



BONUS EPISODE

Healing and Resurrection

A conversation with Aundi Kolber about why we need the word “trauma,” what is meant by it, and how we grow in its aftermath.

SHOW NOTES

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill tells the stories of myriad hurts committed in the name of Christ and his church. Real pain inflicted on real people has consequences; and, for many in the Mars Hill community, the ripple effects have been long lasting. Individuals’ spiritual trauma has born out in subsequent church relationships and even personal spiritual practices like Bible study and prayer.

In a culture enamored with therapeutic lingo, it can be hard to determine what true trauma is. Spend any time on social media, and you’ll find claims of trauma and invocations against toxic people, especially those associated with the church. Exhorted by Scripture to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves,” how can we discern this kind of abuse when we experience it? How can we create organizations that are hospitable to the hurting? And, what can we do to recover?

In this bonus episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospers sits down with therapist Aundi Kolber to investigate the roots of spiritual trauma and chart a path forward after pain. Committed to an integrated view of humans as divine image bearers, Kolber explains the necessity of embodiment in our spiritual lives and offers practical tips for starting the process of repair after trauma.

You can learn more about Aundi and her work at www.aundikolber.com.

MASTHEAD

“The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” is a production of Christianity Today

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🐦 @MikeCosper

Mike Cospers: There's a question I've heard again and again from listeners to the podcast. It has to do with the language of spiritual trauma, and what do we mean by that? If you've listened to the series itself, then you've heard various stories of damage, disorientation and deconstruction that happened in the aftermath of the collapse of Mars Hill. But how do we account for the varying levels of impact in the lives of members of the church, or in the stories of people who've been wounded in other churches with similar collapses. Today on the show, we're gonna try to answer those questions, to begin to understand in concrete terms what we mean by spiritual trauma. How it affects not just the mind and the soul, but also the body, and how we understand it in a time when therapeutic language gets tossed around all too easily. And we're going to begin to explore, for those who've suffered it, how they might begin to heal.

My guest for this episode is Aundi Kolber. Aundi is a licensed professional counselor, and the author of *Try Softer*. She specializes in trauma and body-centered therapies, and is particularly interested in the intersection of faith and psychology. She's also a survivor of trauma and brings her own experience of change, healing, and life with God into her work.

From Christianity Today, you are listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Today's episode: Healing and Resurrection After Spiritual Trauma.

When somebody comes to you out of a really difficult church experience, where's the threshold where you start to see this was spiritual abuse, they've got signs of spiritual trauma?

🐦 @aundikolber

Aundi Kolber: A place to start, and really when we're talking about any type of trauma - and abuse is a type of trauma - I really begin with the body. Because the mind can have its own perspective and the nervous system may not match the experience of the mind. So your mind might be like, Oh, it was fine, it wasn't that bad, I looked up this fact and it didn't match. But let's just say, for example, I'm sitting with someone and they're talking about an experience that they had where prayer was used in a weaponized way to make them feel as if they had to do something, and that was used as though that person who was praying was the only one who could hear from God, not the person themselves.

Let's say we're in session, and that person begins to talk about their own prayer life maybe, and they're like, You know, I try to pray, but every time I do, I automatically feel like I'm watching myself, I feel really disoriented, I feel disconnected. In my work, we can't say, Oh, here's your spirit, here's your body, here's your mind, that's not how we were created. We are integrated, holistic people. And so as that person's body is testifying to the reality that this doesn't feel safe enough for me to engage with, and therefore from a place of needing to find some form of safety, I'm needing to what I would call in that situation, dissociate or disconnect, which is our nervous system's way of saying, I'm pulling the plug on this, because in the past, this has been deeply unsafe for me.

So to go back to that baseline question, a lot of what we're looking for is both. Sometimes people recognize that something wasn't okay for them, that that power was used to harm them, that spirituality or faith was used as a cloak over the reality of actually what I want to do is control you or harm you, or you are a transaction to me, or this person who

harmed you, it's their representation of who God is to you. And so for me, though it's helpful to have some definitions looking for, like, patterns of using spiritual experiences in a harmful way or a controlling way, we could look at that and say, yes, generally speaking, that might count as spiritual or religious abuse. But what we're also looking for is the information of our body. So in our culture, a culture that's deeply disembodied, particularly often Western Christian culture, that can be very difficult to get that information.

Mike Cosper: Yeah, I think the challenge for a lot of people hearing that idea, when you talk about it's in the body, for you as a therapist, what are you looking for? What are they exhibiting when they've come out of one of those experiences?

Aundi Kolber: Yeah, really good question. And I think the number one thing that has become so helpful to me when talking about things like spiritual abuse, but really any type of harm or trauma, is looking at what is called the window of tolerance. And that phrase was coined by Dr. Dan Siegel, but I've found it really helpful. And I utilize it a lot to help people understand that when we're in our window, it's really when our whole brain, body, and I would even say our spirit is able to interact, we're integrated. And I think that really is the place from which from a faith perspective, we interface. Like, the God-given wisdom of our bodies also interfaces with our spiritual wisdom, like we are whole. And so we have the best opportunity to live from that place when we're in that window. And I would also just say, that's the place in which we can feel our feelings, or we can engage an interaction, or we can really have a sensation in our body, and everything remains online. And when I say that, it doesn't mean that everything's easy. It doesn't mean that we're just like, Oh, this is the best thing I've ever experienced. It means that we can literally tolerate it in our body.

So what happens, though, is that our body, through something called neuroception, it is always scanning the environment for safety or unsafety, for threat. And even before we've had a conscious thought, our body can begin to go up into what would be like fight or flight, or potentially the fawn response, which oftentimes it looks a little bit like people pleasing. And if those things don't resolve the threat, we will then go down into that dissociation. So that's typically sort of a disconnection or a numbness. It can even look like sort of a depression or a heaviness, and there's a whole spectrum of that.

So this is really important, and this for me is when I talk about the language of the body and listening to the body. When I am in session with someone, first of all, part of my work as a therapist is to be really connected to my own body. Because one of the amazing things about our bodies is that as we are present in our bodies, we literally have the internal framework to actually track with the nervous systems in the bodies of those around us. And so as we do that, for me as a therapist, I'm noticing, I'm noticing cues. Like, is someone beginning, they're saying how much they love their church, but they're agitated, and they're maybe even starting to sweat or they're looking at the door, because their body is like, This isn't safe anymore for me to talk about this. And so part of my work as a therapist is both noticing that, tracking with that person, and helping them to recognize what is it that they need in that very moment to help bring them back into their window of tolerance.

So for some people that might mean that they can't just dive into their story. Like maybe

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someone comes in and they've got years of spiritual abuse that maybe they're just beginning to have an understanding of. Oftentimes I will give them a very, very quick overview of how I do my work so that they understand why it may be important for them not to just go into that verbal description of what happened. Because I think our bodies are so designed to want to heal, but what can happen is it's almost like a car that gets stuck in the snow and you're just putting the gas on and those wheels are spinning, but you're not going anywhere. And I think if we dive in sometimes too quickly and we're not honoring the pace of our body, so if we're not noticing the cues like, oh, I'm getting - I sometimes use the words activated - I'm getting super activated as I tell this story. If we can notice that and match the pace of our work with the pace of the nervous system, what begins to happen is that person builds safety, and there's a deeper integration where healing can actually begin to happen.

Mike Cosper: How is it that the body absorbs these experiences and it's throwing off signals that something's wrong, and it's trying to get attention, get space, do what it needs to do. Is there a process of seduction that's getting past the body that does the damage in the first place? Is it a kind of thing where it's like you get involved in a spiritual community, and it's the honeymoon phase, man, this is all great, and people get invested at that season, and then when those alarm bells start going off, it's almost like they've got the cognition at that point that says, No, I have a story that tells me why I should be here and why I should stay committed to this place. And then is that the conflict, like the body is saying, you gotta get outta here, this isn't safe, you're being manipulated. There's all these reasons why you should go. But then you have this kind of spiritual overlay that's saying these are your spiritual authorities, this is your community, this is your access to God. Is that what you're describing?

Aundi Kolber: Yeah. I think that... There's a quote that I immediately thought of as you were saying that, and I forget who said it first, but the quote is, We repeat what we don't repair. And I think your question of, Is there a point at which we're just bypassing the body and then the body and the cognition are fighting each other, because the cognition might be, I have to listen to my pastor, I have to listen to these people who I believe are my spiritual authorities. And so then that's in conflict with my body and I don't know what to do with the conflict so I'm just gonna submit to the cognition. For a lot of people, that's where they find themselves really stuck in many situations. And so coming back to that quote, we repeat what we don't repair. One of the things that it makes me think about is how we were formed, perhaps in our early years around faith. What we were told, the messages we were given, even around what does authority even mean, what does it mean to have a body, what does it mean to listen to that body, what does it mean to be in relationship, period? What does love mean, and what does it mean to be loved by God? These are some really central questions that depending on how that was formed in you, is probably going to come back and shape how you respond to your body when your body gives you information.

Because our brain, obviously a lot of us, there's that famous phrase that's like, mind over matter. And one of the things I sometimes say is that there is no mind over matter, there is only us. We carry the scars, we carry the harm. You might be able to white knuckle it for a while, but you carry it. And there is a cost to carrying that. And at some point I do believe the body says, enough. Like, you won't listen, enough. And I believe that's

God-given. I believe that is the grace of God. Because our body says, okay, I'll survive this, I'll go into survival mode, I'll white knuckle it for you, I'll figure out how to adapt, I'll make myself really small, I'll be submissive to these people who are harming me just to get through the threat. And at some point the body goes, that's it, that's as far as I go. And then usually that comes from a place of either we're clinically depressed or we cannot function anymore, or chronic illness becomes profound, or there's so much inflammation in our body.

Because I think that oftentimes we think of our body like this tool, and that's not what we are. We're not tools, we're not commodities, we're not objects. We're image bears, we're beloved of God. And I think at some point our body goes, Okay, I need to be treated that way too.

But going back to that original question, yes, we do bypass the body. And I think we often do that because something in us longs, and is made for wholeness. And we repeat what we don't repair because we want wholeness. Something in us is growing up. That always meant that I just got shamed and psychologically abused, but maybe this time will be different. And I get where that comes from. I see so many folks where this is not the first time. Usually, this has been years, this has been decades in the making, when finally they say, maybe this level of anxiety isn't normal, maybe I shouldn't have to get to the place where I have a panic attack when someone prays or wants to pray for me, maybe it's not normal to feel like I can't stay in my body in church.

So I think bringing some curiosity and some compassion. A lot of times I call it compassionate attention. I really believe that's God's posture to us, this compassionate attention, that actually gives us the model for how to listen to our hurting parts of ourselves. That if we can turn towards the hurting parts of ourselves and our story with compassion, rather than simply running back into more harm. By the grace of God, we pause, and we say, Maybe not this time. Like maybe it could be different, and God give me the imagination to think that it could. Embed the hope in me to believe that this is not what you made me for.

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And I think it doesn't usually come right away. Oftentimes we need someone to witness us, to create the safety to say, Right where you are, I have no expectation, right where you are is okay. And I just want to be here with you and honor your pain, honor the story that your body is holding, honor the cost that you have paid just to be here right now. And often from that place, this is where our God-given wisdom of our body begins to say, Thank you so much to my mind, I just need you to pause for a second and listen to the body, so the body can catch up.

Mike Cosper: Yeah, it makes me think. I don't remember who said it first, I've heard it many times though, this idea that Job's friends were great friends right up until the moment that they opened their mouth. That throughout the book, there's all these arguments for why it happened and the moralistic reasons and all of this kind of stuff. He's saying, No, God's gonna come up and He's gonna explain this and He's gonna defend me and this, that, and the other. And in the end of the book, God shows up and He says, who are you to question me, I'm gonna ask the questions you're gonna give me. And He paints this picture of creation and it's this overwhelming vision of the smallness of Job in

the midst of God as Creator, the work He's doing. But then there's this very clear undercurrent that at the end of the day, Job is satisfied by that answer, that he's in this larger story. And then more fundamentally, his satisfaction comes from the fact that God did show up, God was present in it.

I think about that a lot in these stories, our rush to rationalize and verbalize our ways out of suffering and sorrow. How much do you think fighting and resisting grief, resisting allowing it to have a place in our life? It seems like a lot of that is cultural. Because there are cultures in the world that seem to do this a lot better than we do.

Aundi Kolber: I think that there is a really strong connection between how disembodied our culture tends to be and how poorly we grieve. I think that there's a really strong connection to that. Because grief requires that we be in our bodies, and to bypass the body often is a way to, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, not feel, and that means we then don't grieve. But the cost of that is that whatever is not grieved is still in us. So if we go back to that idea from earlier, that your body is holding that, just because we haven't outwardly expressed it doesn't mean it's not there, doesn't mean it's not real.

I think you're right, like, there are many cultures globally that do this well. I think of the black church, that that is done so well. That is just a deep resource, the ability to feel and to grieve and to lament the reality. And I think it's so important to take notes, to notice that there are folks that are doing that well.

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Yet I know for myself and for so many trauma survivors, this has been an essential piece to healing. And what I would even say, I think that grief is really important, and I would even widen the scope to say, to feel feelings. Because what tends to happen when we are disembodied is that our window of tolerance is really small, and when the window of tolerance is small, it means that it doesn't take a whole lot to get our body overly activated or into fight or flight or fawn, or into a dissociative experience. And because that's true, what that means is that... Let's just say someone grew up in a traumatic home and then they went to church, and something about that church environment felt really familiar, but maybe it was because it was familiar to the traumatic home they grew up in, the abusive home. And so what they did is they were repeating some of the dynamics within the church that they experienced at home. But their body is already primed. They're already primed to become more traumatized because their window, because of unresolved trauma, they are, first of all, not aware of the information of their body. But then when something really painful happens, their body is gonna be more likely to internalize that as trauma, versus when we can grieve, when we can feel, when we can be appropriately angry, when we can advocate for ourselves in the ways that we need to, when we can also have joy, when we can be encouraged and received, which is also part of that window of tolerance discussion, we have - it's like a container that has more room. And so because there's more room, our body moves through the experience. That's what I think of when we talk about grief, is that it's a really normal part of the human experience to have grief. In fact, I think we have probably pathologized grief in a lot of times in our culture, which is a shame.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

It makes me think of the flip side of some of this as well, which is... I remember having a conversation with a good friend a couple of years ago. It was actually before I had started working on this series, and this was a guy who had been in the mix in this cohort of guys who planted churches in the early 2000s, and had seen the whole deal, and then had his own kind of moral failure and had to leave ministry for a time and go through a restoration/reconciliation process. And I think for someone in the shoes that he was in he had done an admirable amount of work. I remember talking to him, I was talking to him about this, and I was just trying to understand why there is this phenomenon, why you just see it again and again, and the patterns are the same and the abuses are the same, the sort of bullying, the narcissistic tendencies, all the rest of it, why does it repeat. And I'll never forget, because he did not miss a beat from the moment I said that, and he goes, Oh, it's dad stuff, it's all dad stuff. And he just named half a dozen people that he and I both knew who had done the same thing, and was very quickly able to go, Father story, Father. And that was his own story, too.

As you talk about what we don't repair, we repeat, one of the phenomenon I see in that is how many of those men, they were super high achievers, they gave everything to their work. And it's almost as though, it's a cliché, but it's like you're constantly living to try to please the father that you never had or never pleased or never had that connection with. And with that undone, looking for that healing, looking for that affirmation in an organization that's successful and a reputation that's successful, it's a bottomless well you're trying to pour that stuff into.

Aundi Kolber: What I would just say too, is that, we haven't explicitly mentioned this, but this is very connected to attachment. And so when I talk about attachment, what I am talking about is the internal framework of how we interact in relationships. And that's usually formed from our earliest caregivers. And then what happens is those templates we bring with us, and those are what we bring with us often when we think of God, but they also are in all of our human relationships. And sometimes there's some variation and there's nuance, but when you talk about one of your main caregivers perhaps being - typically we could split it up between secure attachment and insecure attachment, and within an insecure attachment, there are some other categories. But secure attachment, essentially there's this internal sense that if there is a rupture, there will be a repair, generally speaking. It's not perfect, but there is enough repair there that you carry that around, like literally in your body. And think about how powerful that is, because if the other is the insecure attachment, it's the expectation that there won't be repair.

Then what happens is that we get these adaptive strategies to help us manage the fact that we think there won't be repair. But we also know in our bodies that we have to have connection. Like, it's literally essential to our survival. It's not just ornamental, it's essential. And because that's true, if that's projected onto God, first of all, wow, some harmful theology comes out of that. But then also, let's say that's what we're carrying with us. If you're a leader, or if you're a parishioner, like a congregant, you are also carrying that. And so it can create this very, sometimes harmful and even could be toxic, cocktail that feels familiar.

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One thing that's important to understand about our bodies is that our bodies prefer familiarity over actual safety, if we haven't experienced a lot of safety in our lives. So if

you grew up, if toxicity and harm and abuse feels really familiar, your body will actually prefer that until you get more resources and support around you because that's familiar. And our body goes, you know what, I know how to adapt to that, I'll go to that. I repeat what I don't repair. And so this thread of how really our mental health, our relationships, our physical body gets so bypassed. And this is where it gets harmful to keep everything in the spiritual realm, because it's so easy to proof text some really harmful ways to be in the world, right? Like you could slap something on there real quick and just be like, here's why you have to do that. And this is why it matters that anyone in leadership, including in the spiritual sense, really be doing that internal work with humility, with knowing it's not a finish line. It really is a posture of we all are in process. None of us are fully complete, none of us have it all together. And at different times we're gonna need additional support, we're gonna need someone to be able to give us direction. Or multiple someones, definitely community. And so I think all of this becomes connected to those things that get passed down to us, and it gets especially harmful when we put it only under the realm of spirituality.

Mike Cosper: There's so much there. I want to make sure though, we talk a little bit about when you're in one of these unhealthy communities and you're wrapped up in those relationships that are, whether you wanna call 'em toxic or codependent or whatever, not always but hopefully there's this moment where the spell breaks, and all of a sudden you have this thing where all these hints and all these moments of uncertainty and all of them, something happens and it coalesces and you wake up and you go, wow, I just see a ton. And oftentimes this is a traumatic thing. Some of the stories told in the podcast or these stories of it happens when people get fired, it happens when they get cut out of ministry. It happens when they raise a question and the force with which it's responded. And oftentimes where people find themselves when the spell breaks, is they feel like they're in zero gravity. They don't know where the ground is, they don't know where they are. And because those unhealthy communities are so all-consuming of their lives and their relationships and everything else, the isolation that they feel, the loneliness that they feel is just incredibly profound. Where should someone who's in that place, where do they begin to look for healing?

Aundi Kolber: Yeah. When I hear you describe that experience, what it makes me first think of is just profound disorientation, is the word. And I think particularly abuse survivors, spiritual abuse survivors, that is a very common thread. Everything that I thought I knew, I don't think I know anymore. And I think I want to just normalize that if you are a person listening to this and you have had that experience, you are not alone. This right here, when we talk about our body giving us information, this is it, this is the information. And I'm not saying it's like the be all, end all, but it's just a really important piece of the fact that our body is literally saying to us, This is too much, this is not safe. And so even though that feels almost like, Hey, where's my checklist, let's get to healing now. But I think what I wanna just do is actually slow that down. And the reason why is because we do have this tendency, especially once you've noticed that, oh, wow, this is really happening, it really is as bad as I thought it was, maybe worse, maybe I don't even have a sense of how bad it is, I think the first thing I would just say is that pacing yourself in this process is gonna be truly essential.

One of the things I say a lot is the more complicated the trauma, the more complex the

healing. And so if you are a person who's recognizing that this is complicated, this is not, oh, here's your bandaid, and we fixed it. No, like here's all the relationships that are wrapped up into this, here's my faith that's wrapped up into this, here's how my family and our community and all these things, it's all wrapped up. And so I think that in a way, the very first step is honoring, is recognizing this is real. What I'm going through is real, and it is probably pretty big for you. And that is so normal.

The second thing I would just say is that to know some really basic skills is gonna be really helpful. One of the things I talk about a lot is something called grounding, and grounding is something that is essentially using our five senses to come back into our body. And specifically what I mean by that is to come back into our window of tolerance. Because our window of tolerance is the place from which you can begin to plan, right? To be able to maybe find a therapist or to begin to make a plan of rebuilding some safety, whether that's needing to take some time away from that particular church or from church in general. Like, you really need your prefrontal cortex online for that, and that prefrontal cortex is only available to you when you're in your window of tolerance. So grounding, a really basic thing that you can do with that, is using your five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Now, that's just an example. There's lots of ways to do grounding. But if you're just starting this - and for some folks hearing this, they're gonna be like, Okay, that sounds kind of woo, woo. I get it. I get it. But if you have lived outside of your window for a long time, or if you have been on the edges of your window most of the time, this is going to be a little bit challenging at first, but I just want to encourage you to give it a try. Because what we're trying to do is actually tap into the wisdom of your body so that you can take some further steps. And these are things, Mike, we've talked about in the past. I would encourage you to try to find a trauma-informed therapist. So someone who has an awareness of the body. So that's typically someone who has a background with things like EMDR or perhaps things like somatic experiencing. And so part of what you're gonna want to do is you have to begin to build some sort of stability, some sort of safety so that you can make your plan of action. Because the reality is that every situation does have some nuance. I wish that there was just, like, a 1, 2, 3, and you're done thing, right?

But sometimes this is going to mean that you're able to really engage the community and ask for help, and ask them to participate. But sometimes it may not. And that's okay too. That's actually, that's normal. And I think that in order to do that, it's gonna be important that you gain some place where you feel like you can really be integrated and supported as you make that plan of action.

Mike Cosper: There's been this growth in the use of the language of trauma, I don't know that it's always helpful. Christine Rosen wrote an article in Commentary talking about the creep, the term to apply to everything, and in the story there's a quote from the author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, which is a bestselling book, it's kind of everywhere. But it's about trauma, it's about a lot of this stuff.

Aundi Kolber: Are you talking about Bessel van der Kolk?

Mike Cospes: Yes. But even he, there's a moment in this article where he's commenting on the expansion of the term and the way it's ubiquitously being applied. And so I worry about this conversation even, people hearing it and going, Oh, people had a bad experience in church and trauma's the buzzword, so they just tag that on there as a way to shut down conversation. And you hear it too in terms of the way people say, I saw something on social media and it triggered me and it was traumatic, and this kind of thing.

Aundi Kolber: Yeah, yeah.

Mike Cospes: And it's so flippantly applied to experience that I think when people try to talk about this conversation, stories like people who walk in the back door of a church and their hands are shaking because of what they've experienced before. I talked to somebody who said, When I left ministry from the unhealthy environment I was in, I couldn't read the Epistles for a year because they had been so weaponized as a way to enforce authority within this very narrow bandwidth around a leader and that sort of thing. There's a wide gap between some of those experiences. And I wonder how you think about that. Because it's also very difficult because you also want to be sensitive to people. Things hurt. So there's a spectrum there, I'm curious if you wanted to comment on that at all.

Aundi Kolber: Yeah. I think the first thing that it makes me think of is, and this is really misunderstood in our culture, and what I would say is probably the leading element of this that is probably misunderstood, is that not all pain is trauma. And when I talk about trauma, what I am really talking about is something that has overwhelmed our nervous system's capacity to cope, and therefore, what is happening is that the experience itself is actually stuck in our body. And if that experience is then reactivated, we reexperience something that was from the past as though it's in the present. Now, when I'm saying that, there is a huge spectrum. Meaning that something may be disturbing, and that is really uncomfortable if it gets activated, but that might look a little different than someone's trauma that's activated of being trapped in a burning building. Now, that's not to minimize the first person's experience. I think in order to do good body-centered work, we honor the body full stop. And I don't say that from a place of, the body has all the answers. I say it from, it has to be part of the work. It has to be. Otherwise we are creating circumstances in which if abuse or trauma's not already happening, it's going to happen, and it's going to be probably more significant because the person doesn't have the internal framework to move through it.

But when I go back to that original idea, not all pain necessarily becomes trauma. I think we misunderstand. Because I felt pain, first of all, it doesn't necessarily mean it became stuck. If you can process the pain, God-willing you can, I hope you can. That's what we are made to do. Our bodies are actually designed, our bodies are amazing, and the things that I have watched people heal from, it's profound. It's like watching a miracle in process. Like, it's so cool. And so I know this to be true because I've literally watched it and I've experienced it myself. But if we call all pain or discomfort trauma, first of all, then we take away some of the power and the preciseness of the term. Because being uncomfortable doesn't mean that we are traumatized. Being uncomfortable might mean it may be a little bit activating to our nervous system. So here's where some more nuance is needed. Just because we feel activated doesn't necessarily mean someone is harming us.

It may mean, though, that we still need to do some things to care for ourselves. Like, we may need to have some boundaries, even if it's not about that person. Like, that person who perhaps is activating us may truly not be doing anything harmful, but based off of your experience and something that happened, that may be triggering. And so we have to separate that out from abuse. Just because we're triggered doesn't necessarily mean we've experienced abuse either.

Now with all that said, I do want to just say that many, many folks that I've worked with - you talk about not being able to read the Epistles for a year. I've known folks who years they can't interact with the Bible. And I say that from a place of just honoring the spectrum. And that for me the only way that I see this working together is if we hold the inherent mutuality and reciprocity that is required as humans as we keep the discussion about trauma. Because if trauma just becomes another way to say you hurt me so now I can hurt you, that's where we lose it. Like, we lose the humanity.

Mutuality and reciprocity doesn't mean that we don't have boundaries, it doesn't mean that we don't say, Hey, this wasn't okay, or this needs to change. But I do think it holds onto the inherent reality that we are all humans and we're made in the image of God. And there is something about that inherent dignity that if we lose it, we're in trouble. And at times we have lost it, and it breeds more harm. And so to me, I get how it gets to be the catch-all term in all this stuff. It's like, I don't know that person's story. Sometimes I use the words like disturbance, like it was disturbing to my body. And I think that validates the reality that something about that was really hard for me. And I am an advocate for saying, Okay, what do you need to do to listen to your body, was this about a past situation, is this about past and present, is this only about the present? It requires wisdom and support to often navigate those situations, and I think that's really normal. And so to me, it's not so much...

I think many people are longing to be validated in their pain. So what if we changed the conversation from the pain has to be bad enough for it to be validated, to say, I believe you, this is painful, I get it. If we created the kind of culture where people didn't have to compete to have their pain heard, it would shift. And so I think instead of having to be like, Yes, you meet the diagnostic criteria for this and this, it's like, Listen, if you have these emotions, I just want to free you up to feel those feelings. And obviously not in a way that's harmful to others, but I trust that God gave your body wisdom, and there is a way that can move through. And as it does, I believe that you are going to know and be able to imagine what comes next. And I think what happens is we just get really stuck on, I want to be seen, I want to be heard, I want my pain to be valid. And here's the thing: Your pain is valid, full stop.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

We've actually heard a lot from pastors who are saying, I want to learn from this process and I want to grow and I wanna love my church better, but I'm also finding - not just because of the Mars Hill podcast, but because of the broader culture, this broader phenomenon of abusive pastors, falling pastors, whatever - they're dealing with such a culture of mistrust at times that the conversation becomes weaponized towards them. I know a lot of guys who just, they're ready to quit. They're like, If I had another job, I'd

be done. And obviously I'm not trying to vouch for or defend every one of them either, because I don't know.

But I love what you said a minute ago in terms of how do we approach this in such a way that recognizes that the image of God is at work inside all of us, including those that hurt us, including those that wounded us.

One of my favorite quotes is Marc Maron, the comedian, has a podcast called WTF, and he's got these very narcissistic parents and they divorced, and there's all this pain from his relationship with the two of them. He was notoriously, like, a very angry person for many years. And even into the early years of his podcast, it's been interesting to listen to him for a decade, because you've heard him kind of temper and grow into some wisdom and gentleness, and it's really interesting. But he said one day, My process of kind of healing and making peace with the world and making my peace with my parents was when I just woke up one day and realized, Oh, these are just some assholes who had kids. And it's a funny comment, but it's also a really compassionate comment. We often don't know what we're stepping into when we try to parent, or we try to lead, or we try to have these kinds of relationships and we hurt people. And I think about that word grounding, I think about the connection to humility. David White talks about how the word humility means of the earth.

Aundi Kolber: Yes, I love that.

Mike Cosper: I think part of what's fascinating about the moment we're in as well, is that there's a shift from kind of the movement thinking of the megachurch church growth phenomenon that says we're gonna change the world for Jesus. Sometimes that gets shifted into just another kind of grandiosity that's like we're gonna reform the culture, instead of saying, No, we're going to be Job in front of a mysterious God in an overwhelmingly complex world. So I don't know, that's a lot in response. But I think this is such a complex story.

Aundi Kolber: So complex.

Mike Cosper: And I think the desire for quick solutions is so... I know it from my own life, wanting the quick solution, and I've written about this elsewhere. But for me, the experience of grief of losing my dad was the very thing that opened up my ability to grieve in the other ways that I've had painful experiences in the church.

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Aundi Kolber: Yeah. I do just want to say, I think that this is why I think that pacing element matters so much. And I think it's not only for the people, like, in congregations and parishioners, but also for pastors and people in leadership. And I think for me, one of the things that has really risen to the surface as being central, which I love the connection between groundedness and humility because I see that to be so true. And I forget, I think Adam Grant maybe talks about humble confidence, or a few different people have paired those things together. But I think at our best, at our God-given, like, self best, we are humbly confident. We are in touch with the reality of our belovedness and yet we are in touch with our fragility. And those two things together are really beautiful. And I think that we need that for such a time as this, on both sides.

I would just say, I think it's important always, especially with pastors and probably they may already know this, but to recognize there is an inherent power differential. So even just by holding that position, even that, like, someone may not even know you, they just know you hold that position. And that in and of itself may be hard for them. And I think it's a challenge to separate that out a little bit and to say, You know what, you beloved person of God who has a hard time with my position, I just free you up to go on your journey with God. Because I am not God, because I am limited, I just bless you. I bless you because I know the God of the universe does hold it all. And it's only when I'm connected to that humility - God, what's my part to play - that that also then allows me and really opens me up to my belovedness too.

Because when I push up against my limits, which we do all the time, which is really normal and okay, and really healthy, we can fall back into the belovedness to say it's okay, it's enough. If it all falls away, this is what I'm able to do. I can release people to go on their journey of healing. I can release myself to go on my journey with God. And for me, that then all gets wrapped up in honoring the mystery of this work. That's what holds the humility and the belovedness, is to trust there is something bigger. There is a God who is bigger, that is holding this, and there are things that happen that I have gotten to witness, and I'm like, I don't know how that just happened, exactly, but I praise God that it did. And what an honor to participate. And I see so much of my work, like, I get to participate. That is so cool. Obviously I don't work with every single person, every trauma survivor, but what a joy to participate in this work. And that in and of itself, it gives more life, it births more generativity in life. It was never about the finish line. It was never about the numbers. It was never about impressing people. It's okay. Settle into the reality and the truth of who you really are, because that is spacious and abundant.

Mike Cospers: I think one of my hopes that's just emerged in the last few weeks, as I've thought about, there's just a poverty of wisdom in the church for how to navigate these things. Since the 1960s, there've been these church movements that have defined themselves as we are the church for the new emerging generation, we're the church for the people who don't have a place in the church. That language just gets repeated every ten years. But one of the things that it does is it does cut generationally, so you don't have those generational threads of stories that help people navigate and help leaders navigate.

But on the positive side, I have to hope that... My friend, Reuben, he's a pastor who had said this to me one time and it's always in my head. He says, With every death in Christ, there's a resurrection. I have to believe that in the stories of wounding that are being told and the stories of churches trying to navigate this stuff, that on the other side of this, maybe there is a coming wave of wounded healers who are going to be able to own these stories, tell these stories. And as a community, in small ways in their local communities, in an earthy grounded way, a humble way, there can be some grassroots sort of reorientation for the church that can heal in these ways.

Aundi Kolber: Yeah, I love that. I think that whole piece around resurrection, and it's such a central tenant to our faith, right? That ours is a God of resurrection. And I think where the mystery comes in is we don't know what that will look like, and that when Jesus was resurrected, how much that flew in the face of what his followers, what they expected from Jesus. I love, though, that I feel like God constantly is inviting us to see even the

tiny resurrections. And I think a lot of times in the work that I do, even when we begin to experience those little moments of safety. Like the first time you tell a little bit of your story and someone just honors it and they just get it. I'm like, that's like a little resurrection right there, there's something being born. And that this is almost always happening.

For me, that's grounding, coming back to that word, but it's also so hopeful. May all of those small moments of resurrection birth something even bigger. But while we wait, while we're in process, we can have the eyes to see. We can pray that God would give us the eyes to see that these things are happening, that there are those tiny shoots already being experienced.

One of my most common prayers this last couple years has been: God, give me eyes to see the way you're already here, you're already working. Help me to tune in to what's already being experienced. Because I think so often, particularly in our pain, which is so valid, we miss it. We miss the invitations and the glimmers. And in a way, healing means we begin to see into that reality, we see it more clearly, and then we are better able to access, like God is already here. Never left. Right here with us, grieving with us, but also birthing us to something new. And so that just gives me a lot of hope.

Mike Cospers: Thanks, Aundi.

Aundi Kolber: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Mike Cospers: You can learn more about Aundi Kolber's work at aundikolber.com. The link is in our show notes. You can also check out her book, *Try Softer*, wherever you buy your books.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. It's executive produced by Erik Petrik. This episode was produced, written and mixed by Mike Cospers. Joy Beth Smith and Azurae Phelps are our associate producers. Music by Kate Siefker. Graphic design by Rick Szuecs. Social media by Kate Lucky. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple. Thanks for listening. We'll see you soon with a couple more bonus episodes.