

WHAT THE HEALING JOURNEY LOOKS LIKE

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 277 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are going to have a conversation with a favorite repeat guest of ours, Bob Hamp. He is on Episode 1, the very first episode of the Flying Free Podcast. We kicked the whole thing off 277 episodes ago with Bob Hamp. And he did an episode called, "How Can You Tell if Your Abusive Partner Has Changed?" And then he came back on 76 episodes later and talked about "The Ways Religion Kills People." It's been way too long. It's been like, 200 episodes later now, and we finally are having him back. Today, we're going to be talking about the healing journey for a survivor.

Now, Bob is a licensed marriage and family therapist as well as an author and a teacher, and he and his wife, Polly, are the founders of Think Differently Academy, which is an online community for training, personal growth, and healing. Both Bob and Polly have been avid supporters of me and my work and the women that I serve, and Bob has proven himself over and over again to be the kind of person that I can trust. So welcome back to the Flying Free Podcast, Bob.

BOB: Natalie, you kind of make me want to tear up a little bit. You say all these formal things about me, and then all of a sudden you talk about me being a trustworthy person.

NATALIE: You are. And I have people that ask about that too because a lot of women, they're a little bit leery about men that I bring on and I have had a couple of duds on the podcast in the past that I've ended up eliminating the episode. So maybe some of you listeners who have been longtime listeners may have noticed all of a sudden an episode goes down? That's why.

BOB: Is this really 277 or is this like we skipped over a few because they were...

NATALIE: There's only been a handful — less than five episodes over the last six years that I've taken down. In the advocacy world, people come and go too. They're like a little firework. They burst out there and they give all this great stuff and then they disappear. And you're a consistent, always there... And maybe it's because you're a therapist and you have a practice in... Where in Texas again?

BOB: In Grapevine, Texas.

NATALIE: Grapevine, Texas. So your ministry is just very steady and consistent, and also you and Polly are just so real. You don't just offer answers — you also offer yourselves. I

feel like you're there in it. Your heart and soul are in it for all of the right reasons. And it's obvious to me and to other people who come in contact with you. And everyone that I've talked to that has ever had you as a therapist or worked with you just has amazing things to say about you.

I'm happy to have you on the podcast again and let's talk about the healing journey. I know you don't remember the episode that you listened to, but you were listening to an older episode of mine, and you were like, "Oh, we really need to talk about this."

BOB: Yeah, I'll definitely jump there, but I don't want to miss the chance to say nice things about you. Because first of all, you just lavished me with some of the deepest compliments a person could give. I think if there's anything somebody could say that matters besides, "You're cute, you're pretty, you're smart," it's like, "You're consistent and you're safe." Consistency for me, it's always been important to me that I don't say something that's not already true inside of me. You don't create something and then hope to live up to it. You check what's in here and then you learn to express what's true. That may even come up again in our conversation about the healing journey. But one of the reasons we know each other is because after you heard the teaching on the dynamics of abuse, you put it in your book and you cited it correctly.

NATALIE: Thanks to a good editor.

BOB: I don't mean the APA standard appropriate. What I mean is you gave credit. And I don't know if you've experienced this, but in the world of content creation, there are a lot of people out there who'll just steal your stuff and not even think a second thought about taking credit for something that they didn't come up with.

And so when a friend of mine said, "Hey, someone quoted you in their book," I didn't know Natalie Hoffman at the time, but I went and got your book and found the citation. Read the book and great first book. I've literally quoted the title to somebody sitting here in my office the other day because they're saying, "Maybe it's me." And I said, "You know what's the title of the number one book I recommend to people in your situation?" They said, "What?" I said, "Is It Me?" So great title.

But to our point, I read through and I saw that you'd given a quote from my teaching and then you attributed it to me. And that shouldn't mean as much as it does, but it does. To me, that says the things about your integrity and your honesty and you're not trying to just be a flash in the pan like you described a minute ago.

If you get something of value, you give credit to whom you got it from. And so I think I

read that and I reached out to you and just said, "Hey, you know my teaching, but I just want to say to you, thank you for attributing correctly in your book that." And from there, I feel like we've become not only colleagues but friends.

NATALIE: Yes, definitely.

BOB: We send people to you all the time just because I think you've developed community, and community is such an important part of the healing process. Which brings us up to your question, and that is... I don't remember when I texted you, maybe two or three weeks ago, and I never just reach out to someone and say, "Can I be on your podcast?" And had I known it was number 277, I probably would have said, "Why has it been so long?"

NATALIE: Seriously, I was embarrassed actually. I was like, "Oh my word, I can't believe it's been that long since he's been on." That's crazy.

BOB: You're always welcome to invite, and you were so gracious when I invited myself. But I'd listened to Sara Richmond, you had a guest named Sara Richmond, and I thought to myself, "I know Sara Richmond." And when I got on to listen to it, it was not the same Sara Richmond that I know, but it was enough to get me into it, and the podcast was about the healing process. And you and Sara were talking about what's the center of the target and how I think about that journey. You're talking about finding yourself again.

And I thought since — it's been six and a half years since I did that teaching on Facebook Live — since six and a half years ago, we've literally had probably a couple thousand people just reach out and say, "Saw your video, can you help?" "Saw your video, I finally got out." "Saw your video. I finally understand what's happening." But literally thousands of people have communicated with us because of that video, and then of course, I think because of your podcast and maybe Gretchen's podcast and a few others.

So what that means is in this office where I'm sitting right now, probably half of my clientele right now are people who are in some stage of the healing journey of either discovering they're in an emotionally abusive relationship or at the far end of the healing journey. They're finally stepping back into the life that they can create for themselves, realizing that they're now free to create a life that's full and strong and solid and rich on the end of a very long, painful journey.

And so sitting across from people for six and a half years in some stage of that journey,

I just thought I've seen some things that are consistent and it helps people to know, if they're at the beginning stages, it helps them to know kind of what's coming up. But also I think that wherever you are in it, sometimes you just need someone to say, "Hey, you're going to make it. You're going to make it. And here's where you are right now." And so I wanted to come talk about that.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. I'm so glad. It's been a long time since I've really touched on the systematic journey of it. I feel like I focus on little snippets of the journey here and there, but let's put it all together. And I can't wait to hear your perspective. I was telling Bob, before we got on here, the way he puts things... His business, his therapy counseling center is called Think Differently, and there's a reason for that. I feel like Bob thinks differently about things, and then he articulates the way he's thinking and then opens up.

He's blown my mind so many times when I've gone to conferences and heard him speak or heard him on, for example, that example of Facebook Live. The way he words things or how he articulates the truth about abuse and about lots of different things is very eye-opening, and lots of light bulbs just go off in my brain and go off in other people's brains as well. And if you can get people to think differently about their situation, then their life changes.

BOB: Everything changes.

NATALIE: They think differently, then their life changes. So why don't you tell everyone how you found yourself... You were a therapist and an author, and all of a sudden you find yourself operating in this whole abuse advocacy world. So tell us about how that happened. Was it that Facebook Live that got you started, or had you kind of been dabbling in this a little bit before then?

BOB: Well, that Facebook Live was my first public teaching in this area. But honestly, and I think I've only said this maybe in the conferences we've done, you and I, and I recently shared in more depth at a counselor's conference where I was the keynote speaker on the topic of freedom, but I asked if I could do a breakout session on abuse.

So just about a month ago, I did a session for 150 Christian counselors in the state of Texas, teaching that concept of understanding abuse from the perspective of the misassignment of responsibility. And it was a breakfast session. So it's seven o'clock AM on a Saturday morning, and they invited me to share because they wanted me to share with the whole group, not just a breakout.

So they're all eating, and I said, "Listen, I don't mind teaching while you eat. I've got enough ADD that I can talk through lots of chaos, but I want you to all put your forks down and put your drinks down and put your coffee down just long enough for me to tell you why I want to talk about this." And I proceeded to tell more of my story than I've ever told in a public setting.

And so I wanted to do a little bit of that here today. Yes — author, counselor. I think of myself as someone who's spiritually in tune and has spent my years developing wisdom. And I was in an emotionally abusive relationship and had no idea. And I had six different counselors say to me, "Bob, you're being abused." And I said back to them, "No, you just don't understand her. No, she's just dealing with trauma, and when she gets over it, we'll be fine." And six different counselors insisted, "No, Bob, you're being emotionally abused." And I literally pushed back on all six of them — people I know and trust.

And one day one of them sent me to read the book, *The Betrayal Bond*. And I thought, "Oh, they want me to read this so I understand the trauma that she's been through." Chapter One the scales fell off, and for the first time I saw, "No, I'm reading this because I'm being abused. And I've somehow kept myself in this through lots of denial, lots of rationalization, and lots of kind of putting the weight of the world on my shoulders."

And over the next three to four years after reading that book, I still tried. And I think part of the journey as we talk about it today, it's so hard for people to get from the place of "I'm going to keep trying," to "I think I'm done." And I can name three to five different moments from the point I really believed I was being abused to the point where I finally filed for a legal divorce where I thought, "Maybe I'm right. Maybe I'm right. Maybe I'm right."

But by the time I got out, we had been married thirty-two years when the divorce was made final. And the last ten years of it was really when things started to show what they were. We probably saw eleven different counselors, six of whom told me I was being abused. And in that process, when I finally got out, I asked myself the question, "How did I get fooled?"

Not to oversell my pedigree, but I have all the reasons why I should have known. Everything from my profession to my personal, like I said, development of wisdom to what I thought of as spiritual insight, and I was as fooled as fooled could be. And I began to pick it apart and ask myself... Because this is how my brain works, I pick things apart. Thinking differently for me is "Break things down into understandable components." And I asked myself the question, "How did I get fooled?"

And that night on Facebook Live is the first time I publicly explained to everybody else. Now, that's not how I couched it that day. I couched it, "Why abuse is hidden in plain sight. How you might miss it. Why you might not understand the dynamics of abuse." But for me, I was for the first time publicly saying, "I now understand how I got fooled." I thought I was the special helper and I thought that she was somebody who if I could just get it right enough that she'd discover that she can be the amazing person I was so convinced that she was. And so that piece of that teaching was incredibly personal for me because I thought I was a special helper.

NATALIE: Yeah. And you were taking all the responsibility on yourself.

BOB: All of it. I had one counselor say, "You have a conversation with yourself, but she sits there while you do it. You say something, then you go to the other side, tell her what you need her to say, she says what you've told her to say, you come back over and respond to what she has said out of her mouth, but came from your thoughts." And this marriage counselor said, "I've watched you several times just have a conversation with yourself while she sits there and parrots the words you tell her you want."

NATALIE: Yeah. I will get people on the back end that will DM me and say, "Can you give me resources for my husband?" And I'll say, "Why isn't he asking me for the resources?" "Well, I'm just helping him out." "Well, you send him to me directly. If he comes to me directly, then I'll give him the resources." "Well, he won't do that." "Well, then I guess he won't get the resources because I don't help people through a third party."

BOB: Yeah. The crux of the teaching is that the foundation of all abuse is the misassignment of responsibility. So the abuse victim accepts that assignment of responsibility as being theirs. And so one of the more subtle ways that that responsibility gets assigned is, "If you'll do this for me, I'll do the work. Teach me how to communicate. Teach me how to be a better guy and I'll be a better guy." And so we go, "Oh, then I'll take responsibility to teach you." And you hit the crux of it right there, which is, "If he reaches out, I'd be happy to give him resources."

But he's still, he or she, because females abuse males as well... I recognize the percentages. But he or she is still trying to say, "Teach me how." In other words, "It's still your responsibility to get me to be a better spouse." And it's brutal because the spouse who wants to see that happen is just doing what would be healthy and beautiful in a healthy and beautiful marriage.

NATALIE: Exactly. It's not like these victims or these survivors are doing anything wrong in a healthy marriage, but it doesn't work in an abusive marriage. It is the wrong thing

in an abusive marriage.

BOB: And it would be such a powerful thing in a marriage that's characterized by mutuality. You've heard me say this because I say it in all of our conferences: People ask the question, "What was wrong with me that this happened to me?" I always answer it and say, "No, it's not what's wrong with you. It's what's right with you. You're kind, you're patient, you're forgiving, you're a servant, you're generous, you're thoughtful, all these characteristics, which in a healthy marriage would be incredibly powerful and healthy. In a predatory marriage, they set you up for ongoing predation and are used against you."

And again, kind of foreshadowing, but one of the things that happens in the healing journey is there comes a point where we almost have to re-embrace those parts of ourselves that have betrayed us because they're not negative qualities. They're positive qualities used against us. And I think what happens is we end up angry at that part of ourselves or even despising that part of ourselves, which may be some of the most beautiful attributes of our character.

NATALIE: Yeah. Or looking at that part of yourself as being weak when it's actually very powerful. It's strong. I mean, think about it. It's carrying the weight of your whole life and the life of your partner on its shoulders. It's definitely not a weak part of you.

BOB: No, there's an incredible strength in it. It's misdirected strength.

NATALIE: Exactly. So talk about why this experience of emotional abuse is so incredibly devastating for people.

BOB: I've got two answers. I'll give kind of the psychological answer and then I want to talk about a way I've learned to illustrate this that kind of makes you go, "Oh, my word."

So the psychological answer is that at the foundation of mental and emotional health is this thing called "individuation" where we move from dependence to independence. What that literally is, is the ability to take responsibility for your own life and not take responsibility for other people's lives. That is the bedrock foundation of developing emotional, mental, relational, spiritual health. And it has to do with the right assignment of responsibility.

So when that wrong assignment, when it gets all twisted around and you find yourself taking responsibility for other people, all of the foundations of your well-being have been given to somebody else, and it's like you're trying to build on the ground that

keeps shifting and shaking and earthquakes keep happening. The foundation of your life is completely unstable when responsibility isn't being consistently built and acted on, because it's about you moving from dependence as a child to independence as an adult, which allows us to move into healthy, interdependent relationships that are characterized by mutuality, mutual responsibility taking, and mutual generosity.

In that process, all of our health stems from that. So in that particular way, there is no foundation for anything healthy to develop when your responsibility is being given away and you're taking responsibility for somebody else.

Let me give you the second way to answer that, and that is, kind of in looking at it, I think sometimes the phrase "misassignment of responsibility" doesn't sound that wicked. But think for a moment about sexual abuse from an adult to a child and think about the number of ways that responsibility gets assigned in that dynamic. And then I think we can begin to see just how incredibly destructive it is.

Number one, the adult who's sexually abusing a child assigns to that child the responsibility for their drive. Now, notice I didn't say "need" because it's not a need, but they assigned to that child, "You are responsible to be the receptacle and the caretaker of my drive," and in doing that, this child at whatever age they are takes the weight of an adult's sexual drive. That alone can tell you just how devastating it could be.

But then step two, they also are made responsible for that adult's choices. "I only do this because you're a bad child." "I only do this because you're a good child." "I only do this because you're pretty." "I only do this because you're ugly." And all those subtle, underhanded statements and accusations say, "You're responsible for why I did this to you."

So now they're responsible for their drive, they're responsible for their choice, and the last thing the abuser says is, "If you tell anybody, I'll hurt you or I'll hurt somebody you love." So now in a complete reversal of child/adult roles, that child is now responsible to protect the person who least protected them.

Now, let's take it one step further, and this will be familiar to your whole audience, whether in their situation or in the illustration I'm giving, now they tell somebody. And the first question they get back is, "What did you do? What were you wearing? What was your part?" And so now it's gone from the assignment of responsibility for this person's sickness in three different ways to now all the onlookers, all the people who should be the protectors say, "Yeah, but what was your part?"

NATALIE: They collude with the abuser to make sure that the victim takes the responsibility.

BOB: One of the ways I describe responsibility is “emotional weight.” And if you think about emotional weight as something you put on your shoulders, we've just talked about putting a ton of bricks on the shoulders of a child. And you described a couple minutes ago the strength of a person in an adult, emotionally abusive relationship.

They're putting on the weight of their own shoulders, “I'm going to live my life and take all the responsibility for me, but I'm also going to double that and put the weight of this grown-up person who's supposed to be responsible for themselves, I'm going to add that weight,” and there's literally a physical impact on the body.

A physical impact on the way the brain functions and the way that the hormones function and therefore the stress on the organs and the stress on the skeleton and the muscles. There's a physical impact on the body when we take that weight of responsibility.

NATALIE: Yeah. I'm so glad you brought that up because you often hear, “Well, emotional abuse, at least it's not physical abuse,” but it really is. It really is.

BOB: Yeah, there's a book that I read two years ago called *When the Body Says No*. I wish I had thought that enough to remember the author. It's not *The Body Keeps the Score*. It's *When the Body Says No*.

NATALIE: And I'll put that in the show notes.

BOB: Okay. The subtitle says something about the impact of stress on the body, but when you start to read the book, the impact is about relational stress. And it goes through chapter by chapter by chapter and talks about a variety of different physical ailments that come from us either refusing or unable to set boundaries in healthy ways, we trigger different chemical reactions in the body that lead to a range of different specific chemical — hormonal mostly — reactions. And it's incredible how the body tries to say, “Hey, if you won't say ‘no’ with your words, I'm going to try to stop you.”

NATALIE: God gave us amazing bodies if we would be willing to listen to them.

BOB: Before I got into the space, I had an experience in my office that might be helpful at this moment, and it actually ties to the bigger picture of what I want us to talk about. I teach a class called “Levels of Change.” It's about really coming to know who you really

are. And there's a certain amount of that about spiritual growth, but there's a certain amount of that's about "What's the blueprint? Who are you really at the core?"

And I was teaching this to a woman, she'd come in and she's under a lot of stress. She's got fibromyalgia, body aches from head to toe, side to side. And I taught her this session and at the end of it, she said, "All my pain is gone." And she went home, she came back the next week, she said, "All my pain is gone and it stayed gone. And I started to tell people around me that God's healed me. And so people at church are asking me, and so I tell them about this, and I tell them how I've been healed." And she said, "It kind of irritates my husband," and I heard the little clue in my head, but I didn't know enough back then to zero in on it.

Five or six weeks goes by, and she comes in and she says, "All my pain is back." I said, "Tell me, tell me what's happened." Well, every week that she was talking about this miraculous healing that happened to her when she recognized who she was and she started to think about who she was in new ways, her husband was increasingly irritated by the ways she would talk about it, the number of people she talked about. Someone asked her to get up in church and share about it. And he was just like, "When are you going to stop?"

And finally, she said, "Okay, okay, honey. I'll stop talking. I know it bothers you." And when she decided to stop talking about it, bit by bit, the pain started to come back into her body. And it was the first time that I recognized the relationship between coercive control relationships and chronic pain. Whatever shift happened for her, she was able to stand against it for five or six weeks. But when she gave in again, the pain came back with it.

NATALIE: That's incredible. Let's get into the meat and potatoes of what you want to talk about today, which is the stages of the healing journey. Can you talk about that a little bit or a lot?

BOB: I want to talk about it a lot for sure. I'm not even sure if I think of stages though. I guess if I break it down that way I do. But having sat across from so many people in various places in that journey, there's just some predictable things that happen. And one of them, of course, is when they start to answer the question, "Is it me?" as your book says, or, "Is there really something going on here?" There's a moment, I think, for people where they go... For me, it was opening up Patrick Carnes' *The Betrayal Bond*, and within the first chapter, it's like scales fell from my eyes. So there's a point of initial discovery.

But one of the ways I've described this process is it's like this terrible unfolding, uncovering. You think you see, but then tomorrow you see more. And then you think you see now, but tomorrow you see more. And then you think you see, but tomorrow you see even more. And I think as you get further down to this end of the spectrum, it's like there really is something to this idea that truth will set you free, but some of the truth is so painful from here to here. It's like just this avalanche keeps...

NATALIE: Yes. Oh my gosh, I can totally relate to that. Even as you wake up to more and more of it and understand more and more of it, you don't just see it in the one place that you thought there was pain. You start seeing it in other places where, you were so focused on this relationship, that you don't realize, "Oh my word, I've got this problem in a lot of different relationships," or "I've got this problem at my church," or "I've got this problem in my family of origin. And now what do I do? Because now this is impacting my entire life." What do you do with that?

BOB: And there's a point where, as you start to get to that place you just talked about where it can seem almost so overwhelming and all-encompassing, that there's almost kind of this hopelessness. And I want to say it right here and maybe again later, that's the moment where things begin to turn around. And it doesn't feel like it.

What it feels like then is, "I might as well just crawl in a hole and pull the dirt over my head and give up," because you see it in all those places you just named. "And if I had to end my marriage to get out, but now I'm recognizing that my parents also are emotionally abusive, do I cut off my whole family?"

Wrestling with those questions and knowing that you came to a yes answer in your marriage makes you really go, "Then what's left for me?" I think there's a moment... There really was for me, Natalie, and I hear you describing it for you, where it's like, I lost so many friendships and so many connections. I was employed in the church world, which is also a place that doesn't look happily on most people getting out of marriages. And so many assumptions about what was going on, so many stories going around about what was going on. Only a few people ever stopped to say, "What is going on?"

And in that window of time where it's like, "I'm pretty much left with everything's been burnt to the ground. I want people to hear," that's when you can finally start building on a solid foundation, and as painful as it is to feel like you're building from nothing, what you build from that day forward lasts.

NATALIE: Totally. And it's so much more stable because like you said earlier, you're

doing it from your authentic place of self, from who you really are, rather than who someone else defines you to be or who someone else says you are.

BOB: I think about you because again, I mentioned earlier I feel like we're not only colleagues but friends, and I think you've really built not only this community for people that are in recovery, but you've built a family and a life where you seem to be really having a healthy marriage and relationships with their kids that are genuine.

And even though there's always stuff to work out and work on, it's not coming from people pleasing and it's not coming from the fear of losing a relationship. It's coming from the fact that relationships need to be worked on.

NATALIE: Exactly. It's a completely different dynamic and feel. There is not that stress and that fear and shame that's surrounding it. This life that I have built and my own children and all the relationships that we have and the relationship I have with my second husband, it is the family that I always dreamed of having when I was a little girl. It is the family that I believed in, the thing that I thought was possible, and I love that I finally found it. But I didn't find it until I changed. I had to dismantle all of the other stuff in order to find this.

BOB: That's so interesting because when you say it that way, it's so accurate. It's like "All the responsibility has been put on me and now I'm also responsible to be the one to change."

NATALIE: Yes, it is. So talk about that because I get a lot of kickback. There are some people out there in the advocacy world that are like, "Well, if you talk about the victim changing, then you're victim blaming — then you're putting the responsibility on the victim."

BOB: Right. But it's really about the appropriate assignment of responsibility.

NATALIE: There you go. Yes.

BOB: If the abuser is not going to change, then I have to both change my expectations and change my responses. In that initial teaching, what I say is, "For real change to happen, the abuser would have to A.) stop abusing, B.) take full responsibility, C.) express empathy consistently over time. But for change to really happen on the side of the abuse victim, they have to stop taking responsibility and continually hand back the responsibility to the person who is responsible." And that is a significant change for those of us who spent a lifetime — I'm going to use my term — people pleasing.

NATALIE: Yes, because the other person, they're like a slippery little thing, because when you try to put the responsibility back on them, it's going to slip off of them naturally because they're never going to take it. They're like an ice wall. And it's going to come back to you and then you have to make that conscious decision again to put it back on him again. "No, I will not take this. I will not take this."

BOB: And ultimately they're not going to change, the abuser, because what they're saying is, "I'm so accustomed to other people taking responsibility for me, I actually don't have any emotional weight. Life is fairly easy for me until you set boundaries. And when you set boundaries, life gets hard for me."

NATALIE: Yeah, they don't like that.

BOB: So the change that we as the abuse victim have to make is to stop carrying responsibility and maintain solid, consistent, verbal boundaries. That's one of those steps that's like, it's this stage that I call "becoming the communication ninja" where you stay completely out of the games and you just stand behind the wall that you've built and you declare to them, "Hey, that's your side of the wall. None of that stuff comes over here anymore." To use the Cloud and Townsend language, "That's your sandbox."

NATALIE: And you have to know that inside of yourself in order to communicate that. If you're still kind of wondering or kind of in doubt about what is your responsibility and what isn't, then you're going to be more wishy-washy about it. So that's where doing your own work and getting really solid in what is your responsibility and what isn't, that's the key to actually then being able to establish that strong boundary wall.

BOB: And in many cases, that's the hardest part because there's both an intellectual and emotional piece. The intellectual piece is just sorting it out, "What is mine? What's theirs?" But the emotional piece is by the time we've gotten there, we've carried things that aren't ours for so long, it feels wrong to give it back.

We haven't talked about this stuff in such a long time. When I sit across from people, I recognized over the years that in that plus/minus exchange that I described, the abuse victim has resource and the abuser has deficit, and the abuser tries to take your resource and give you their deficit. Part of the deficit is we also end up carrying their emotions. There's a literal transfer of emotions where the abuse victim feels guilty about things the abuser should be feeling guilty for.

And so when we give them back what is actually their responsibility, we feel like we're doing wrong. To do the intellectual work of sorting through that and the emotional

work of going, "Everybody tells me it's not wrong, but it feels so wrong, but everyone tells me, so I'm going to do it and I'm going to let the emotions shift while I keep my boundaries intact." Such a difficult piece of that.

NATALIE: One thing I'll just interject here because I want to tie some threads for things that I keep talking about on my podcast to listeners, but are you familiar with Internal Family Systems at all? IFS? So how I think about this now is that those parts of me that still feel guilty or ashamed or worried or scared, those are child parts inside of me that haven't really fully developed because they're stuck in, maybe when I was a child I had that shame and guilt put on me, so now they're just carrying those parts.

So I used to say, "Well, my head knows one thing, but my heart says another." Now I would say, "My adult self knows the truth about this, but my little child parts inside of me, they're still not quite sure. They need someone to validate where they got that belief from, where did they get the idea that they had to take responsibility or take someone else's guilt on them? So where did they get it from, why do they keep carrying it, and what do we need to do to help them get free from that? If that little child part is free from it, then us as adults, we can drive the bus of our life instead of having them always trying to take over because they're scared and they just want to keep us safe."

So anyway, I just threw that in there. It's a very rudimentary explanation, but just in case people have been listening to other things that I've talked about, that's how I would tie that into our conversation here right now.

BOB: Absolutely. And another way to think of the same thing is in Family Systems, not Internal Family Systems, but Family Systems, there's a concept called an "introject." And an introject is an internal representation of another family member. So you would know this by, if you ever are sitting in front of your plate and you're full but there's food on the plate, and you hear the voice say, "Clean your plate. There are starving kids in third world countries." And maybe I'm giving away my generation, but you know, if you hear your parent's voice, that's an internal representation of another family member, which we would call an introject.

So part of handing over those minuses... And this actually is another part of the healing process. One of the things that the abuser often does is they also hand over their opinion of you. And so now we have an introject of the abuser's voice inside of our head: "You're so stupid. You'll never make it without me. You are the problem." And that internal representation of an external family member becomes what the old school therapist would call "the tapes running in your head." But it's all the same thing because it is a child part in the sense that it hasn't matured enough to distinguish, "Is

that my responsibility or not?"

Whichever language you use to describe it, we take into us both emotional states and belief systems and opinions of the abusive partner, especially the longer that we've been with them and the longer we've listened and internalized. And we internalize because we don't know how to stand against it. We take the responsibility. So we take everything that goes with it.

NATALIE: Yeah. And then we actually feel like we are the person that they say that we are. It's so weird.

BOB: Which in 99 out of 99 cases is 180 degrees wrong.

NATALIE: Yes, it is.

BOB: So that's what we said thirty minutes ago. The people who are thinking that of themselves are beautiful, powerful, strong, generous, kind, forbearing people who think, "I must be mean, I must be selfish, I must be all these things." But it's because they've internalized the voice, and you almost have to do that to keep peace in your home.

I want to zoom out for a second if I could. I don't know if you'll remember this. In one of the conferences we did together, and I don't remember which one it is, I told a parable. I don't want to retell the whole thing, but I want to give an overview of it because that parable for me, it really is about the process, the way to and the way through.

I tell the parable about this young woman who used to love hiking. She loved the outdoors, she loved the mountains, she loved the ocean, and she would just go and she'd hike through the outdoors and she'd take a lunch with her and just really loved the freedom of being out in the outdoors. And it brought such joy to her. She just loved doing that.

And one day on a hike, she comes across a man who's crouched down by a giant, cavernous pit in the ground, and he's crouched down picking things up, and she stops by and says, "What's going on?" And he says, "Ugh, my backpack dropped and a bunch of my stuff fell, and some of it even fell down in this pit."

And she being the nice person that she is, she says, "Well, I'll help." She gets down on the ground, and also starts helping. And this guy kind of makes a few funny comments about, "If one of us would get down in the pit, they could get the stuff that's there, but it

looks dangerous down there." And so she just continues to help.

But all of a sudden, kind of out of the corner of her eye, she sees something, and next thing you know, she's been pushed down into the pit, and she's tumbled thirty feet onto sharp rocks and hits rock bottom, possibly breaking bones, but at least being knocked unconscious and being bruised badly on the way down.

She wakes up and she looks up, and there's kind of a shadowy figure at the top of the pit, and he's saying, "Hey, can you see my stuff down there?" And she's shocked. She can't imagine that this person is asking about stuff when she's in incredible pain and she's at the bottom of this pit and she's still barely regained consciousness, she's still checking to see if she's broken anything.

And she just shouts back and says, "I'm injured. I can't get out." And the voice comes back again, "Yeah, but could you throw my stuff up?" And she tries to respond and eventually, the figure goes away, but she's thinking to herself, "I've got to get out of here. I'm stuck down in this pit and I don't know how badly I'm injured, but all the sides of the pit are straight up. I don't know if I can get up without any help."

And she actually takes a little bit of time to kind of find some water and drink some water. And after a couple of hours, she's like, "Maybe I'm strong enough to get out." But the climb out is a long, arduous climb where first of all, she's in a lot of pain. Secondly, she didn't bring rock climbing stuff. She just was hiking. And then to top it all off, she keeps thinking she sees something over her shoulder and it makes her jump and fall back down to the bottom of the pit.

And it's hours and hours and hours of arduous climbing up out of the pit and she finally gets near the top and she thinks to herself, "Do I dare get out of the pit? He might still be up there." She ponders for a little bit and tries to listen and does everything she can to discern whether or not he's up there.

And finally, she realizes she's got to get out of the pit because it's the only way she can survive. So she climbs up, looking carefully around, she looks to see, and there seems to be nobody there. So when she finally hoists herself up on the flat ground, she doesn't see anybody. So she drags her backpack over behind a big tree and sits up on solid ground for a few minutes to catch her breath until she hears voices down the path.

And at first she thinks, "It could be him again," and she does everything she can to hide herself. But then she realizes it's mostly female voices, and she thinks, "But I don't know

if they're safe." I guess I'm telling more of the story than I intended to, but it's hard to just tell about it. I just didn't want to take too much time.

And so she hears the female voices, but then she says, "I don't know if they're safe," and so again, she hides behind the tree. Finally, when the coast seems clear, she drags herself two miles back the path on injured legs back to her car, drives herself home, and commits the next several years of her life to becoming an expert at climbing rock faces, first aid in the wilderness, and recognizing dangerous people.

She starts studying everything she can, and she becomes an expert at first aid in wilderness and climbing rock faces. And she becomes an expert at reading people and learns everything she can about what kinds of people are dangerous and what signs to look for. And she's become so expert at this, she could even teach classes about it and occasionally does.

But then one day it occurs to her, "I used to love hiking. I used to love to be outdoors, and I've forgotten that." And one day she packs herself a lunch and she goes out to hike and she feels too anxious, so she only hikes about thirty minutes. But later that week, she hikes an hour. Later that week, she hikes two. And here's the key: She begins to find herself again.

And for me, Natalie, there are so many pieces in that story. When we talk about the process of moving from the scales come off my eyes through I can rebuild my life again. The journey goes from the scales have come off my eyes, but maybe I can fix it.

I heard Natalie, who's an expert, say, "It's very rare for an abuser to change, but maybe mine is that story. And so I'm going to do everything I can to make my story that story." And there's a part of the integrity of the abuse victim that would say, "If I haven't tried everything possible, I don't feel okay about giving up." But there's also part of that people-pleasing thing that says, "Other people will think less of me. I'm still carrying the weight of my spouse. If I divorce them, I'll hurt them." On and on, there are all the things that we think.

And at some point, there's a point where we say, "But they pushed me in a pit and left me at the bottom of the pit. And if I'm ever going to be okay again, I at least have to get out of the pit." And there comes a point in there where there's this decision of, "It's time to get out." Whatever that means, whether that means separation, divorce, both of those things, what it means in terms of boundaries.

And then there's a period of time where, because of the trauma of what we've been

through, it really does help our mind to read all the books and listen to all the podcasts. It helps us feel a sense of safety and it helps us feel a sense of security and it helps us understand ourselves. And the other thing it does that's so important that's not in the parable... And this is one of the things I love about what you do. We keep trying to emulate you, but we're not doing this part as well as I think you are.

It's so important to find other people who are or were in the place that you are. It's so important to hear someone else say, "Yeah, me too. This is what it was like for me at that point. And I found myself at this point. I finally got past this point." "And yes, me too. And this is what it was like, and you're not crazy, and you're not bad, and you're not weak."

The community element of that actually engages parts of the brain that disengage in trauma and re-engage when we connect other people in meaningful ways. I think you've probably heard that when we tell our story and it's validated, it actually restores some brain function and is an important, significant part of the healing process that someone or several people hear us tell the story and say, "I'm so sorry," and express empathy and express care.

So as this woman climbs up out of the pit, there's a point where we get out of the pit, but it's important to then, "What do I do after my pit experience?" But I think this is what you guys were talking about on the podcast. And the thing that I always find myself both holding in front of people who aren't quite there yet, but also saying to people at that moment when they go, "Maybe everybody's left me. My church has stopped supporting me. They support him instead. The counselor backed him up, et cetera, et cetera. Maybe everybody's left me."

And there's this moment where all the denial goes away that we talked about a few minutes ago. And in that moment, it's time to ask the question, "Who am I then before the abuse happened? Who was I before I ever met him?" And if the abuse was also in the family of origin, so it actually goes back to childhood... Because Polly talks about that, my wife. She talks about how her abuse was from childhood on, and she can't go back to a time when she can remember not being abused.

But the question isn't, "How do I heal?" The question is, "Who am I?" And then what does it take to rediscover and regain that person to, "You were an athlete back then. Go back and play some sports." "You loved hiking," like the woman in my story. "Get your backpack and go out in the woods." "You were an artist," "You were a musician," "You were a scientist. Find yourself again."

And I think there's an element where we have to do some of the deep healing work that we talked about, but I think there's a time when it's almost like kind of picking at wounds. "I've read all the books I need to read. I can teach the classes. I've been on Natalie's podcast a few times. I can tell other people about it, but do I have any identity separate of a recovering abuse victim?"

NATALIE: Yeah. For people who are more like your wife, because I think there are a lot of survivors who do have families of origin and they can't really go back to... I would suggest connecting with that younger person that you used to be and asking her, "What are your dreams?"

Because when you were a little girl, you still had dreams. You still had ideas of what life could be or what you maybe wanted to do. So going back to even those things. Maybe you were kept from those things because of the constraints in your life and the circumstances of your life, but still, those dreams hold the key to who you are, who the essence of you is.

BOB: I always tell people, ask two questions. One, ask what you dreamed about when you were eight, nine or ten years old. What did you dream about when you were eight, nine, ten, right in that range, before we start looking at big pictures and having abstract thought? Did you dream about being a superstar in the NBA? Did you dream about going to the moon? And even though there might be some fantasy wrapped around that, at the core of that fantasy is something real.

NATALIE: Yeah. Like either a sense of adventure or a sense of loving to nurture other people.

BOB: So the one question is ask yourself what you dreamed about in that little snippet of life. But then the other question, and I'm surprised how often people don't ask this question, is, "When you are on your deathbed and you're moments from that last breath, what do you want people to say and what do you want to say about the life you lived?"

NATALIE: That's a really good question.

BOB: For me, those two peel away all of the people pleasing, expectation, world demands of us, all that, and it just says, "What's the core of what desire?" There's a book by John Eldredge called *The Journey of Desire*, and one of the things he says, the very first line of the book is, "Desire is everything." And what he's saying is, we've been told not to desire and push it down. But at the core of it, desire is the thing that's

designed to move us forward. And one of the things an abuser wants to do is they want their desires to be preeminent and you to only desire to serve them. And to reawaken someone's personal desire, either those years from eight to ten, or that deathbed question, it's like, "What would I want? What would I want?"

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so what is the most important thing that you would say to someone who is somewhere along this journey, this abuse recovery journey?

BOB: Because we both know that question was coming. And I've given two of the answers already. One of them is don't think as much about healing, but become yourself. One of them is you're going to make it. And I think I might have heard you say this or Gretchen, but it's such wisdom. You are strong enough to live in it. You're clearly strong enough to get out of it. It takes much more strength to live in the abuse than it does to get out and rebuild a life. It doesn't feel like it because you're wanting to use that strength to cling to what was, but I think just the idea you're going to make it to the life that you want to live.

And whether you can show them that, tell them that, encourage them of that, those times you and I talked about a few moments ago where the weight of all the things that are collapsing just seems so dark and where you suddenly look at things that seemed real, and you look at it and go, "Those things weren't real," and you're building on all that you know you have left, that's actually the moment where you are starting to make it. It feels so desolate, but yeah, I think you're going to make it. You're strong.

NATALIE: Well, we're almost done. I don't know if you can talk about this in a short way because it kind of opens up a whole other can of worms, but maybe you can just give us a little nugget of wisdom. So we did kind of talk about the fact that sometimes your church might end up not being able to be there for you for whatever reason. And they might actually want to keep putting the responsibility on you, maybe because of the way their theology is or whatever. What would you say to people who are actually dealing with a situation like that as well on top of the emotional abuse that they're getting from their partner?

BOB: I hear you loud and clear when you say it as concisely as I can. A helpful snapshot is, when Jesus talks to the woman we call "the woman caught in adultery," He does two different things. He deals with the crowd and He deals with the woman. And interestingly, the one He walks away with is not the crowd. Because the crowd is the religious leaders. The crowd is the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the ones who are in charge of the law. They're the ones who instigated the conversation and they believe they're on God's side. But who He stays with and sits down next to and expresses

empathy to is the woman.

And I think there's a stark image there of the difference between what it is that comes from an institutional approach versus the person of Jesus and how He sees. And I think for us to sift and sort through that, to realize that the church itself doesn't necessarily represent God in any of those things necessarily... I know that there are churches that are healthy and leaders that embrace people and stand against oppressors. I believe there are. But if your church has abandoned you in this process, know first and foremost that God not only has not, but He's drawn closer.

The second thing I'd say about that is He's not afraid for you to be ticked at Him. I will say that in my two years post-divorce, I was so angry at God. And a lot of that was my own deception, right? A lot of that was my own picture, feeling abandoned, but it felt so real. It felt like He had not only abandoned me — He'd set me up for what had happened.

But here's the thing. I'd duke it out with Him. I'd tell Him how mad I was. I'd tell Him what I thought was His fault, and I'd tell Him that stuff. And as much as some people may be anxious about that stuff, that's a form of prayer. Doesn't sound very holy, but in that wrestle with Him, He'd find times and moments to just remind me, "Hey, I know it feels like I wasn't there. I'm here right now and you matter to me."

NATALIE: I was listening to The BEMA Podcast and they were talking about how Abraham got into this debate with God about whether or not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. That's not the point of it, though. The point that they wanted to make is that Abraham had what they would call back then "chutzpah." I think that's how you say that word. And Jacob had that too. That was something that they admired. If you could go to God and wrestle with God, that takes some chutzpah. And God actually likes that. God wants to have a relationship with us where we can talk to Him about real things, where we can debate back and forth, where we can ask Him about those real problems.

I have to do a shameless plug for my book right now in this moment too, because that is really what my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, is about. It's about viewing God one way for many, many years and then realizing that's really not who God is. God is not like all of these people that were in my life that were trying to shape me and control me. God is so much bigger. He's not a scary little god. He is this big, safe love.

And when you're in a big, safe love, you can talk to God. He's big and safe. You can present your fears to him. You can present your arguments to him. And He's just big and safe. You're always, always, always safe.

BOB: Interesting how secure He is that He's not made insecure by questions, doubts, and arguments.

NATALIE: Yes, very good.

BOB: Can I put in a shameless plug?

NATALIE: Yeah.

BOB: We are doing something about it too.

NATALIE: Tell us about it.

BOB: This last Sunday, we launched the inaugural meeting of what we're calling The Living Room.

NATALIE: How did that go? I thought of that as kind of like an online church. Do you think of it like that?

BOB: I keep saying no.

NATALIE: Oh, okay. So tell us what it is.

BOB: I mean, I keep saying it's not a church, but it's in the sense that literally we had people from other countries as well as across the U.S. And the goal is to gather people... Of course, our community on tdacad.com, our community there has a number of different ways that they can gather, but we also can Zoom through the website. So it's completely separate from Facebook, very private and protected.

But the goal is to gather every first and third Sunday morning for an hour for the purpose of worship and spiritual growth. If you know me at all, you know that I make a strong distinction between the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is where we have all this, "You're doing it right, you're doing it wrong, you're doing it right, you're doing it wrong," and the Tree of Life, which is where the breath of God restores us in every moment.

And it's been hard for me to hear people come back and say, "Once I understand the difference, I hear it everywhere I go. I hear the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil everywhere I go. Where do I go to get teaching that comes from the Tree of Life?"

And so Sunday mornings, we'll do a bit of, it's all open for conversation because Zoom gives us that. So we can talk on the chat, ask questions, go back and forth about stuff. We'll bring a bit of time of prayer. I'll bring up peace at a time of spiritual growth. And then I really want to play with the idea that worship isn't just about singing songs.

NATALIE: I was thinking about that. I thought, "How did they do the singing part?"

BOB: See? So over the years, people have said to me, "Bob, I'm done with church, but I really miss the corporate worship." And I hear that, and I think "We have so been inured in the idea that it's a song service." From the nineties on, it became this kind of big crowd all lifting up the choruses together with electric guitars, which I'm a fan of.

But what people are really saying is, "I missed the song service." And I occasionally would, in settings where we didn't have a worship leader, a musical worship leader, I would lead a time of worship where we just facilitate people acknowledging the attributes of God.

And in a crowded room, in a live setting, I would say, "Let's take a few moments to get still and I want you to turn your attention to God's presence here with us. And as you do, say out loud something you know is true about Him. And then God, would you tell us, and we invite people to hear, God, would you tell us how you want us to know you today? And for you in the room, say out loud what you hear Him saying to you."

Worship is really about giving worth or worth-ship to someone or something. And we're literally saying, "You are worth our attention. You're worth valuing. You're worth being the center of what we're saying and doing." And learning to do that without music, I think, is crucial for the human heart because we feel stuck unless someone's playing a song. But to be able to say, "You're good."

So yesterday we facilitated a time and Polly said, "But can there be sometimes music?" And I said, "Sure." But I want to help people think differently about worship in particular because I want people to join together. It's the sweetest thing.

I think we asked three questions: "If you turn your attention to God, what do you most notice about who He is? Put it in the chat." And man, the beautiful stuff that started coming up in the chat. "Ask God or think of a time when He protected you, and put it in the chat." And man, just the stories of delivery and protection. And oh, I think the third one was, "Tell us something that God delivered you from, a time you felt stuck and God got you out of it." And, you know, in the chat, and the chat's publicly available, we had about fifty people at our first meeting.

NATALIE: Wow, that's great. So you're not seeing everybody then on the screen? It's not like a meeting, a Zoom meeting — it's more like a Zoom webinar?

BOB: Well, we did yesterday because we have less than a hundred. So some people don't want to be seen. But as long as we're under a hundred, we can still see everybody's faces. But if we grow past a hundred, we're going to have to do more of a webinar. We won't see faces, but we'll be able to engage on the chat.

And what we want to do is answer the question, “What do we do for spiritual growth if we don't trust the church anymore? Where do we go to engage a community of worship and spiritual growth if we've been so hurt by the church we can't go back?” And of course, you, probably like me, hear that so many times, we so felt the weight of providing an answer to that.

So The Living Room, it is for subscribers, so you do have to be a member of the community, but being a part of the community gets you all the freedom stuff, all the take your life back from abuse stuff, all the other stuff as well as The Living Room. And I feel a lot of weight on it, Natalie. Because I feel like we're in a season where the church needs to go through some changes anyway.

NATALIE: Oh, I think it is. I think there's a mass exodus happening and then there's going to be a void and then something will fill it. Hopefully something more authentic and more spirit-led, I think.

BOB: I've said, from way back when I wrote my leadership book, I've said that kind of the structure right now is like this, and I think it has to become more like this for it to remain organic and authentic, where people feel the safety to be who they really are in that setting. I think that structure of hierarchy makes people think, “Who am I supposed to be?” But in a structure where everybody's level, there's no need to pretend.

NATALIE: Yes, I love that. That's so, so good. That describes what I grew up with is there's this ideal that you have to try to be, and then you lose who you actually are in trying to be that nebulous, unattainable, whatever it is. You can be like Christ — and this is what I think He wanted for us, to be His hands and feet — but also ourselves. We partner with Him. It's all of us partnering with all of Him and it's makes this beautiful thing.

BOB: Why would he make us so unique if not to be a unique expression of His nature that only I am here to do and only you are here to do and only Polly is here to do? Each of us carries something unique that when brought together forms a complete body. To

have this idea that we all have to conform to this specific image takes all of the uniqueness of God's creation and calls it sin. Ludicrous in my mind.

NATALIE: Yeah. It's crazy. Well, this has been a great conversation, a longer episode than we're used to, but I think it was very riveting and definitely worth listening to. I'm excited to share this with everyone on the Flying Free Podcast. Thanks so much for coming back, Bob. It's been too long. We won't have it be that long before you come back again, okay? I promise.

BOB: Thank you for going longer for a few minutes. And thank you so much for having me on. I'm really grateful to be here with you.

NATALIE: Yeah. And we will provide all of the links to everything in the show notes. So if you're listening and you want to get to the places and find all the things, we'll have all of those links in the show notes.

BOB: Thanks, Natalie. So great to see you.

NATALIE: Good to see you too.