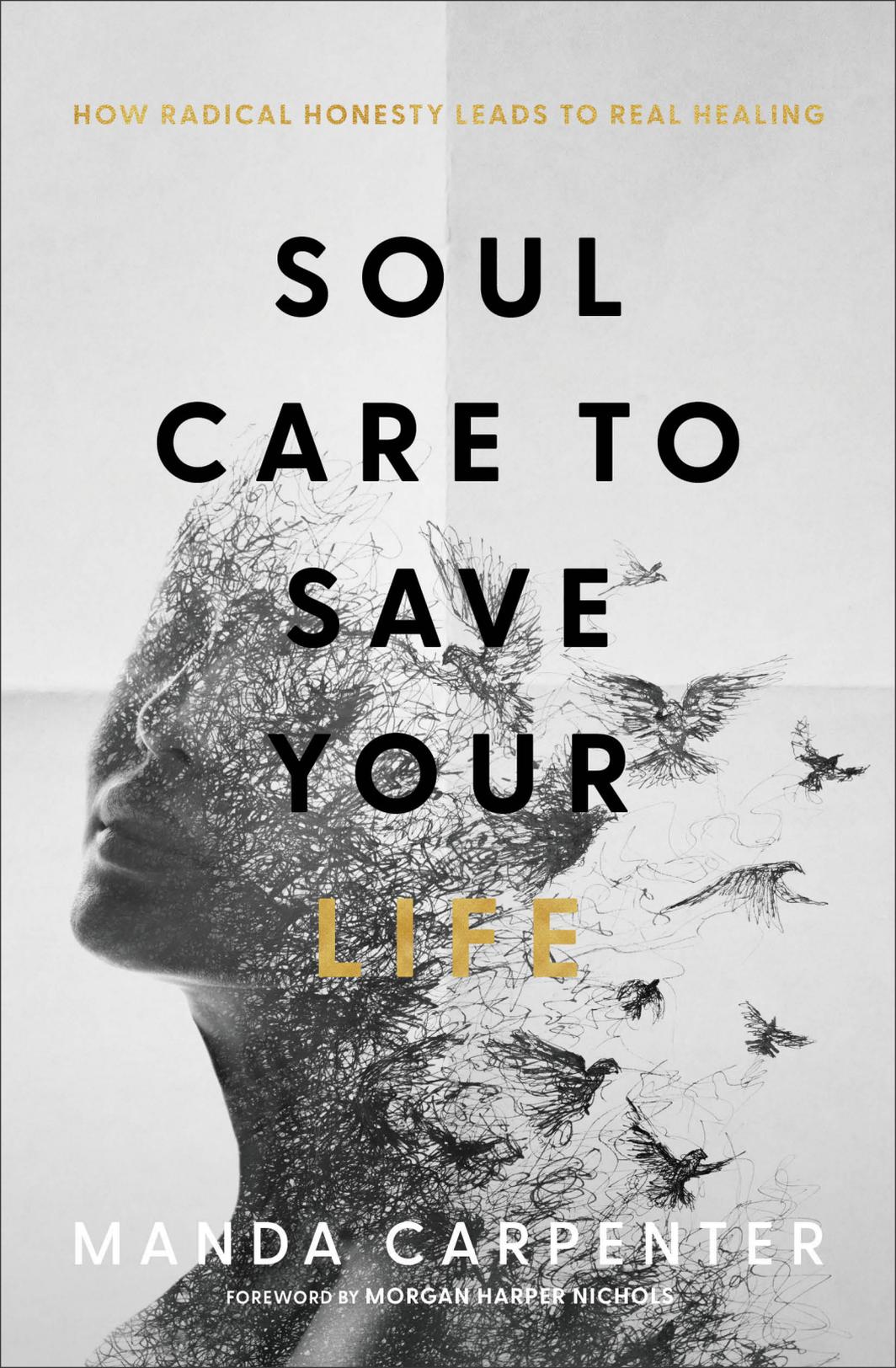


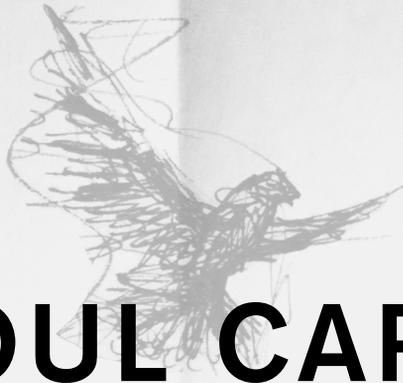
HOW RADICAL HONESTY LEADS TO REAL HEALING



SOUL
CARE TO
SAVE
YOUR
LIFE

MANDA CARPENTER

FOREWORD BY MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS



SOUL CARE TO SAVE YOUR LIFE

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LEADS TO REAL HEALING

MANDA CARPENTER



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Foreword

Morgan Harper Nichols

I first met Manda a few years ago when she and I were both speaking at an event in Austin, Texas. I had never been much of a “speaker” up until that point, and in my true introverted nature, I was nervous. I’d spent months preparing an entire talk only to walk in the door and question it all. Who was I to say anything? What could anyone gather from my unfinished story? Over the past few years, I had managed to be present on the internet and connect with people by creating poetry and art. I was so grateful for the opportunity to do this work, but the real world felt a lot messier. I was a struggling freelancer. I was in the last year of my twenties, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I didn’t feel ready to speak yet. In my mind, I had a lot more work to do first.

The event began, and my overthinking continued. As I struggled to quiet the inner chatter, Manda’s presence broke through the noise in my mind. When she took the stage and shared her story, everyone in the room received an invitation to pay attention to the beauty and power of transformation.

As Manda shared her highs, her lows, and the ways she was continuing to grow, I reflected on my own journey. A journey that was, very much so, still in process . . . exactly how it was meant to be. I took a deep breath, and this truth rose up from the depths of my soul: *OK, we're all still learning here. I'll speak about what I've learned and what I'm still learning. That's all I need to do.*

I walked away from that event a little less afraid to share my story as-is. I also walked away with a newfound friend in Manda. Since then, we have been able to swap stories and share ideas that remind me it's a beautiful thing to learn as we go. Healing happens on the path. Soul work happens in the day-to-day.

In this book, you will encounter the words of a woman who is doing the work and is inviting you to journey with her. Take a deep breath and get ready to grow in your awareness of the full landscape of your life. Get ready to travel through the desert, to the sea, and all of the places in between, knowing that in the well of your soul, you are whole. You are still becoming who you were made to be.

CHAPTER 1

My Hidden Secret

My husband, Eric, and I are city people through and through. All of our kids have been born and raised in the city too. So when we took our three big boys camping for the first time, it was an unforgettable experience, to say the least.

One year into our marriage, we left the comfort of small-town Indiana, where our family and friends lived right around the corner, to set out on an adventure. We landed in Chicago and unexpectedly stayed for five years. Now, Los Angeles, the city we used to frequent for beach getaways and creative energy, is our home. We gravitate toward big cities because we enjoy being immersed in a diverse population, having access to public transportation, and avoiding yard work. Everyone used to tease us about moving to the burbs once we had kids, but we chose our own path. We made a conscious decision not to have biological children for the first five years of our marriage and instead became parents through foster care.

We have had over fifteen children in our care throughout our foster parenting journey. In early 2021, I gave birth to our first biological child, but when I initially set out to write this book, we had three boys living under our roof: Goof, age thirteen; Bear,

age nine; and Skittles, age six. Those aren't their legal names, of course, but rather their chosen nicknames. It's a crazy thing to consider, but if we hadn't chosen to live in Chicago, we would never have received the call to care for them. Like every child I've ever potty-trained or taught how to write their name, these boys came into my home total strangers and left as part of my family forever. And as all children do, they have each been used by God to chip away at my pride, magnify my selfishness, and test my patience. They give me the best seat in the house of grace, joy, and resilience.

Our urban lifestyle has increased our proximity to diversity and our awareness of needs we were blissfully ignorant of in the small towns we grew up in. Chicago and Los Angeles have grown and stretched us until, over time, we are no longer who we once were—a beautiful and rare gift in a world where many seem to forget that growth doesn't have to end with puberty. Chicago taught me many things, but none top the belief that there isn't a single person we wouldn't love if we knew their story. Given proximity and enough time, knowledge and empathy will almost always replace judgment and ignorance. After a while, we fit in so well living in the concrete jungle that you'd never know we weren't native to it. But it makes us appreciate the times we get away and are surrounded by nature even more.

Unawareness Hurts

When we took our big boys camping, it was every bit as dirty, fun, and fattening as I'd hoped it would be. One of my proudest moments was when the younger two chose to poop in the woods rather than walk a short distance to the public restrooms near our campsite. These city kids didn't need any help embracing the wilderness. The first evening, they couldn't wait to make s'mores. An avid lover of all things chocolate and sweet, I did not object. Out came the roasting sticks, marshmallows, chocolate, graham

crackers—and my anxiety, as I prayed no one would accidentally set themselves on fire.

With gentle safety reminders here and there—“Yes, your cotton sweatshirt will catch fire if you touch it with a marshmallow that’s on fire!”—everything was going great, and the boys were having a blast. I’m pretty sure they ate four large s’mores each.

Here we were: an unlikely family made up of different DNA, skin colors, and preferences with so much love and laughter that no one would guess we’d only known each other for nine months. If the world were as it should be, there wouldn’t be a need for foster care. The thought brings joy to my soul. Still, there are moments in our journey where everything is beautiful in its own way, and I think, *We could’ve missed this*. It’s what keeps us saying yes to partnering with families in crisis. Until heaven comes down and there is no poverty, no unhealed trauma, and accessible help for everyone, there will be a need for foster care. It’s all I think about when I lay my head down at night. So, I embrace that I am not God, I cannot save the world, and I too need saving. And I simply keep saying, “Yes, we’ll make room.”

There we were, sitting around the campfire peacefully, until Bear and Skittles began poking the burning logs with their roasting sticks, creating unnecessary clouds of ash and smoke. Their playing around notoriously turns into play fighting, so I warned them to be careful (mommin’ at its finest). Soon the sun painted the sky with gorgeous hues of red, orange, and pink. Our boys called their mom to say goodnight, a part of our nightly routine few families can relate with. They were in awe as their mom told them about the sky from her view. Despite distance and everything else that separated them from her, our boys realized that no matter how much time passed between visits and calls, they could always look up and know she also lived under the same sky. Children shouldn’t have to find comfort in these things, but sometimes it’s the best we can offer. After they hung up, the hues faded to black, and we could soon only see each other’s faces in the glowing firelight.

Because it never rains until you're camping with three kids, the air began to shift, and a downpour began to brew. What started as a light drizzle quickly turned into a tsunami. (OK, I'm a little dramatic, but you get the point.) Eric grabbed a flashlight and coached us on what to grab and where to go. I set out to protect our hot dog buns and other dry food by gathering it all up to put it in the back of our vehicle. In the middle of all this hustle and bustle, I felt a burning hot roasting stick jab my lower leg.

I screamed, and a few linguistically colorful words came out of my mouth. Eric ran over with his flashlight, shining a light on my bloody wound. My face was covered in tears masked by the pouring rain. At the sight of my injury, the kids froze. Bear dropped his stick and began bawling. He screamed, "I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to!" at the top of his lungs.

Multitasking as parents learn to do so well, Eric helped calmed our tender child, whose past trauma made him believe he was going to be harmed by accidentally causing this incident, while tending to me too. His flashlight revealed two big holes in my pants where the stick had burned right through the material. Just below the kneecap, I'd been branded. It felt about as bad as it looked.

I hobbled over to the picnic table, taking a moment to catch my breath and keeping my leg straight. Almost as if God saw our struggles and commanded the rain to cease, it died off. Eric turned on our vehicle headlights so everyone could see better. I called Bear over. "You are not in trouble, baby," I told him. "It's OK. I'm all right. You're not in trouble. Accidents happen. I know you weren't trying to hurt me." I put my arms around him, and he nuzzled up to my chest, sobbing with relief.

When the rain came down, Bear had reacted like we all did and hopped out of his seat. Unfortunately, he didn't set down his hot roasting stick. He wasn't thinking about how dangerous it was to run with a sharp, scalding hot object. An hour prior, there had been a couple of close calls with his older brother's eyeballs; now my leg had been branded, all because of a lack of awareness.

(I'm happy to report that my leg is completely healed, and Bear recovered emotionally.)

At nearly 3:00 a.m., I lay awake in the tent, relieved that everyone else was sound asleep and replaying the best parts of the day in my mind. In that time of reflection, I experienced a moment of enlightenment and jotted myself a note:

When we lack awareness and stumble around in the dark, we aren't only putting ourselves in danger but burn other people and then have to deal with the aftermath of feeling ashamed.

I was reminded by my sweet boy, Bear, that when we choose to live unaware and in the dark, we aren't only hurting ourselves; we hurt other people in the process.

Unawareness Costs Us

I know what it's like to hurt people because of my own unawareness. One decade ago, I lost a few friends and the respect of an entire family after making a huge mistake that can be traced back to my lack of maturity, integrity—and ultimately, inner awareness.

At the time, I had just gotten out of a longstanding relationship with my college boyfriend. We were trying to stay friends—a tactic I don't recommend. He reached out to me to share some very private and personal news about his family, asking me for my word that I would not tell anyone. He shared that his younger sister, whom I had grown to be friends with, was pregnant. The pregnancy wasn't planned, and she was not married. Sadly, this was a huge opportunity for gossip in a small town with conservative Christian roots.

My ex-boyfriend didn't say anything negative; he simply wanted to tell me the news because he was shocked. Up until a few weeks prior, I had been the person he shared these kinds of intimate life details with. Even though his sister was someone I cared deeply

about, I didn't pause to consider my responsibility, my commitment to maintain discretion, or her feelings. Instead, I took this sensitive information and shared it with some of our mutual friends. I want to believe that my intention wasn't to gossip, but that's precisely what I did. Not only did I disregard my promise to hold this sensitive information wisely but I went out of my way to disperse it—via text messages, and including my judgmental thoughts about the whole thing. Word got back to her, as gossip tends to, and she reached out to me. She was hurt and disgusted. I'd made a huge mistake. Why had I been so cruel? I will never forget the feeling of longing to take it all back at that moment. That mistake became a lifelong lesson.

Have you ever made a mistake so dumb that you wish you could go back in time and have a do-over? You replay the incident over and over again, but it doesn't change reality. What's done is done. We can't go back in time to fix our lowest, ugliest moments, but we can learn from them.

What that situation revealed to me was that I had a gossip problem. I learned I would go to great, stupid lengths to connect with my friends—even though talking about other people isn't what true friendship is built on. I also learned I had some self-righteous tendencies and a bad habit of judging others that needed to be addressed. I wasn't aware of these things until it all hit the fan and I was left to clean up the mess.

Imagine if I could have avoided the pain of it all. The pain of having people I care about angry with me, the pain of beating myself up over it, and especially the pain I caused a young woman in the midst of her unexpected pregnancy. What if instead I had been in tune with myself to the point where I chose to journal my thoughts about this sensitive information before sending any texts? Perhaps I could have called her up to have a conversation or scheduled a therapy session to figure out why something that had nothing to do with me caused such a big reaction inside me. But I didn't, because I wasn't living in that state of consciousness.

Unawareness causes unnecessary pain in our lives and in the lives of people we love. This particular incident cost me my reputation, respect, and relationships. The most painful cost of all was the loss of friendship. Since then, no amount of time or apology letters I've written have been able to mend the hurt or restore what I wrecked. We cannot always control if we get a happy ending, but we can control if we learn as we move forward.

Awareness Creates a Sacred Opportunity

Self-awareness at a soul level is vital if we want to live healthy and deeply meaningful lives that evolve. I don't want to be the same person twenty-five years from now. I don't want to lose friends or family members because I neglected to do the inner work. I want to thrive, grow, and learn. I want to be more like Jesus and embody the fruits of the Holy Spirit without striving or focusing on behavior modification.

While working at a church a few years ago, I met a woman, Rocio, who would become my mentor—someone I hoped would help me grow in self-awareness. At the time, Rocio was the assistant to our lead pastor's office, and I was the first impressions director. I never had a hard time making a great first impression, but always believed if people really knew me—all of me—they wouldn't think I was so great after all. *Oh, the irony.* Our jobs didn't lead us to interact with each other a whole bunch, but we crossed paths enough for me to notice she carried herself with such grace and poise. Whenever I had a conversation with her, I felt like I'd just cozied up next to my grandmother on the sofa with a box of chocolates. It was so comfortable and easy. Though she's nowhere near old enough to be my grandmother or even my mother, this kind and beautiful Latina woman, who stands five inches shorter than me, embodied empathy, and in her presence I felt safe.

As a staff team, we have a birthday tradition of gathering around a long table to share a word with the person whose birthday we are

celebrating. The word can be an affirmation of who they are or a word of encouragement for them in the coming year. We always assign one person to record every word shared so the birthday guy or gal can have it as a keepsake.

I had only been on the team for two months when September, my birthday month, rolled around, and it was my turn to be celebrated at that table. Everyone looked me in the eyes and shared a word for me that felt genuine and inspiring even though they didn't know me super well. Although everyone said really kind and affirming things about me, Rocio's words were different and caught my attention.

"It has been a joy getting to know you. My word for you was going to be *kind* because you are genuinely kind, but instead my word for you is where I feel like God is leading you next. It's *home* and it's also *owner*. Maybe it's home-dash-owner, but I want you to write it down home-slash-owner," she instructed the scribe.

home-owner

home/owner

At the time, this didn't have any real significance to me. Rocio and I didn't know each other very well yet, but as time went on, I consistently felt seen and understood by her. As someone who identifies as an Enneagram 8 (see chapter 6), I found this to be huge. She became such a safe relationship for me, and I felt free to be myself. You know the type of person you don't have to second-guess your words around, the type who gives you confidence they have your back without ever saying a word? That's Rocio. This ultimately led me to ask her to be my mentor.

"Hey! I feel weird asking you this, but . . . would you, um, maybe want to be my mentor?" I stumbled over my words, nervous of being rejected and feeling like an idiot. I added, "I know you're busy with work and being a mom and wife and all, so I just want

you to know I'm not super needy . . . I don't need a lot of your time. Really, I just think maybe it would be cool to learn from you.”

Her eyes smiled at me.

“It's just when I think about who I feel like really *gets* me, it's you,” I added. “And I admire you for so many reasons. Plus, don't you do some mentor stuff like this for others—”

She cut me off before I could ramble any longer. “I would be honored,” she said. It was as if she had been waiting for this moment, for me to ask her or be ready. Something about it felt divine.

Our mentorship began with her asking me what kind of things I wanted to tackle and grow in. I didn't have clarity, so I simply expressed my desire to be a better follower of Jesus, wife, and writer. We began by meeting weekly for lunch, and our relationship evolved organically to daily texts and spontaneous phone calls. God was up to something through our mentorship, even though neither of us knew for sure what it was.

Awareness Cultivates Hope

I had never acknowledged my obsession with male attention because I wasn't aware enough to realize that's what it was. That is, until the day it hit me square in the face as I hit the cold, hard floor of rock bottom.

When I first began dating Eric, my subconscious but very real need for a male to desire me felt fulfilled. However, soon enough our married life felt “normal,” and I reentered the unspoken struggle I had been tempted by throughout my entire life.

My eyes and mind began to wander. I found it increasingly difficult to resist males who showed me attention. What would start as a harmless compliment left me longing for more. I wanted to be desired, and it was especially tempting to feel desired by someone other than my husband if things with him were in a rough spot—say, when he got busy with work and I felt like an afterthought. During our first year of marriage this happened on

random occasions, such as when a handsome stranger in a coffee shop struck up a conversation with me and complimented my eyes. I felt desired and found fulfillment. *My husband didn't tell me I looked beautiful this morning, and it's not my fault this other guy did*, I told myself as I justified my flirty behavior. I wasn't doing anything wrong by feeling attractive and desired by other guys, so long as I didn't act on it. Over time, though, my excuses and justifying increased, and my boundary lines got blurry.

No one wakes up one day and says, "Today is the day I'm going to have an affair," or "Today is the day I'm going to become addicted to pornography." People don't just decide, "Today is the day I'm going to become an alcoholic," or "Today is the day I'm going to rack up a ton of credit card debt." These addictions happen as, over time, a person remains unaware of their shadow side and temptations. This is often why people, like me, get to some sort of crisis moment and think, *How in the world did I get here?* We can't believe it, and yet, from an outsider's perspective, it's usually clear as daylight.

One day I committed what I believed was the unforgivable sin of infidelity. I allowed one man to cross the much-needed-but-seriously-lacking boundary lines in my life. He probably knew what he was doing all along, but I did not. I wasn't aware until it was too late—and that's precisely the problem.

I couldn't believe what happened, but as I retraced my steps it was so obvious—which made me feel even more ashamed. There were no excuses or ways to justify it. My unawareness of the sin I was entangled in led me to make the biggest mistake of my life. All along were red flags I'd ignored, and had I been living consciously they could have served as major stop signs. Things such as:

- How often he complimented me.
- How much I enjoyed his attention.
- How often he communicated with me despite knowing I was married.

- How I hid certain things about him and our friendship from my husband.
- How he gave me gifts and crossed the line on what an appropriate friendship looks like between two heterosexual people of the opposite sex.
- How I went out of my way to make him happy.
- The overall amount of time and energy both he and I invested in each other.

All of it was inappropriate. None of it was “no big deal” as I had been telling myself all along. I’m now convinced there is no such thing as harmless flirting when you are married. I now hold the belief that if we have to hide something from our spouse, it’s wrong—period. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

In the aftermath of what occurred, I promised myself to never be so ignorant and heedless ever again. I was finally aware of my shadow side—because I saw the shadow once the light poured in: I was addicted to affirmation from men. I started going to individual counseling and brought this new self-knowledge to my counselor. However, I did not tell her (or anyone) about the event that had taken place and had ultimately awakened me to this awareness. I thought it was a secret I would take to my grave.

While it’s great I had become conscious of my struggle and started therapy, the secrecy of my mistake left me feeling isolated and ashamed. Day by day I looked up, hoping to see the light, but it was as if the lid was closing and less light was pouring in. Some days the lid was propped open just enough to let a little light in—but on those days, it rained. It rained so hard it poured, and the water was inching up to my shoulders. As the water rose, so did my anxiety. There were no good days. I grew extremely depressed.

God’s Spirit had been whispering to me, telling me to go to my husband and get this off my chest. To tell the truth. Then I would be free from the guilt I was carrying. The Enemy had also been

whispering, convincing me that I was damaged and had ruined my life. I wrestled with them both for over a year. Most days, I felt like I was drowning. I couldn't go more than a few hours without thinking about my addiction, what had happened, and how terrified I was of anyone finding out.

Occasionally thoughts of sitting down and spilling the tea would come. I'd get a burst of energy, thinking *Today's the day I'm finally going to confess*. But just as quickly as those bursts jolted through my body, the lies of the Enemy came storming around me like a colony of bees. The buzzing was so loud and the culpability so real. I was desperate to make it stop. This was a matter of truth or death. I came to a decision: trust God or end my life.

When you truly believe the world will come crashing down if anyone finds out something about you, it's terrifying. Every day is filled with fear and shame. Sometimes intrusive thoughts enter your mind, and you imagine vanishing from the earth so you can be free of it all. My depression took me to low valleys I didn't think were possible. I've met women who have gone through something eerily similar after having an abortion. I've met both men and women who tell me this was their experience while silently battling a porn addiction. I have friends in the LGBTQ+ community who tell me they contemplated suicide before coming out because they truly believed it would be worse for them to face rejection from people they love than to embrace their true identity. Being honest about your sexuality is vastly different from doing something you know is wrong—like I did—but the depression many people, especially conservative Christians, experience is similar. It's no wonder an LGBTQ+ person seriously contemplates suicide at almost three times the rate of someone who is heterosexual.¹

As I contemplated ending my life, I thought, *What if I tell Rocio? If she offers me hope, I can get through this. If I tell her and she reacts the way I think she and everyone else will react, I am better off dead*. After all, Rocio was heaven-sent.

My guess is that you have sin or a secret struggle in your life only you know exists. It might feel small in comparison to mine, or maybe you've written a story that yours is even worse. Maybe it's recurring, or perhaps you've tried to cover it up in fear of what someone might think if they knew. And you would do just about anything to be cured of it.

The Enemy might, at some point in time, try to convince you that the only cure is to end your life. I want you to hear me: **this is a ploy**. He comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Don't buy it. God can heal and restore you—and he will if you give him the chance. There is no magic cure to overcoming your demons or greatest temptations. There is no self-help book with ten steps to conquering your innermost battles. There is nothing that can fill the void in your soul forever or sustain transformation other than Jesus.

If I'm honest, I never used to believe in prophecy or what I considered to be all that crazy, weird spiritual stuff, but now I do. I do because Rocio's birthday word for me came to fruition. I didn't go home to be with Jesus. I came back home to him here on earth. And it all happened because I owned my sin rather than trying to hide it.



For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

“Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.” (Eph. 5:8–14)



SOUL CARE PRACTICE NO. 1

Identify your hidden secrets.

Be Radically Honest with Yourself

1. What do you feel shame about?
2. Which struggle shows up repeatedly in your relationships?
3. When are you most tempted to lie, cover up, or hide?
4. Imagine a healthy, healed version of yourself—how is it different from you right now?
5. Why did you pick up this book?