

The Body Knows

A Theology of Forgiveness

Jazmine Lawrence

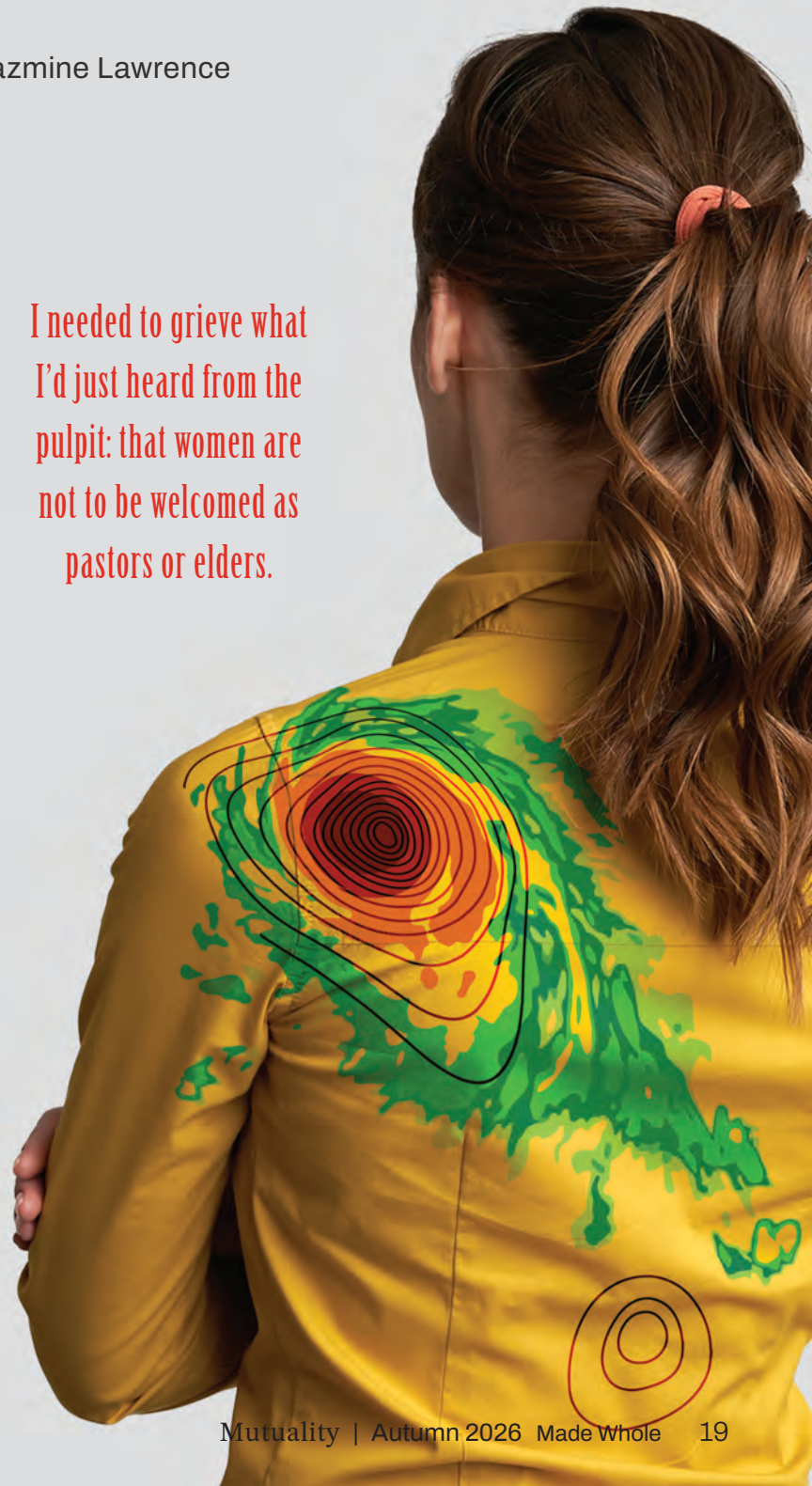
Feeling Like a Failure

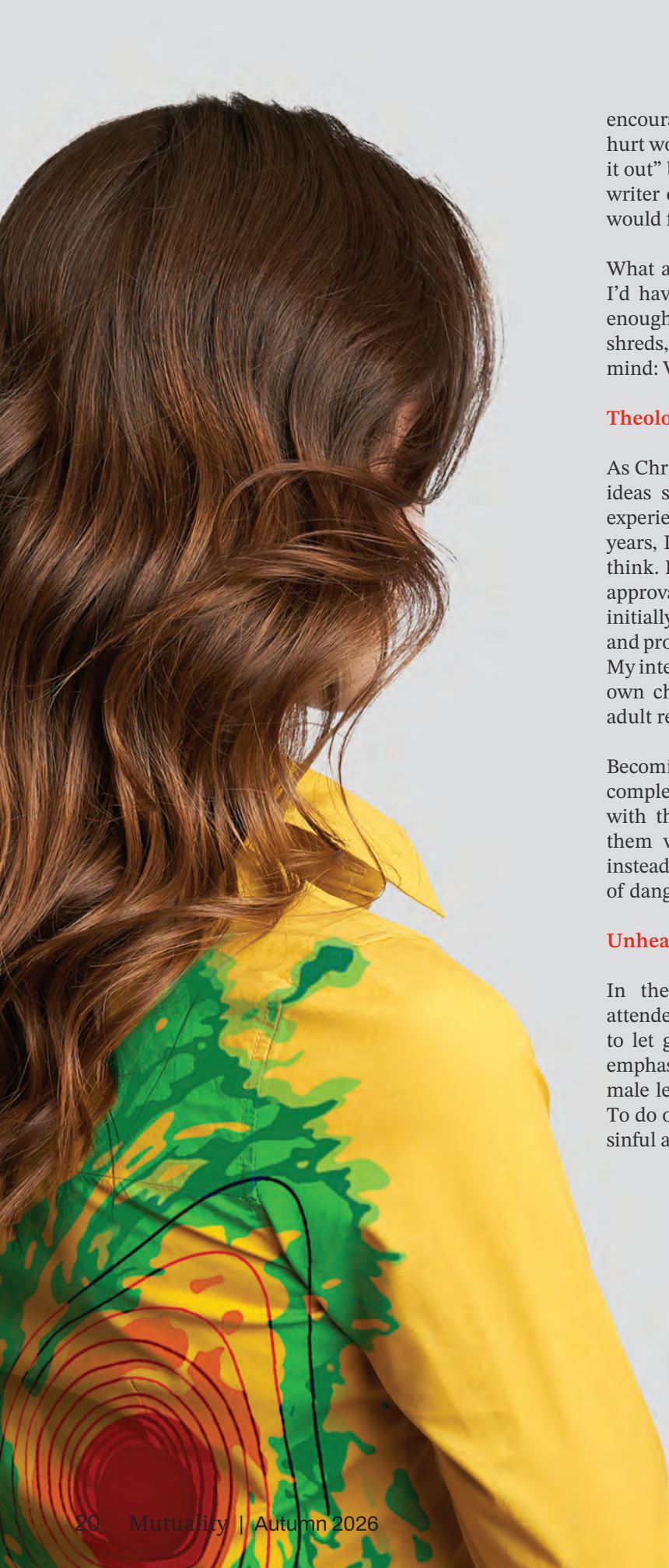
As I stood to join the worship band at the end of the pastor's sermon that Sunday, I was flooded with physical waves of anger, the sobs in my chest barely held back. The need for relief clashed with the responsibility to be present and engaged in playing the piano for everyone else's sake, let alone engaging with God in worship.

As soon as the set ended, I ran to the prayer room where, miraculously, no one else was waiting. The prayer team, two dear friends and mentors of mine, welcomed me in as I burst into tears and cried. Another worship team member knocked on the door to call me up with the band for the second service, but my friends waved them away. They protected the safety I needed to grieve what I'd just heard from the pulpit: that women are not to be welcomed as pastors or elders.

That Sunday message sparked years of conversations in the congregation, wound upon wound. The more we talked, the more I ached. The tension increased every time the topic of forgiveness came up. I desperately wanted to forgive the church, its leaders, friends, and family who agreed with what began to feel like a demeaning stance that women should submit unilaterally to men. I wanted to obey Jesus's command to forgive; I repeatedly *said* that I forgave when

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encouraged to do so. But I felt perpetually unsafe. The hurt worsened until my stubborn determination to “stick it out” broke. I secretly wondered: *what if I left?* Like the writer of Psalm 55: “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest” (verse 6).

What a sense of guilt came with the thought! I felt like I’d have to admit failure in not being able to “forgive enough” to stay. Years later, with my health and heart in shreds, I finally did leave with a question nagging at my mind: What *is* forgiveness?

Theology That Heals, Theology That Harms

As Christians, our ideas about God and God’s creation—ideas shaped by the Bible, church tradition, personal experience, and reason¹—are our theology. Until recent years, I thought a church’s job was to teach me what to think. I submitted to my church’s theology and received approval and acceptance in return. Such submission initially made me feel safe, unified with fellow believers and protected from being accused of having bad theology. My intense craving for safety was a way of coping with my own childhood traumas, military service, and strained adult relationships.

Becoming aware of and eventually disagreeing with complementarian theology unseated my sense of unity with those around me. I felt so vulnerable. Forgiving them was supposed to bring healing and peace, but instead every attempt to do so only worsened the feeling of danger.

Unhealthy Theology, Unhealthy Body

In the complementarian Christian environments I attended, forgiveness was defined as an act of the will to let go of a debt of justice owed. It was particularly emphasized for women as a form of submission to our male leaders. I felt expected to quickly let go of offense. To do otherwise was bad; any feelings of resistance were sinful and not to be trusted.

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So I tried harder to choose forgiveness, then felt confused when, instead of restored peace, I experienced worsening physical pain, fatigue, insomnia, and digestive distress. The cognitive dissonance registered physically as I said all the “right” things until I was brought to my knees by symptoms. My body was shouting, “I can’t work with this!” I had to face the hard truth: forgiveness as an act of the will was not restoring peace.

The theology of forgiveness I was taught turned out to lack empathy.² Rather than receiving compassion, I felt chronically guilty of unforgiveness. This lack of empathy and love is a red flag indicating unhealthy theology and spiritual coercion that can be expressed with statements like, “Don’t you want to be freed of the bondage of unforgiveness?” or, “If you don’t forgive, God won’t forgive you.”³

By unempathetically expecting quick, almost automatic forgiveness, the complementarian environments I was in couldn’t restore safety for those not favoured in the hierarchy. Such environments are known to protect men who have done wrong.⁴ This resonates with those I watched get disenfranchised—usually women, children, and men who didn’t fit the “macho” stereotype—with a drained sense of agency and an unsettling sense of being stolen from, with no words, allies, or advocates to say so.

Empathetic Theology and Love

In the Lord’s prayer, we ask God to “forgive our debts as we have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). When a person is wronged, they experience loss, so it feels like the wrongdoer owes a debt of what’s been lost. Injustice violates and steals non-material resources like a person’s sense of safety, confidence, belovedness, dignity, physical strength, hope, and vision for the future, liking and respecting the self (self-esteem), *joie de vivre*, and agency.

To forgive such debts implies that the debt gets covered, and the forgiver regains those lost non-material resources, whether or not the wrongdoer helps. It can be hard to

stop relying on the wrongdoer to restore losses. A healthy theology of forgiveness acknowledges and empathetically supports recovering those resources, healing the wounded and strengthening the community as a whole.

In the Old Testament, God is the great forgiver. In Exodus 34:6–7, God proclaims that he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .” God never lacks the resources to forgive.

In the New Testament, Jesus startlingly instructs us dispirited, disenfranchised crowds to forgive like God. But Jesus doesn’t weaponize language against vulnerable people to accuse them of not having forgiven. He doesn’t say, “Just forgive and move on already.” He brings physical and emotional healing to them, demonstrating that the Way to healing is through him to access God’s infinite resources.

As I re-learn how to forgive, the journey has become a commitment to seeking God to recover lost resources. In hindsight, I now see the validity of being able to vulnerably confess “I’m not ready/able to forgive yet,” as a brave way of admitting drained resources and inviting safe people to participate in my commitment to learn how to forgive.

Steps Toward Healing: Safety, Story, Feeling

In order to face what had happened, not only in my complementarian church but also in other areas of my life, I needed to start with what trauma recovery expert, Judith Herman, recommends come first: self-care and safe interpersonal relationships.⁵ This is also known as the safety and stabilization stage of healing from trauma.

Next, as another trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk, puts it, recovery cannot start until I “become familiar with and befriend the sensations” in my body associated with remembering the trauma.⁶ I struggled to acknowledge those sensations because I had been trained to do something called spiritual bypassing, or spiritual deflection:⁷ using spiritual language like “forgiveness” to avoid acknowledging and addressing lingering hurt. My health problems proved to be the wake-up call that sent me plummeting through the veneer of inauthentic forgiveness into the real healing journey.

Jesus brings physical and emotional healing.

Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho Tutu, identify next healing activities: telling the story in safe spaces⁸ and in naming the hurt.⁹ I write this after several years learning to tell my story. Retelling in safe places never fails to open up new meaning, increase clarity, and advance the healing. And then, “giving the emotion a name,” Desmond and Mpho write, “is the way we come to understand how what happened affected us.”¹⁰ Naming emotions lessens their threatening nature and releases us to move through grief toward healing.

A key emotion for me (and many women) to name has been anger. In keeping with spiritual bypassing, Judith Herman observes that Christians often “exhort victims to transcend their anger through forgiveness rather than taking action.” She goes on to point out that women, especially, have been exhorted to forgive when their “justified resentment might make those in power uncomfortable.”¹¹ Reading this shook me: it’s a pattern known to psychology, not just my personal experience.

These authors enlighten what an empathetic theology of forgiveness should look like, one that restores safety and agency and encourages forgiveness as a worthwhile journey.

Healing the Body

Healing from an unempathetic theology of forgiveness has, for me, meant first settling into safety. Stabilizing. Predictably *not* facing the former Christian environments that had caused hurt. I didn’t used to think leaving was an option. Now I recognize my agency to do so had been covered over with false guilt for unforgiveness, making me think I couldn’t leave and could never find safety.

Safety, it turns out, is key to recovery. “Being able to feel safe with other people,” says van der Kolk, “is probably the single most important aspect of mental health.”¹² And mental health is inextricable from physical health, a sense of enjoying being in one’s own body. My own healing enables me to contribute toward the healing and wholeness of the rest of the body. I’m deeply grateful for the environments, people, and conversations that nurture this safety.

My body feels it. As my physical symptoms slowly lessen, I hear my body’s agreement with a healing theology of forgiveness. “This,” she says, “I can work with.”

Notes

1. As per the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the term coined by Albert Outler to summarize John Wesley’s theological sources. “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*

Vol 20, No 1, Spring 1985: 7–18. However, in referring to ‘experience,’ Wesley specifically meant the experience of God’s grace. In contrast, constructive Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s five-volume series *Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (2013–2017) represents a view that affirms theology be shaped by all human experience, including science’s observations, with special attention to hospitably listening to the ‘other’ whose views differ.

2. I am convinced most people in my environments did not consciously set out to control, coerce, abuse, or disenfranchise others. This highlights how subversive unempathetic theology can be.
3. For example, Matthew 6:14 and Colossians 3:13 can be cited to compel forgiveness.
4. Bethani Jantzi helpfully gathers several studies on how traditional gender roles and men’s conditioned entitlement to control elevates and normalizes abuse in her article: “The Wife as a Training Ground: Complementarian Theology and Coercive Control,” in *Priscilla Papers* 39/1 (Winter 2025), 25–29.
5. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Hachette, New York: 2022), 318–319. For anyone well advanced in trauma recovery who is no longer easily triggered, or anyone ministering to traumatized individuals or groups, I highly recommend this resource for helping make meaning of trauma. Some points may conflict with your theology, but it’s worth wrestling with the realities she raises even if you disagree.
6. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin, 2014), 102.
7. “Spiritual bypass” as per Jesse Fox, Craig S. Cashwell, & Gabriela Picciotto, “The Opiate of the Masses: Measuring Spiritual Bypass and Its Relationship to Spirituality, Religion, Mindfulness, Psychological Distress, and Personality” in *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 4, no. 4 (2017): 274–87. A succinct explanation is available on the Serenity Mountain Recovery Center blog (The Truth Behind Spiritual Bypass Culture in Treatment,” <https://serenitymountainrecoverycenter.com/the-truth-behind-spiritual-bypass-culture-in-treatment>). Long-time psychotherapist Michael Hart refers to this as “Spiritual deflection” in *The Transformed Life: Freedom from Negative Generational Influences, Past hurts, and Sabotaging Thoughts* (Khadesh, 2024), 174.
8. Desmond Tutu & Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (HarperOne, 2014), 78.
9. Tutu & Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 95–97.
10. Tutu & Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 95.
11. Judith Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (Hachette, 2023), 105. Herman cautions against undiscerning forgiveness, though she may be conflating forgiveness with reconciliation. Certainly, her caution against forgoing justice without a genuine change of heart on the wrongdoer’s part is especially important.
12. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 81.

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