

WHAT I'M READING, LISTENING TO, AND THINKING ABOUT

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 278 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are doing something totally different. I've never done this before, but I woke up this morning thinking about all the amazing books I've read and podcasts I've listened to and experiences I've had this past month, and I thought it would be fun to share some of the things I've been learning and thinking about as a result of my exposure to these things. So at the time of this recording, it's the very end of March, so these are things related to my experiences in March of 2024.

A theme I'm seeing play out over and over again in my life is the theme of love: What it is, what it isn't, how to get it, how to give it, how powerful it is, and yet how elusive it feels sometimes. An unstoppable love plays an important role in my own memoir, *All the Scary Little Gods*, as I walk the reader through different experiences in my life where I really didn't understand love, but I found myself passionately seeking and pursuing it from the time I was a small child. And that really is the human quest, isn't it? To find a place of rest in a great Love that keeps us safely held?

A book I recently finished was a book I heard Peter Enns recommend on an Instagram reel called *After*. It's by Dr. Bruce Greyson, the world's leading expert on near-death experiences. Now, I've seen other books about near-death experiences written from a Christian perspective, but honestly, I've just never felt compelled to read them because I knew they'd be biased, and if people were just projecting their own religious beliefs onto their NDEs, then in my mind, it kind of discredited them. I know I'm just being skeptical.

This book fascinated me because it was written from a secular viewpoint, and Dr. Greyson has been researching and investigating in this field of near-death experiences for decades. So I really wanted to find out what someone like that, with no preconceived notions about what lies after — in fact, he was very skeptical when he first began — what someone like that might honestly discover about NDEs.

I'm just going to read you Amazon's description of this book because it's much more succinct than I could probably say it. But here's what Amazon says: "Cases of remarkable experiences on the threshold of death have been reported since ancient times and are described today by 10% of people whose hearts stop. The medical world has generally ignored these near-death experiences, dismissing them as 'tricks of the brain' or 'wishful thinking.'

But after his patients started describing events that he could not just sweep under the rug, Dr. Bruce Greyson began to investigate. As a physician without a religious belief system, he approached near-death experiences from a scientific perspective. In *After*, he shares the transformative lessons he has learned over four decades of research. Our culture has tended to view dying as the end of our consciousness, the end of our existence, a dreaded prospect that for many people evokes fear and anxiety.

But Dr. Greyson shows how scientific revelations about the dying process can support an alternative theory. Dying could be the threshold between one form of consciousness and another. Not an ending, but a transition. This new perspective on the nature of death can transform the fear of dying that pervades our culture into a healthy view of it as one more milestone in the course of our lives. The book *After* challenges us to open our minds to those experiences and to what they can teach us, and in so doing, expand our understanding of consciousness and what it means to be human."

The bottom line lesson that Dr. Greyson discovered that I got out of it is that there is a source of inexplicable love that is holding this universe, and that learning about what happens on the threshold of death teaches us that love is what life and death are all about. Wow. I mean, that just goes along with so much of what I believe God has been showing me the last few years. Interestingly enough, the last few years, I have come out of a religious environment that is so much about shame and fear, which the Bible teaches are the opposite of love.

Now, when I think about love, I think about not being afraid anymore. I think about not being ashamed anymore. I think about feeling safely held. I think about being able to make mistakes and take risks and use my voice without being afraid of being cast out, discarded, and mistreated. In other words, I can trust love to keep me.

One of my favorite verses when I was a little girl was John 10:28: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

When I would hear stories and feel afraid that I could be lost forever or that I wasn't chosen by God or that God had me hanging like a spider over a flame of fire, ready to drop me in at His whims, I would think of this verse and find a different view of God through the words of Jesus. I could trust in that love. I could rest in it.

So I listened to this book called *After* on Audible, and I found it to be a beautiful, informative, and validating resource that brought me tremendous comfort and hope. It

is not a Christian book, but it is a Christ-tion book, if that makes any sense. And I know that will make sense to many of you. If it doesn't make to you, I would just encourage you to keep seeking.

Along the same lines of this theme of love and resting, I heard about a podcast called The BEMA Podcast with Marty Solomon. Now, this podcast looks at the Bible through a Jewish hermeneutic, making the argument that it was written by Jewish authors for a Jewish audience. So reading it and interpreting it through a Western lens thousands of years after it was written has really messed up a lot of things for us and kept so much of its wisdom hidden from us.

So right now, this particular podcast, The BEMA Podcast, it has eight seasons, and they recommend starting with season one, which begins with the book of Genesis. And so I did that. And so far at the time of this recording, I've listened to Genesis 1 through 11 — episodes that deal with Genesis 1 through 11 — and whoa. It really has me in awe of the Bible again.

Now, I talk about my longstanding relationship with the Bible in my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, and one of the things I had to do in order to heal from the ways that the Bible had been misinterpreted and used to perpetuate abuse and a culture of fear and shame in my own life is to stop reading it for a while. I wasn't ready to throw the whole thing out, but I needed to create some space between me and this book in order to explore what it would mean to connect with the Holy Spirit in my life in some other ways.

Jesus never said He was leaving the disciples with a book. He said he was leaving the disciples with the Holy Spirit. So I wanted to find out what that meant. I wanted to learn how to abide by the Holy Spirit on a minute-by-minute basis and not just view my connection with God as this thirty to sixty minutes that I spend each morning when I'm reading this book, the Bible, and praying. There's nothing wrong with doing that, but I just wanted something more. I was wondering if there was something more.

So anyway, back to The BEMA Podcast. I'm never going to be able to do it justice, seriously. You'll just have to go and listen to it yourself to get the full gist of this. But this podcast has introduced me to a couple of fascinating things so far. First of all, the Bible leaves us with more questions than answers, and we don't have to be afraid of that. And they are not afraid to read a passage and then pick out all of the problems, all of the contradictions. There are so many.

They give voice and they articulate all the questions that I've had in my Christian life

and more that I've even missed that made me feel uneasy, but I just kind of gaslit myself into ignoring it. They call it The Lullaby Syndrome — I think it's The Lullaby Syndrome — where you read something over and over again so much that you just take for granted what you were taught that it means, and then you don't see other things that are actually there.

So anyway, in other words, there's no spiritual gaslighting going on. There's no arrogant insistence that, "This is the correct way to view this passage." There's just this incredible sense of curiosity, openness to the mystery of the Bible and the layers and layers of wisdom that are there, and openness also to letting the Bible speak on its own terms instead of through my particular interpretive lens as a 21st-century female or as our pastors do through their particular lens through a 21st-century seminary graduate.

So another interesting thing that I had never heard of before is a literary tool that Easterners used back then called Achiasm. And Achiasm is basically a pattern where the first part of a story mirrors the last part. And it can do it in two ways. It can be ABCDDCBA or it can be an ABCDABCD pattern. So it's like a story folded up against itself. And then right in the middle, if you were to take a piece of paper and fold it and then just look at the crease, that would be the middle. There's this point. And that is where the hidden truth gem of the story is.

So in these episodes, they show how, for example, in the creation story, Day 1 corresponds to Day 4, Day 2 corresponds to Day 5, Day 3 corresponds to Day 6, and then there is the very center, which is Day 7. And you can go and listen to find out how these days correspond or you can see if you can pick it out on your own. But the very center of that creation story is that God rested. That is the middle point or the hidden truth that has profound impact on our lives if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

There's also this pattern of threes. There are tons of threes in the creation story. There are words that appear three times and then repeat three times in a row. The creation story has repetitions of the numbers seven and ten as well. The creation story is a poem. It's not trying to tell us how God scientifically created the world — it's trying to tell us about God Himself.

So another thing they point out in this first chapter of Genesis is how it repeats evening and morning the first day, evening and morning the second day. And in the Jewish world, the day began in the evening. That's why they start with evening. We would say, "Morning and evening the first day." But not in the Jewish world, not in that world back then. Do you know what they begin with, then? The Jewish world begins with evening, which is the resting part.

And the point is, the piece of wisdom that is embedded in this, is that God is about resting, not about producing. So what can we learn from this? We learn so much through this about trusting. We learn about what it means to just be. We learn about resting in our Creator because God is a God who rests.

And if you are a survivor who has been trying and trying and trying and working and working and working to gain love and approval, this is very good news. You don't need to do that anymore. People who are trying to make you do that, they don't understand who God is. Maybe they don't know about this God. Maybe the god they're worshiping is a scary little god, but this God is a God who rests, and He invites all of us into his rest.

So that's just a little taste of this podcast. This podcast takes you through each story in Genesis and continues on, obviously — this is just season one — and shows you all the problems and the holes, and then it also shows you the hidden gems. Now, it's a perspective I've never heard before, and I gotta say, I am obsessed.

So later on, they go over all these chiasms so far, and then how there are chiasms within other chiasms, and right in the middle of a great big chiasm that sits over chapters 1 through 11 is the single word, "Noah." And it's in chapter five. So the center of this big, huge chiasm is Genesis 5:28-29, and right in the center of those verses is the word "Noah." Guess what "Noah" means? "He rests."

So here's a quote from this particular podcast episode that just blew my mind: "Actually, if you go to the next slide in our presentation, the name 'Noah' means 'he rests,' which is just brilliant because this whole story started off with a story about Shabbat. The whole thing, Genesis 1, was a story about resting in the goodness of creation. Here in the center of the chiasm, that is Genesis 1-11, that is the preface, and it sits a verse about a man whose name means, 'he rests.' And it's the same man that's going to save all of creation.

There's this really definite hint in the preface that if you are willing to trust the story, if you're willing to be somebody that can find that place of rest and not become obsessed with your own creativity, obsessed with your own fears, obsessed with your own insecurities, obsessed with the threats of broken relationships and the people around you, and if you can learn how to be like God and to stop and know when to say enough, if you can know when to stop creating, if you can know when to stop destroying, well, God's going to be able to use you to save all of creation. He's going to be able to use you to put the story back together. You're going to be this great partner for Him."

And I love how in this podcast they talk a lot about this partnering with God, which is

another theme that I feel like God has been showing me and revealing to me in just every area of my life that I get to partner with God in my own life, and in doing that and in partnering with God and healing my own life, that it has a ripple effect or a butterfly effect that goes out to my own family and then out to other people around me. So check out The BEMA Podcast if this kind of thing fascinates you as much as it does me.

Now, another thing I did in March is I went to an IFS, Internal Family Systems, conference near Chicago in the middle of the month. I had never been to one of these before, and I think I was expecting it to be more teaching. I brought my big notebook prepared to take all these copious notes and learn all the things, but it was actually four days of Internal Family System exercises and listening to others share their IFS experiences.

Now, I'm not really big on sharing in a large group. I mean, I can do this podcast, but when there are a hundred people in a room and I'm not the designated speaker, I just stay quiet and listen to other people. So I listened and I enjoyed listening to other people. There were a lot of sad stories. There is a lot of pain in this world. Most of the attendees were therapists. I had so many interesting conversations during the mealtimes because we all ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, and I made sure to sit with different people every single time and just got to meet some very, very amazing people. I felt so much peace while I was there.

But on the third day in the morning, a woman stood up right in the morning when it was just starting, and she scolded everyone. She was upset that there were, in her words, "so many men," and that women didn't have more of a voice there. Now, there were a hundred people there I think. I would say at the most there were ten men in this group of a hundred women and the rest were all women. And of the men that had spoken so far, they had bravely shared really vulnerable stories of childhood abuse and other horrible things they had lived through. So it felt like she was trying to take their voices away and their safety away.

And then she went on to say that there were not very many representatives of the global majority in the room and that they weren't getting chances to use their voices. I was totally shocked. First of all, there were several representatives of the global majority and many of them had opened up and shared their stories as well. The three assistants were all representatives of the global majority. These were the three women who were assisting Dick Schwartz and his wife who were leading the conference. There were some women who appeared outwardly to be white, but they revealed later they were in fact members of the global majority.

The bizarre thing was that this woman speaking was white. So she was definitely not a representative of the global majority but she felt the need to protect them, which felt more like she was infantilizing them, honestly, as if they needed a white person to defend them.

You could feel the air being sucked out of the room. I don't think a single soul there was not triggered by this woman's rant. Part of me was yelling inside, "You are ruining this beautiful space for everyone." Dick Schwartz and his wife were leading the session and they were able to pull everyone together eventually, but it took all morning. Some people were crying. It was hard.

But on the next day, which was also the last day — there was one morning left. It wasn't a full day. It was just going to be like, going to get together for the last three hours and then go get on our airplanes and fly home. But at the very beginning, the same woman raised her hand and I could not believe it — they gave her the mic. I wanted to run over and grab the mic out of her hand and say, "No, let someone else talk, please. I beg of you." But they gave her the mic and she proceeded to do the exact same thing all over again. She claimed she had the spirit of Maya Angelou and that it was her responsibility to let all of us know that this was a serious problem that needed to be addressed here in this room.

The leaders ended up calling for a break, and then I just decided to leave at that point. Now, there were only a couple of hours left, but I was done, and I felt really good about going.

The reason I'm sharing this with you is because I have worked hard to create spaces where I can thrive and grow and where others can as well. And that space, I felt like it was getting infected with something that felt sick and wrong. And I realized that there's nothing I can do about that. But there is something I can do. I have choice for myself what I do with my own body, with my own brain, with my own ears, with my own voice, and I could choose to stay there or leave.

And I realized even as parts of me were kind of panicking inside, I was able to say to my system, "It's okay. You can stay if you want to, and you don't have to stay either. You can leave, and it doesn't matter if they all think you're weird for leaving. That's okay too." I don't think they even noticed that I left, but.

Me from ten years ago would've felt like I had to stay. But the me that I have become decides where I put my body and what I listen to and what I expose myself to. So I ended up going to the airport early that day. Guess what I did? I rested.

All right, another book I read in March was Dr. Ramani's new book. It's called *It's Not You*. You may be seeing it on your social media. It was an instant New York Times bestseller. It's called *It's Not You: Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People*. So I've got this book called *Is It Me?* And Dr. Ramani's book says "Nope. It's not you."

I've been posting some quotes on social media this month from her book. One of the things that I teach in my program, my Flying Free Sisterhood program, is radical acceptance. It is so, so important. And sure enough, Dr. Ramani explicitly says in her book that radical acceptance is the gateway to healing. I tell women that when they cease to be surprised at how their abuser acts or the choices that he makes, that is when they know they have come to a place of radical acceptance. That is the point at which they are finally free to heal. This means radically accepting that they are not going to change ever.

Now, I know this is really hard for Christians to get because we have this bad habit instilled in us to think that God can change anyone, including abusers. And God can, but they don't want to change and God is not a puppet master. So when you finally accept that your abuser isn't going to change, that is when you can shift your focus to your own change and transformation.

Another book that I read this month — it's actually a re-read — I re-read Louise Penny's first book in her "Inspector Gamache" series called *Still Life*. So I have this program for divorced Christian women called *Flying Higher*, and I taught a bunch of courses for that group a few years ago. So if you join, you can access all of those courses.

But for the women who have already gone through all the coursework, we are just having fun reading books and studying together. So last year we went through twelve life-changing, non-fiction book studies, which again, when you join you can actually dig into those archives if you want to and listen to those discussions.

But there were several women who didn't actually read the books, but they just listened to the discussions and just got so much nuggets of wisdom for their lives, even just listening to the discussions. But anyway, this year we're reading through twelve thought-provoking fiction books. Fun, right? So far in January, we've read *The Dutch House*. In February, we read *Lessons in Chemistry*, and then in March, we read *Still Life* by Louise Penny.

Now, in *Still Life*, one of the themes is that people are either really living and showing up for their lives authentically, or they are pretending or stalling out on life and not really living at all. Several of the characters are living still lives in this book. It's kind of a

play off of the idea of painting a still life or a still life painting because there's a theme of art running through this whole book as well.

But there's this newbie detective in the story who blames everyone and everything else for her lack of wisdom, and she subsequently is unable to gain any wisdom herself. There's this other character who also blames everyone else for his lack of movement in life, and in both cases, it is the fact that they cannot take responsibility for themselves and their own thoughts and behaviors that keeps them from being authentic and truly alive.

And I couldn't help but think about the people in my own life who have never grown. They've never learned. They've never gained any wisdom because they've always believed that they already had all the answers, that they already had it all together, and anyone or anything that would show them or hold up a mirror to them to say, "Actually, you're very human. You make human mistakes, just like the rest of us," they would just look at that and go, "Oh, nope, that's someone else's fault, or that's someone else's problem."

In my new book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, I talk about how taking responsibility is something that only adults can do. It is the very essence of adulting. Anything less is remaining in a child role, unable to move forward.

And finally, I just want to share that I created a Spotify playlist for my new book this month, *All the Scary Little Gods*. If you go to Spotify and just do a search for "All the Scary Little Gods," you'll be able to find it. But this playlist goes in chronological order of the book, and it has most of the songs that I directly mention in the book. Those are on the playlist, but there's also some other songs that were part of my journey.

I love the songs that I picked to start and end this playlist: "Dear Me," by Nichole Nordeman opens up. "Dear me, this is a letter to the girl I used to be." And then I ended the playlist with "A Mother's Prayer," which is my prayer for my own children and grandchildren. And it's a prayer from my inner mother to my little Natalie, who has longed for and ached for a mother to see and know and love her. She has longed to rest. And now I can partner with God in giving little Natalie a place to rest. I can't ever listen to that song, "A Mother's Prayer," without crying. "Lead us to a place, guide us with your grace, to a place where we'll be safe." And this is my prayer for each one of you, too.