

Free of Me



Why Life Is Better When It's
NOT ABOUT YOU

SHARON HODDE MILLER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sharon Hodde Miller, *Free of Me*
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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Sharon Hodde, 1981– author.

Title: Free of me : why life is better when it's not about you / Sharon Hodde Miller.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017025098 | ISBN 9780801075230 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Theological anthropology—Christianity. | Self—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Self-perception—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Liberty—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT701.3 .M57 2017 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017025098>

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To my three great joys, Ike, Isaac, and Coen.

Loving you is God's kindness to me.

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Introduction

It's not about you."

These are the famous opening words to Rick Warren's bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life*, and when I began telling people about the vision for this book, these were the words I returned to. I didn't land on them intentionally, but organically, because they capture my own journey well. I couldn't ignore the way people's ears perked up when they heard the phrase. Something resonated, as if it was a message they needed.

Even so, I wondered if the phrase was too bold. "It's not about you" can sound scolding, which is not the message I intended. I consulted my friend Karen, a fellow writer and wise woman of God, to see what she thought of the phrase. "Is it too *in your face*?" I asked. "Do you think it has a place? Do Christians have the ears to hear it?"

"I love it!" she declared without hesitation. "I think this message offers something needed, that people *want* to hear."

What Karen understood, and what God has taught me over the years, is that there are two ways of saying, "It's not about you." One is a rebuke, a finger-wagging sentiment, usually directed at

“young people these days.” But there is another way of saying it, and hearing it too: “It’s not about you” can be freedom. The friend who rejected you, the parent who hurt you, the boss who insulted you, the neighbor who was rude to you—*it’s not about you*. Their brokenness, their temper, their cold, piercing words; none of that was about you, but them. When your house isn’t as big as you’d like it to be, or your ministry isn’t as successful, or your name isn’t as well known, thank goodness *it’s not about you*. Your marriage, your calling, your life here on earth, none of it is about you. It’s all about God, from the first to the last, and that is some of the best news on earth.

When you make things about you that are not about you, it’s a terrible burden. Living for yourself is a crushing weight. Deep down, we all know that if we could stop trying to people-please, stop trying to measure up, stop focusing on our flaws, and stop dwelling on rejection, life would be a lot easier. If we could only focus a little less on ourselves and a little more on God, our shoulders would feel so much lighter.

I think we all know that. But the challenge is, how?

The Allure of Self

Over two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Ovid penned a cautionary tale about vanity. At the center of it was a man named Narcissus, whose appearance was stunningly handsome. This man was not just quarterback handsome, not even supermodel handsome. Narcissus was sublimely intoxicating to everyone, including himself. His face was so beautiful that, after glimpsing his reflection in a spring, Narcissus fell in love with himself.

Narcissus was captivated by his own reflection, to the point that he couldn’t bear to leave it. He refused to part with his watery gaze, so he remained there, enchanted by what he saw. Hours turned into days, and days into weeks, and his body decayed

into a shell, until one afternoon, Narcissus laid down beside his reflection and died.

In the age of social media, it's amazing how relevant this ancient story remains. It still has so many lessons for our contemporary moment, the first being that **vanity isn't new**. Vanity did not arrive with smartphones or selfies, but is as old as humankind.

This story also points to the **allure of self**, and how irresistible it can be. Notice that Narcissus didn't simply like what he saw but was wholly and completely consumed by it. He could not pry his gaze away from himself, and that is the human condition. All of us struggle with the pull of self-focus, whether we recognize the temptation or not. Even when we do recognize it, the habit is hard to break, because self-image is constantly enticing.

Another timeless truth tucked into this story is the **peril of self**. Narcissus's vanity kept him from living his life, and self-focus does the same to us. It results in a slow but steady spiritual death, often without us even noticing. Self-focus hurts our relationships, shrinks our faith, kills our confidence, and ultimately steals all our joy. When it creeps into our families, our friendships, and our work, it turns the beautiful into the burdensome.

That was my story. Self-focus robbed me of my joy. It affected my marriage, my calling, and even my relationship with God. I was so focused on my own image and reputation that I began to wither inside.

And just like Narcissus, I couldn't stop looking.

The Vision of This Book

Shifting your focus off of yourself and onto God is much harder than it sounds. As broken people, our gaze naturally drifts inward, making vanity a tough pattern to shake, and that is why I wrote this book. Once I was able to see my own self-preoccupation—both the allure and the peril of it—God took me on a long journey to

freedom. He taught me how to adjust my sight back onto him, and it literally changed my life. Once I grasped the truth that life is not about me and shifted my focus onto Christ, it became the song of my heart, one I can't stop singing to others.

In the pages that follow, I have done my best to communicate the vision God gave me, because I want it to capture you the way it captured me. You will read about my own story of self-focus, as well as the pain it caused in seven areas of my life. You will also learn four practical steps out of the trap of self-focus. Not a single page comes from a place of judgment, but from the grit of having lived it myself.

Every chapter includes a "Discussion Questions" section, because I hope you will read this book in community. God designed the whole Christian life to be walked out in the context of a "people," and I can't think of a better way to combat self-focus than by linking arms with others. Find a friend (or three!) who is committed to honesty, grace, and growth, and embark on this journey together. At the end of each chapter you will also find a "Focus Verse" and a "Focus Prayer," designed to shift your gaze away from self and onto God. The transformation described in this book is not possible without the help of the Holy Spirit, so I hope these prayers remind you of his role, as well as release you from the burden of achieving this vision on your own.

Finally, I want you to know that if you are reading these words, I have prayed for you. On countless mornings, I woke up thinking of you, burdened for your own self-made captivities. I asked God to shine on the hidden places in your heart and grant you the courage to see yourself honestly, because this book asks you to do something hard: to look straight in the face of your vanity. It's uncomfortable and it's humbling, but it's how we break the spell of self. And oh how it is worth it! I pray, so desperately, that it changes your life the way that it has changed mine. I pray you will be set free of *me*.

PART 1

Self-Distracted

one

Mirror Girl

Are you looking for accolades? Are you looking for applause? Are you looking for approval? Are you looking for acceptance? Because that stuff will kill you. The Devil will make sure you get all of that. Especially early, and especially young, so that you then collapse when you're unapplauded, when you're unapproved, when you're unaccepted, and when you're unwanted.¹

—Christine Caine

This is my story.



J may be little, but I'm smart!" According to my parents, I made this pronouncement at the age of six. I was a tiny twig of a kid, always in the zero percentile of the pediatrician's chart, smaller than everyone my age. Because of my size, I was an easy target for teasing. There was the

boy who always called me “shrimp” and my entire sixth-grade math class who used to take turns wrapping their hands—fingertip to fingertip—around my ankle. I was carnival-attraction small, but it didn’t bother me. I was confident and tough. I knew I could hold my own.

As I got older, I transitioned into my clumsy middle school years, but my confidence soldiered on. In fact, it escorted me all the way through high school, in spite of a deep and abiding awkward phase. To this day, my confidence still surprises me, because I was *factually* more awkward than my peers. I know everyone says that about themselves, but it’s true. Take my hair. Until my freshman year of high school, my haircut was one snip away from a mullet—long in the back, with bangs wrapping around my forehead like a bowl. My bangs extended so far behind my ears that my friends referred to them as my “360 bangs”: from the front, they had the illusion of encircling my entire head. From the side, I was early ’90s Billy Ray.

Unlike some middle school girls whose disaster haircuts were carefully crafted, mine was haphazard. I never thought about my hair. I got my hair cut at a local barbershop where the clientele was 99 percent male, and I never even noticed. I never thought, *Hmm, everyone here is a middle-aged man. Maybe I shouldn’t get my hair cut here.* Not even on my radar.

Then there were my teeth. My teeth required extensive orthodontic work, which included headgear and an expander on the roof of my mouth. My mouth looked like I had gotten in a fight with a chain-link fence.

My outfits were more typical middle school fare. Each month I combed through the pages of *Teen* magazine, hoping to recreate the images inside. This was decades before Pinterest, but my outfits were the ’90s equivalents of Pinterest fails. In the days of grunge, I wore yellow construction worker boots on skinny stick legs, which gave me the appearance of a miniature Frankenstein.

That was me. I was not the cutest. And in case you think I'm exaggerating, I have a testimony! At sixteen years old I began to emerge from my awkward phase. The braces were off and the 360 bangs had grown out. I was starting to look like an actual human girl. Then one afternoon, I was serving punch at a family gathering. An old family friend walked over to say hello. Her daughter was my age, and we'd grown up together.

"Sharon, you look gorgeous!" she crowed. "You have blossomed into *such* a beautiful young woman."

I blushed, but it did feel nice. I wasn't used to people complimenting my appearance. Then she kept going.

"I remember when you used to come over to play at my house, and I would think, 'Sharon is such a sweet girl. I hope she grows out of this.' AND YOU DID!"

This is as close as it gets to someone telling you, point-blank, that you were an ugly kid.

That's why my self-esteem was surprising. By the world's standard of beauty, I fell pretty far short, but my confidence never wavered. I was focused on school and friends and doing things that I loved. I was secure.

A Fragile Confidence

My confidence continued throughout high school and most of college. It wasn't until I graduated and wasn't an *instant* success that my self-esteem began to flag. I took a job where I was on the bottom rung of the ladder, and it made me feel small and unimportant. My pride thrashed against the obscurity of my work, while my self-esteem swayed between entitlement and self-doubt. I was used to being the leader, not the copy machine operator. *This can't be right, right?*

It was also during that season that I began and ended a series of dating relationships, and every breakup felt like a personal failure. Added to those heartbreaks were a number of friendship

breakdowns, which deflated my confidence more. For the first time in my life, I wasn't succeeding, and it initiated a seismic shift in my identity. Until then, insecurity was an occasional visitor in my life; soon it was a steady companion.

However, the knockout punch to my self-esteem was yet to come. A year after my husband and I were married, we moved from our home state of North Carolina to Chicago, leaving behind an extensive network of friends. I had relied on them heavily, so I was anxious to make new friends in Illinois. But as the months dragged on, a friend group didn't materialize. I made a friend here and there, but then one would move away, or our life stages made it difficult to connect. It wasn't long before I began to feel isolated and alone.

About the same time, I was writing more and my blog was steadily growing. I enjoyed writing and felt fulfilled by it, but I also began to meet writers who were much more successful than I was. They had massive ministries and huge followings, and compared to them my blog looked like a hobby. Over time, the comparison began to crush me. I felt haunted by my own invisibility. The combination of loneliness and obscurity was the one-two punch that crumpled my confidence altogether.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, my confidence left me. For a long time, I wondered why. What happened to that “small but smart” little girl?

Eventually I decided to find out, which meant looking back on those early years through a different lens.

A Nice Christian Girl

I have always had a great relationship with my parents. I never went through an angsty phase when I hated my mom and dad or was embarrassed by them. I believed them, I trusted them, and I seldom pushed back. I also lived to please them.

In fact, I lived to please most of the adults in my life: teachers, coaches, pastors, parents of my friends. I was a “good kid” and I relished that reputation. I also made good grades, and I was proud of that fact.

My track record was so pristine that I still remember the handful of times I was in trouble at school. Once in kindergarten I was talking to my “boyfriend” when I was supposed to be listening to the teacher. It was the only day I didn’t earn a smiley face sticker. In eighth grade I accidentally discussed a test within earshot of a student who had not taken it. It was an innocent mistake, but my teacher threatened to send me to the Honor Council. She eventually dropped the charge, but the shame was mortifying.

Those were the two great “scandals” of my childhood. Otherwise, I ran my life on the straight and narrow. I loved that my teachers loved me. I loved that my parents trusted me. I was a nice Christian girl, and the world was a friendly place to kids like me.

That said, there is a special temptation facing nice Christian kids. Although my confidence did not stand on my appearance, it stood on something equally flimsy, which was a deep-seated need for affirmation. Because I was such a good kid, I received a lot of praise, and soon that became my identity. I *needed* the praise, which meant the line between doing good for goodness’ sake and doing good for appearance’s sake became increasingly blurry. After a while, I wasn’t sure if I was nice to people because it was Christlike or because I so needed the acclaim. Maybe it was both.

The truth is, I needed to be liked in order to feel good about myself. My identity was bound up in the opinions of others, and I craved affirmation. As a result, I evolved into a serial people-pleaser.

People-pleasing is a funny thing, because it seems “others-focused,” but it’s not about others at all. It’s about you. You want other people to think well of *you*. You want people to say nice things about *you*. You help and you do favors and you struggle to say no because you don’t want people to be mad at *you*. Yes, your

self-confidence hinges on the well-being of others, but at the end of the day people-pleasing is really in service to yourself.

For many Christians, our niceness isn't about witnessing to Jesus but getting people to like us. That's why kindness, not niceness, is a fruit of the Spirit. That's also why the prophets are never described as being "nice." Speaking truth and living courageously means people won't always think you are nice. God and "nice" are two allegiances that often compete.

By nurturing the nice Christian girl image, I was nurturing a focus on myself. I was concerned with maintaining *my* image and *my* reputation, while priding myself on how thoughtful, well-liked, and selfless I was. I was blind to the gradual drift in my focus, because my idea of a self-centered person was narrow. I thought self-centered people were selfish, mean, and oblivious to the needs of others, but those weren't really my vices. My self-centeredness didn't prevent me from caring for my neighbor, because my self-centeredness *required* it. I needed to be accepted! I needed to be liked! I needed to be thought well of! Being nice to people was a surefire way to have all those things.

That is how subtle self-focus can be. It doesn't always look like a devil with horns. It's gradual and quiet and it creeps in on the back of good intentions. I wanted to be a good person, and I wanted to be liked, and that desire became idolatry of self. I lived to serve my reputation, and as long as people liked me, I felt great about myself.

Throughout my entire childhood, I had based my confidence on people's approval, applause, and acceptance, and I had lots of it. The system worked really well for me.

Until it didn't.

The Mirror Reflex

It's hard not to look in a mirror, isn't it? Try walking by a mirror, or any reflective surface, without checking yourself out. I am terrible

about this. When I was in college, I was eating lunch with an older woman from church. She was a mentor to numerous women my age, and we sat across from one another chatting while we ate. Out of nowhere she interrupted herself and asked, “Is there a mirror behind me? You keep looking past me.”

She craned her neck around and, sure enough, there it was. A mirror. I had been looking at myself the entire meal.

This story still embarrasses me to think about, but it’s also a common behavior. Looking at your reflection is practically a human reflex. If you walk by a mirror you are *going to* take a look. We all do it.

This reflex is powerful. It’s so powerful that we even apply it to relationships. We treat people as if they are a reflection of us and our self-worth. Affirmation and praise give us a positive self-image, while criticism or rejection gives us a negative one.

I call this the “mirror reflex”—the tendency to treat people as a reflection of yourself. For me, the mirror reflex began in the form of people-pleasing, but it became a way of life. Eventually I turned my marriage, friendships, parenting, work, even my relationship with God into mirrors reflecting back on me. When this happens, the “mirror reflex” has two major consequences.

First, **your self-image is shaped by people, possessions, and profession.** You look to these things to determine your self-worth. When the reflection is good, you feel great about yourself. When the reflection is bad, you feel insecure.

Second, **you make everything about you, even when it’s not about you.** Maybe a friend doesn’t say hi to you at work, so you assume she’s upset with you. Maybe the cashier at the store is impolite, and you take it personally. Maybe you volunteer to serve at church and feel hurt when nobody thanks you. When you treat people like mirrors, you create a world that is all about you, and that is what I had done. I had become a self-focused person without even realizing it. I had equated self-centeredness with selfishness, so I didn’t recognize the subtler forms of self-centeredness that had crept into my heart.

I'm not alone. Most of us have an idea of what it means to be self-centered, and it's usually "other people out there," like narcissistic reality stars or the jerk who takes two parking spots. We're less attuned to our own self-focus, mostly because it's not as obvious.

Take social media. Studies show that Facebook directly impacts personal satisfaction, because users interpret the "likes" and comments as a measure of their worth. Think about how you feel when a friend receives more "likes" or more comments on her photos than you. It's easy to compare: *Why don't people like my photos as much? Are my kids not as cute? Do people care about me less?* For many people, these comparisons are *about us*, which leaves us feeling small, unimportant, and overlooked.² But it doesn't stop with social media. Consider marriage and relationships. Have you ever pressured your spouse into doing something, or acting a certain way, because of how it reflected on you? Has an unhealthy dating relationship shaped the way you see yourself? How about friendships? When a friend didn't call you back or didn't respond to an email, did your imagination run wild with questions like, "What did I do wrong?" Maybe she was simply busy or had a family emergency, but you immediately jumped to conclusions about yourself. That's because all of our relationships can function as mirrors, and as I was beginning to discover, I had constructed an entire world of them.

Trapped by My Reflection

I was Narcissus. I was transfixed by my own reflection and suffering a slow spiritual decay. By making my relationships and my ministry about me, my confidence was bound up in their successes or failures. A successful writing ministry meant I had value. Successful friendships meant I was lovable. But the reverse was also true, which left me devastated and insecure.

This is the natural course of all idolatry. Whenever we put anything before God, it's only a matter of time before it turns on us.

This is even true of self-image. When we live for ourselves—even in an innocent, nice Christian kid kind of way—it’s only a matter of time before the idol consumes us.

That was my problem. I existed in a world of mirrors, and by the time I recognized the problem, it was too ingrained for me to snap out of it. I wanted to stop living for myself and my reputation and start living fully for God, but I had to reprogram my heart, and that’s easier said than done. As much as I tried, I couldn’t take my eyes off myself and place them back on God. I needed help, but it was going to take a while to find it.

Focus Verse

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”—Psalm 139:23–24

Focus Prayer

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I cannot know myself honestly apart from you. So I invite you to search me, to know my heart, and to open my eyes to see myself honestly. Awaken me to the broken places I like to ignore and the dark corners I cannot see. Lay claim to them and deal with them, for my good and your glory. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Looking back on your life, when were you the most confident in yourself?
2. In which areas of your life have you struggled most with insecurity?

3. Can you pinpoint when those insecurities began to creep in, and why?
4. Can you identify any areas in which you struggle with the mirror reflex?
5. What do you think is the difference between loving yourself and focusing on yourself?