad at me!" There was a sense in which we were all hurting, all in need of therapy and recovery from the generational trauma passed down by our families.

I want to make it clear that I don't hold any bitterness toward the people who abused me. I didn't reach that place easily. I've felt all the emotions toward them, but at this moment, I'm free from the hate and the vitriol. I believe what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Let no man pull you so low as to hate him." With God's grace and good therapy, I'm free from those feelings. But it doesn't mean that trauma didn't affect me.

The sexual abuse was tucked away because I didn't believe it affected me. It wasn't until I had my own kids that I realized the extent of that violation. If that happened to my son, I would be enraged. It put me in a world that I

didn't have to be in, one that I couldn't prevent. But at the time, I was more upset about the physical abuse because it seemed so clearly wrong to be beaten by a grown adult. I would lash out, scream, goof off in school, ignore authority, all as a result of not being heard and seen. I responded out of trauma and never received healing. I lashed out in anger and fury because I knew it didn't matter. My goal at age eighteen was to go on a bank-robbing spree with my best friend, because what did it matter? There was no justice in the world. What else was there to do?

I've never talked about my abuse for fear of bringing shame to those individuals. I don't hold what they've done to me over their heads. I don't look at them as horrendous people. I look at them as broken people who function in their brokenness. The person who sexually abused me is incarcerated now, and I never considered that she had a problem that she needed people's help to work through. I never considered that she may have had a scar in her past that she was healing from. I don't know her history and what introduced such brokenness into her life. But I can't help but wonder who I would be sexually and relationally if the abuse had never happened.

Don't get me wrong, I haven't always felt this way. I've felt angry and bitter at my abusers at different times. I feel upset even when I think about what could have been. But my understanding of humanity is that we all make terrible decisions that hurt people, and those decisions are not outside of God's redemptive and restorative work. Anyone can be redeemed. Even people who commit despicable acts can

receive grace. My frustration was because of the lack of consequences for my abusers. I felt like they got away with it, like I was left to pick up the broken pieces they had left behind.

Years later, as an adult, I started to feel . . . off. I wasn't off in the sense of needing more rest and vacation days. I wasn't off in the sense of needing to have more community. I felt a constant, annoying hum of anxiety. I felt like the world could cave in on me at any moment. And this was no time to have a breakdown. I was under pressure to complete albums, run a company, speak on behalf of the marginalized, love my family well, be a good friend. *Look at how many people are depending on you*, I would say to myself in quiet moments.

The more I ignored the hum, the more I started to feel more tangible consequences. I was drinking but not casually. I would drink a bottle of alcohol on a good night. Raiding the mini-bar was a common practice as soon as I arrived in my hotel. *What is wrong with me?* I wondered. I was numbing myself, drinking to go to sleep and drinking to get back up in the morning. I knew I had a problem, so I went to see a professional. I thought surely this would help. He listened while I waited for advice. Then he prescribed pills. Pills. I knew I wasn't supposed to pop those pills like candy, but I couldn't stop. They made me feel good. I at least had moments of clarity with them, but I couldn't shake this question: *Am I addicted?*

The book *The Body Keeps the Score* truly revolutionized the way I viewed my past and my trauma responses from my childhood. The author talks about the way we ignore and fail to process our trauma and the consequences of hiding what

is lurking underneath the surface. He writes, “Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.”<sup>4</sup>

The emotional wounds I experienced as a kid are easily rationalized away. *Well, that was a long time ago. It doesn't bother me.* But I'm learning that my body doesn't have a timer. There's no timeline that it can place abuse into. My body doesn't have categories to handle it. That trauma happened, and now it's stored in places I can't hide from. While I'm trying to rationalize it, the heart and soul are saying, *We don't know how to deal with this.* These events now stored in me robbed me of normalcy, of coping mechanisms, of innocence. As an adult, I'm frustrated because that trauma I experienced robbed me of things, and there's a direct line of chaos to my present.

I discovered what it meant to have “little kid trauma” that is experienced with a little kid's mind. In some ways, that's God's form of protection for your mind, but it's also another form of abuse. Because after your abuse, your ten-year-old self thinks, *Why couldn't I fight back? I should've been able to get out of this. I should have stopped this.* My kid brain tells me that I should have prevented it, while my adult brain can process the trauma and the realities of it. I didn't have the processing

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4 Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 98–99.

skills and categories to know that there would be gaps in my family life, gaps in my marriage, gaps in my manhood. I didn't know what it meant to have my son run up to me and say, "Daddy!" with hope and love in his eyes. I didn't know what that felt like. I was just trying to survive.

When your house needs repairs, you call a plumber, an electrician, or some other type of specialist. When your suit has a defect, you call a tailor to fix the issue. When your life has a hole, who do you call? Who are you planning to lean on when someone you love dies or you lose a relationship that you felt would last forever?

Christians are not taught to value the specialists in the church, those people who are gifted in other disciplines outside of theology. I realized early on in my journey out of chaos that what I needed most was a therapist, not a theologian. I already understood doctrine. What I needed was someone who could interpret my life and make sense of why I was walking through chaos without hope of escaping the tunnel.

What people tend to do is create a marker to understand their story. When chaotic things happen, we need a narrative that helps us make sense of things so we can put them into context. Every night our brain is reconciling our narratives. The narrative that brought hell to me haunted me in the night. Amid all the success and achievement, all I could hear was, *This is who you are*. It would take years before I could identify it, and years until I could actually deal with it. But I began a dangerous pattern of self-destruction. It threatened



my marriage, my platform, my very life. It spun me into a tailspin of chaos.

Other Christians told me to pray, to cry out to God, that he was somewhere listening. I couldn't hear him, and maybe I didn't want to. I just had these bottles, these pills, this self-sabotage, this trauma.

Shame is a liar. It haunts our minds, distracting us from being present and embracing what we have. Shame tells us, *You should be \_\_\_\_\_ . If you were \_\_\_\_\_ , you wouldn't be such a failure.* Shame silences our dreams and haunts our nightmares. Even our wildest fantasies can't live up to shame's standard of what we could be, who we should be.

In the middle of my own shame, I knew that God had something to say about shame, about the feeling of "not enough." I knew he had a way of addressing these feelings of worthlessness I experienced in my private moments without the applause and approval of others.

I would sit in silence and wait for God to take away all the shame. I begged him to remove these feelings of worthlessness from my heart. I guess I couldn't realize that he already had. He had already addressed my shame and handled my guilt. He had already dealt with my shortcomings. In these private moments, I would look up to the God I'd sung about, the God I'd told others was capable of taking everything away, and ask, "Why won't you take this shame away?" Eventually, in the silence, he whispered, *I already have.*