

A SHATTERED SANCTUARY

From Fellowship To Freedom

SAMANTHA SELLERS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hello!

I'm Sam, I am first and foremost a wife, fur mama, friend and human rights advocate. I am also a therapist, spirituality seeker, trashy tv lover and proudly part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

I am passionate about creating spaces whether in person or online for people's story and voice to be heard - particularly those who are left with religious trauma or those within the LGBTQIA+ community; a people who are far too often silenced and oppressed by the church.

I am sharing my story with you, in the hope that you feel seen, validated and believed in your experiences and abuse that you have endured.

Your story matters and your voice deserves to be heard - always!

Sam 

KIND WORDS

“Sam is still stubborn. But these qualities have taken her on a journey through darkness and pain in an institution that promotes itself as light and healing.

Her stubbornness meant *she refused to be anything other than herself*. She refused to believe the things she was told too when they didn't ring true. *Even when those closest to her thrust knives into her soul, she didn't back down*. She kept going. Even when the best she could do was crawl.

She stubbornly explored. She was stubbornly curious. And she stubbornly called out the harm that the church has caused and continues to cause to this day. Yes, Sam is stubborn. We need more like Sam.

In the coming years, there will be a flood of people emerging from Christian culture as they seek healing from religious trauma and a healthier expression of life. Sam's story will give strength to others on this journey. *I commend this book to anybody on a deconstruction journey.*”

Matt Glover, Director & Principal Counsellor MGA Counselling & Forest Therapy Victoria (and my long suffering counsellor)

“Beautifully written, *A Shattered Sanctuary* is a heartfelt memoir that captures Sam's journey of self discovery and belongingness amongst a church culture where it turned out that true acceptance was conditional.

I was captivated reading Sam's story and I found it a heartbreakingly reminder of the harms that occur when people place their theological stance over another person's humanity. In this case, Sam's human right to safety within a church community and to choose love and be loved.

I felt a mix of emotions that come when you feel like you are bearing witness to someone sharing their journey with you. Reading this book felt like Sam was sitting in my lounge room sharing her story personally with me.

I think many people will be able to identify with the themes throughout this book such as being spiritual inquisitive, a sense of belonging that faith may bring, the myriad of emotions of being rejected, the grief, the loss and the rebuilding of identity that comes with pursuing self love and self acceptance. *As Sam states so perfectly: 'Your story matters and your voice deserves to be heard'*”

Jaime Simpson, Counsellor and Domestic Violence Advocate and Academic

KIND WORDS

“A Shattered Sanctuary brings depth, insight, wisdom, and relatability needed for those who have found themselves trying to heal from fundamental religion. The authors' story is *raw, honest, and full of self-discovery*. Her story is a must-read and will help many begin to heal from their shame and finally be free.”

Brad Klausman, Deconstruction Certified Life Coach

“I've moved around a lot from one end of NSW to the other and many, many people have crossed my path. Sam is one of those, and although the length of time was not long, she left a lasting impression. *What comes first to mind is her sense of presence, her laughter and smile. She has an energy and life around her that she names herself as "passion"*.”

What I didn't realise at the time was that there was also rejection, pain and abuse that Sam had experienced, but few knew about. Even more distressing for me was to discover this was largely through an institution I have dedicated my life to - the Christian church. A place that should be a welcoming and accepting community, a place to explore life and faith and questions together, sadly in places can also be controlling, manipulative and abusive. Perhaps this is why the betrayal seems particularly hard to take. While organised religion has done some beautiful and magnificent things it also has a dark side and terrible history in some places with children, women, LGBTIQ+ people, those with different ideas and beliefs and those who dare to ask questions or question authority.

In 'A Shattered Sanctuary' Sam tells her story. *It is raw, honest and told with vulnerability*. While the subject matter can be dark, Sam still manages to do so with humour, a sense of even-handed reality and even hope.

Sam's aim in telling her story is so that others might feel less alone in hearing a story that reflects some of their own. Sadly there are too many people who experience religious abuse. The hope is that others too find their voice, and are able to tell their own story. If this is you, find a safe space to do so. Reach out to Sam, other supportive family or friends, seek professional help or those places within religion that are supportive and welcoming. *No one can or should face this alone*.

I address my final words to Sam, echoing back her own words in her intro: Sam, your story matters and your voice deserves to be heard - always! I'm so glad you have found the courage, space and time to do so, and with such grace, in this Ebook.

Reverend Matt Trounce, Minister of the Uniting Church

KIND WORDS

“I’ve heard hundreds of stories of leaving church and/or God, each with their own heart wrenching version of being all-in to being all-out and often, forced out. *Sam’s story left me feeling livid.* My body was surging with anger and I felt the familiar prick of tears. Queer people experience a particular kind of trauma in conservative religious spaces.

When church communities choose doctrine over people, they are offering transactional belonging; false, cheap intimacy. This is compounded when the sign over the door says ‘welcome home’ and the invitation was to become family. It’s important that another Australian voice is speaking up and greater awareness being raised on this important topic in our context. If this experience has been yours, *Sam’s story will resonate. As I hope will her encouragement that you can be free.*”

Jane Kennedy, Religious Trauma Therapist

“‘A Shattered Sanctuary’ is *a must read for anyone going through faith transition, struggling to find a sense of belief beyond communities that ostracise them, and who is trying to figure out who they are and what faith means to them outside the walls of organised religion.*

Sam is someone you feel safe with from the get go. Her depth and compassion having been forged within her through her own journey of faith, trauma, and evolution, *she is both wise and inviting, like you’re in her lounge room having a cup of tea and a chat.*

It’s no easy feat to integrate faith and critical awareness, healthy sexuality post purity culture, and to find a point of reference for your mental health after being told that your depression is a result of weak faith, but Sam knows how, and she’ll show you, too - how you can take your experience and desire and create something beautiful with it.

After my own post religious and faith journey, I’ve found it a challenge to find people who can articulate the process of it, the non-binary nature of being alive in a world we’re still figuring out, but Sam is one of those people who does it well. *Whether it’s through her book, A Shattered Sanctuary, or through her counselling practice - or both - you’ll find a generous guide for your own path.*”

Liz Milani, Author & Co-Creator of The Practice Co

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UNFOLDING

Many are surprised to learn that I didn't grow up in a Christian or religious home; no bedtime bible stories or saying grace before dinner, not even nominal trips to church at Christmas and Easter.

I often joke that I can't blame my family for this. I chose this path - it's on me.

My very first memory of religion was SRE or Special Religious Education around the age of 8 years old. The teacher was always so angry, there was none of this 'God loves you' or 'Jesus wants to be your best friend' it was all about hell and the notion of scaring us into submission - "do what God says, or else you burn in hell". Not the sort of learning you want for an 8-year-old.

I don't remember being interested in God or religion at this stage, but that all changed when I got put into a Catholic school for my final 3 years of primary education - I had to move school due to relentless bullying something that became a recurring nightmare throughout my entire schooling period.

If you have never been to a Catholic school or Church, it is like a whole other world. You do religion every day, go to mass every week, specific times for confession, prayers are said at the beginning and end of the day as well as before recess and lunch, rules were strict, and you were held to at times unrealistic standards of behaviour - which no one ever reaches for the record.

For those like me who were not christened or baptised, you were automatically treated like an other - I liken it to how muggles are treated at Hogwarts in the world of Harry Potter. At mass, you were singled out at the time of communion because it wasn't appropriate for us to receive it without having completed our holy communion. You had to work extra hard in religion or you would get the 'it's okay, we know your family doesn't go to church' pity statements and you never got asked to do prayers.

It was the first of many times to come where I knew I didn't fit in society the way everyone else did.

Despite not having a church-going family and not being holy enough to partake in communion at mass; I was keenly interested in religion so much so that I began going to Sunday mass with a neighbour by choice, immersed myself into religion lessons and at the end of year 6 was voted 'most likely to become the first female Pope'. Spoiler alert - that did not happen.

SADNESS

As I mentioned, I never felt like I fit in with the people around me and I was chronically bullied for not looking or acting like everyone else. It created in me a depth of sadness that even today I find difficult to put words to; there is a whole other part of my story that I won't go into depth about. However, for some context, my dad was never around when I was younger - in fact I didn't know who he was or a single thing about him until I was 9 years old, when little Sam asked to meet him and as I often say - the rest is history.

I often downplay the impact not having a father figure had on me, he made it very clear that I was not part of the plan - an accident, initially by his absence for 9 years and then in the way he treated me differently to my older half-sisters.

He instilled in me the belief that I wasn't wanted, wasn't enough and would never measure up to his golden girls.

The sadness continued and grew.

By the time I was in high school, I was depressed but I was innately good at masking it - though my music showed it, my lack of connections showed it and the scars on my arms and legs certainly showed it.

When I used to share my testimony in faith settings, this is the point where I would say that I was saved twice - saved eternally and saved literally.

JESUS

Despite having been to a catholic school and have attended mass countless times; Religion in high school was very different. My experience barely mentioned Jesus - he was just part of the gospel, but it was never heavily focused on him or his life/death.

So, when the teacher began talking about Jesus, it was new and fresh, and I could not make sense of it to begin with. She came from the Anglican faith and spoke of loving one another, empathy, compassion, good works and above everything else - a relationship with Jesus.

She saw the sadness and vulnerability in me, and she came alongside and nurtured me - not to convert me but just to show me that I was someone worth loving. In doing so, she demonstrated what I would come to know as the love of Jesus, I will forever be grateful for who she was in my life during that season.

Through countless conversations and questions, I ended at a place where I prayed the salvation prayer and gave my life and heart to Jesus.

I was all in.

BLACK AND WHITE

Almost everything changed, my mindset changed, my friends changed, my behaviour changed, my clothes changed, my hopes and dreams changed; the sadness however remained.

Anyone who knows me, knows that I can be intense and full on - it's something about my personality I have come to appreciate and see as passion, but when I was younger it was just a lot. I was not the quiet, unassuming, good Christian girl, I was the loud, obnoxious, black and white Christian girl; it makes me cringe thinking about the person I used to be.

I began to go to the local Anglican church, and was reading the bible daily, doing devotions, praying any chance I got, but when some drama went down at the church and my Mum stopped me from going, I really felt like what I was doing meant something.

Coming from the Western and predominately white part of the world, we often prayed for the persecuted nations of the world where you would sometimes be killed for your faith. This was often used to hammer in your devotion, and I remember thinking on many occasions that if a gun was held to my head would I deny Jesus - it was the measure of my faith.

When I wasn't allowed to go to church, I thought it was one of the tests God gave you to ensure I would remain devoted even without the church.

I did end up at a different church though after around 6 months, thanks to a close friend at the time and her family; this time it was a small Christian Brethren church, and it became my 'home' for the next decade.

CHURCH

I look back on my time in the church with mixed emotions; there is much that I loved, people that I loved and yet there is deep pain and many incredibly problematic behaviours and practices.

I feel like it is important for me to make it clear that I do not hate these people; if I did it wouldn't hurt as much as it has and still does. Still to this day, I have deep love for many who still inhabit those walls, but never will I let that stop me from calling out abuse, harm and holding people and systems accountable for the pain they have inflicted.

If you aren't familiar with the denomination; we were a very conservative and traditional church; men were in leadership and women were in the kitchen or leading Sunday school. Men did the praying, preaching, and pastoring; and women sat in the shadows. The bible was taught in the literal sense and was treated as the holy text that all our lives should be filtered through; if the bible said the world was created in six days, then it was - it was as simple as that.

It was a family church; everyone was related to someone else and so here in lies yet another time of not quite fitting; if you have ever been a part of a family church you will understand this feeling of otherness.

Questions were never explicitly discouraged but you knew that asking questions of the sermon content would result in a series of after church coffee chats to ensure you were doing okay, 'encouragements' around daily devotion and prayer and messages being passed on to you that were supposedly from God that generally began with "I feel like God is telling me...".

Despite all of this - church was home for me; the people became family; not all of them are bad people or had untoward intentions with their words. Many are simply products of the environment they were raised and indoctrinated into.

I largely had a positive experience while I was there, but like any institution, they don't handle change all that well. Remember how I said I was the obnoxious Christian? That continued, and I was not one to just sit in the crowd quietly. I always had a deep longing to serve people, I knew it was my calling and that was initially difficult in a male dominated church; I did everything I could to be involved and I wanted to explore new ways of drawing people to Jesus. Many of my suggestions were met with brick walls; but a few got through the cracks and that was enough to keep me going.

SERVICE

During my time at church, I served in the worship team, as a youth leader, taught Sunday school, organised youth services, wrote and ran youth bible studies, taught primary SRE (Special Religious Education), was part of the morning tea roster, assisted in special events, and was a personal mentor to some of the teen girls.

On top of all of that, I would be involved in all events at school that were put on to evangelise; and there were prayer groups every morning also.

I look back now feeling exhausted by how much I did and understanding how much the church took advantage of my keenness - but I honestly loved it most of the time; I felt like I was doing something meaningful and that I was living with purpose.

I would have said to you "I feel like I'm living in alignment with God's plan and purpose for my life" and that is an almost indescribable feeling unless you have experienced it yourself.

BROKEN

You might be wondering why this section is titled 'Broken' if I was living with purpose and meaning; well remember that sadness that remained despite becoming a Christian? It continued to grow, and it morphed into what I can only describe as feeling broken.

It was evident to me from an early age that I was attracted to other girls, I didn't really think much of it until I reached high school and then I realised I was attracted to both men and women. Everything that I knew about relationships, marriage and sexuality was filtered through my faith which said that was fundamentally wrong.

Not only was I being told that we as humans were sinful and flawed from birth; but I also had this part of me - my sexuality, that I knew I needed to box up, never to be opened again because it was an abomination to God according to my biblical understanding and of the church I was member of.

I thought I could simply ignore my attraction to girls, and it would go unnoticed; I worked out very quickly that I could pass as straight and that I didn't 'look gay' and I wanted to use this to my advantage.

To a select few though, it did not go unnoticed. I was desperate to find what I used to call the loophole; surely there is a way around this - I saw beautiful, and kind Queer people and I couldn't reconcile that people were automatically condemned to hell because of the person they loved.

I began seeking guidance from trusted adults who were affirming of queer individuals, as I tried to reconcile my faith and sexuality. Unfortunately, my church, to which by now I was deeply involved, held very conservative views. Despite hearing affirming opinions, I struggled with the fact that the leaders I respected and trusted did not affirm Queer identities and adhered to traditional beliefs.

The cognitive dissonance was real; I had no sense of who I was, only who I was supposed to be. The only thing that I knew for sure was that I loved God, and I had a deeply personal relationship with Him; that only intensified the shame I felt about my sexuality because the absolute last thing I wanted to do was disappoint God - I was like a little girl not wanting to disappoint or anger her Daddy.

I spent so much energy desperate for the male gaze, just praying to God to send me a Christian guy so that my heart's fate was sealed - I didn't need to worry about my attraction to women anymore. Simple right? Except no guy that ever showed interest was Christ-like (hard standard to reach, I know), or wanted a committed relationship. No matter how many books I read or prayers that I prayed - I never found that guy.

IMMERSION

By the time I reached the end of high school, I wanted nothing more than to know God and the bible more thoroughly and intimately. I was trying so hard to suppress my sexuality and thought that the best way to do this was to immerse myself into my faith more than ever before.

I applied to complete a Bachelor of Theology at University which I got accepted into but deferred (and never got to) to complete something called a 'Gospel Gap Year' or Year 13 as it was referred to. It was a year of immersion into the bible, service, and mission - I went in with the intention and hope that I would grow in knowledge and deepen my faith.

For a bit of context, Year 13 was run by the Sydney Anglicans - well known for being the most ruthless and conservative Anglicans in the country. I didn't know this going in, and I'm not sure that it would have stopped me from going anyway.

I got a lot out of that year, I was exposed to people, places, and situations that I would never have otherwise, and I made some beautiful friendships.

I quickly realised though, that I yet again was the odd one out - I wasn't an Anglican, I didn't come from a church home, I didn't fit the 'good Christian girl' mould.

Suddenly I was seen as rebellious because I asked why our small groups needed to be gendered, I openly drank alcohol, I wanted to push the boundaries on the role of women in church, I wasn't a natural evangelist, I had empathy towards marginalised groups that I should just be witnessing to, I wasn't always happy and I had mental health struggles - all of that was seen as 'rocking the boat' or having a 'lukewarm faith'.

Part of the year was a month-long mission trip to Fiji; I was equally excited and anxious about this; I had never been overseas and so whilst I was apprehensive, I was keen to serve other communities and immerse myself in the culture.

Fiji is an incredible nation, its picturesque and the people are some of the most kind and generous I have ever had the privilege of meeting. However, Fiji is a Christian nation and a coloured nation; so, when it came time for us to have to do walk up evangelism as white, privileged young people I knew I couldn't do it.

Now to understand why this was such a big deal, you must know that we were taught to always have an answer for our faith and always be prepared to share the gospel; we were kingdom makers and to be seen as not wanting to participate in that was huge.

The evening prior, we were relaxing in the pool, and I was wracking my brain as to how I can get out of this without all the questions; I knew there was only one solution, and it was a bit of a risk because there was no guarantee that it was going to work.

We had been told in our preparation to only drink water from a sealed water bottle whilst in Fiji and so here I was in a pool of non-sealed water, and I knew that sickness was my only solution.

So, I ‘accidentally’ swallowed some water and hoped and prayed that it would make me sick enough that I wouldn’t have to go. Thankfully it worked and I spent the next day vomiting; but I look back now, and I feel a mixture of anger and sadness that I felt that I had no say in what I did and didn’t do that I had to go to the lengths of making myself sick to avoid it and to keep the mask on.

PREDESTINATION

I certainly came out of Year 13 with more knowledge, but I didn't quite come out with a deeper faith in God.

Many who have grown up in the church or even spent any time there will know the word predestination and it was this one word that sparked a huge turning point in my life.

For those who don’t know, predestination is the doctrine that everything in this life is willed by God including the fate of individual souls; basically, God chooses who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.

This was not something that I remember my church explicitly teaching and whilst I had heard versions of this, it was always packaged in a more palatable way. Until now, when I was faced with the idea that nothing I did really mattered in the end, if everything was already laid out and planned by God - then what was the point of prayer, what was the point of telling people about God, where was free will in all of this.

Coming from a family who didn’t believe in God, and having many friends who also weren’t Christians, I was faced with the reality that if I believed this then I also had to believe that they were going to hell. When I raised this with a couple of the elders in my church that I had deep respect for and trusted that they had a thorough knowledge of the scriptures, I was met with platitudes like “that is the way God designed it”, or “we don’t always understand why things are the way they are, but we trust God that he knows”.

I distinctly remember having dinner at an elder's home with him and his wife, going around in circles, with him trying to get me to understand it, when his wife said to me "why don't we leave the academic stuff to the men and just trust that God has our best interests at heart and wants the best for us" going on to quote the famous scripture from Jeremiah 29.11.

That didn't quite cut it for me, I didn't want a blind faith and I certainly didn't want to just sit back and listen just because I was a woman.

I knew that I loved God, but I couldn't be at church anymore and at this point I didn't think that I could have one without the other - so I left.

I left abruptly.

REBELLION

This sparked what I colloquially call 'my 2 years of rebellion; if I wasn't going to be fully in church then I was going to be fully out of it.

It's common for people to explore, experiment and rebel after leaving a high control religion and that is what I did - I wasn't sure if I would ever go back to church, but I wasn't going to wait around to see.

I did everything that I wasn't allowed or shouldn't have done while at church, I drank, I smoked, I experimented with marijuana, I partied 4-5 nights a week and I finally embraced my sexuality; but I was also selfish, impulsive, and reckless.

Whilst I may have suddenly been out and proud about being Bisexual; I look back and I know that it wasn't really embracing, I weaponised it. I knew that by embracing this part of who I am would rattle people, it would hurt them, and it would make them concerned about the state of my heart.

Whilst I made new friends, I lost old ones in the process. I had many people reach out from church to see if I was okay or to let me know that they were praying for me, where they were met with nothing but silence.

I was angry, I was angry at the leaders around me for not allowing critical thinking and I was angry at God for allowing such a horrible doctrine in predestination, because this was not the God that I came to have a deeply personal relationship with.

Though, this was no excuse for hurting the people around me; and eventually I did make amends and apologise to the people who would allow me to. The values I hold deeply in honesty, respect, empathy, and generosity were ignored and deep down I knew that the way I was acting was not my true authentic self, but I was so disconnected from myself to notice.

DEATH AND LIFE

You might be wondering why I have reversed this title of this section and it is done purposely.

After around 18 months of my self-indulgent rebellion, I began seeing what I could only describe as signs from God, they were everywhere. They were in tv shows, movies, songs, on the radio, in books I was reading, they were on billboards, in messages from people; I honestly felt like I was being bombarded by God to pay attention to him, back then I probably would have used biblical language like 'turn from my wicked ways' or that God was trying to 'soften my heart'.

I didn't know what to do with them, I went in a shame spiral where I felt that there was no way that I would ever be accepted and welcomed back in by my church let alone forgiven by them and God. The constant barrage of signs and the overwhelming feeling that I was crazy was suffocating, and just when I wasn't sure I could take anymore; I received a message that tragically a friend from Year 13 had been killed in a motorcycle accident.

It hit me like a tonne of bricks; even though we were not super close after Year 13 ended - he was one of the good ones. He was kind, and generous and he loved life; he never once treated me like I was different but instead chose to see the good in you.

I remember thinking “Why him? Are you kidding me God? Of all the people you chose to take him?” it quite simply didn’t make sense to me. I’m not sure something like that ever really makes sense - why good people live such short lives.

His death reminded me of how fickle and fleeting life can be, his death reminded me of the fear I had around my eternal salvation, his death reminded me of the comfort that God would give in times of grief and sadness, his death reminded me of the community I once had, his death pointed me back to what used to give me life.

BLINDNESS

Coming back to my faith was more layered and complex than I perhaps had given it credit for; for me it wasn’t as simple as praying the salvation prayer and I was back up and running. I had hurt people, I felt hurt, I had done a lot that I wasn’t proud of, I had fallen in love with a girl I couldn’t have and then lost a friendship that was as all-consuming as it was toxic.

I had so many questions going through my mind, how could they forgive me? How could God forgive me? Could I forgive myself? What do I do about my sexuality? Do I just shove it back in the proverbial closet? Could I be a Christian and Bisexual? What do I do with the doctrines I so fervently disagreed with? What do I do with all the anger at God?

Blind faith was never really something I could get behind; my faith had always been grounded in my personal experiences and how I felt God was working in my life intimately; but in this moment, I found myself saying the words “I don’t know the answers, but I trust that God’s ways and plans are higher and wiser than mine” and revisiting the verses that told me ‘nothing can separate us from the love of Christ Jesus’.

I was living a blind faith.

I believed that God knew better, I believed that Jesus sacrifice was the reason that I could be forgiven, I believed that I was loved beyond measure by God, I believed that God had a plan and that plan was perfect and I believed that the bible was the holy, God-breathed words for us to live by and that we were to take them seriously and literally.

What did I do about my sexuality? I ignored it - yet again.

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

So, I did what I was terrified of, but what came so naturally to me - I walked back into church, again with no warning and not telling anyone in advance.

Now, if you have never been a part of the church, there is nothing Christians like more than people who have 'fallen away' coming back; it's just a giant 'I told you so' and 'I knew you would see the light' moment. The self-righteousness was astonishing and I still to this day, can't believe that I didn't see it back then.

It was more evident than ever that very first day that I walked back into church; let me set the scene. It is a small church, around 80-100 people on a good day and all I wanted was to sneak in the back and just ease my way back in; I wasn't sure what I would feel like or if I was even doing the right thing.

It's not super easy to sneak into a small church; especially one with glass doors, but I knew that if I arrived a late, I would have a better chance - they had a habit of never starting on time. So here I am arriving for a 10am service at around 10.05, I walk in and manage somehow to go relatively unnoticed.

The man leading the service was someone I used to get on well with and we used to be youth leaders together, I thought this is great, it will be a nice light way to ease back in.

What happened next can only be described as mortifying; here I am sitting at the back of the church trying to lay low and the person leading the service singles me out and says, "Look who is back, the prodigal daughter has returned". I cringe thinking about it now but back then I didn't know what to do in that moment - who would? I simply just smiled and awkwardly laughed.

If you don't know the story of the prodigal son; it is essentially a parable about a young person who leaves home, squanders their wealth recklessly and then returns home seeking redemption and forgiveness from their family.

So, in front of everyone - I had been branded as someone who left the church, was reckless with my life and was running back for forgiveness for all the awful mistakes I had made.

I'm not sure about you, but to me that's not a compliment nor is it something that I wanted to put on display in front of everyone. Now, do I think that he did that with any malicious intent - no I don't. However, it is a prime example of how regardless of our intent, our words can cause harm, and how people in the church often bypass the impact of their actions because they were supposedly doing it with love.

ALL IN

It took a matter of weeks before I was helping here and there and before, I knew it, I was leading worship and youth group and casually teaching Sunday school all over again.

I was all in - yet again.

This time felt different, I was older, had more life experience, I felt like I was wiser and had a faith that understood the concepts of unconditional love and forgiveness on a deeper and more personal level. I was back to the person who wanted to live a life of service and ministry; and back wanting desperately for God to provide me with husband.

All I wanted was some direction; serving was great and I genuinely loved it, but it didn't pay anything; everything was voluntary and so I was praying daily and asking others to pray that God would show a path of paid ministry.

DIRECTION

I did this for around 18 months and then one day, I received a flyer in the mail for a 'Christian Counselling' degree - I knew this was it.

I didn't know why or how, but I just knew that this was what I had been praying for, so I applied and was accepted rather rapidly.

I finally had direction; I was going to use my heart for people, my empathy, and my faith to catapult me into a whole new career path. Little did I know, it would give me far more than just a career. It would give me love, knowledge, a purpose, a centre of gravity.

I loved the content that I was learning, yet I struggled with so much of the introspective components; for the years I spent at church and year 13 it was drilled into me that my heart is deceptive, my thoughts and feelings are not to be trusted; "lean not on your own understanding" was said to me countless times. There was only one to whom we could trust and that was God; so, when the time came to look inward, I had no idea what I was doing, and it didn't feel good to do so. In fact, this was something that I had to continue grappling with over the course of the 3 years, fighting against the innermost part of yourself that deemed you as deceptive and untrustworthy.

When I began my degree, I thought it was going to be wonderful to have the Christian aspects; after all God was our true listener, and counsellor. But as I began to learn more from the lecturers and my own research, I began to realise that us bringing this into the room without full consent of the client is unethical and potentially damaging.

I began to fervently disagree with some of the notions they were teaching, like having bibles in the counselling room, using prayer in the sessions, referring on clients who were Queer or who are considering abortion, insisting on marriage counselling as a remedy to divorce. I suddenly realised that I could be a Christian and a counsellor but being a Christian counsellor did not sit well with my morals and ethics.

The first 2 years were ones of learning and growth; I began to unpack not just mental health, the human experience, trauma, and relationships but the systems they exist in and the people upholding those systems; I began to unpack the bible and what it says about the world and more importantly what it doesn't say. I was in a place where I could think critically not just emotionally.

I sought advice from trusted and affirming Christians; one who was a Minister of the Uniting Church, and the other a mother figure to me who had studied at bible college. They were people that I trusted not just on a human and emotional level but on a biblical level; they lived and moved in the world the way I imagined Jesus called us to.

These conversations were not easy, and they almost never ended in the place I expected them to; but they did land me in a place where I was okay about following Jesus and being Bisexual - that those 2 things were not opposing forces. I would not have said that I was affirming, but being okay was enough progress for me at this stage.

HARASSMENT

For many, the word's purity culture won't mean anything at all and for others they will cause a visceral reaction. For me, I sit somewhere in the middle.

At its core, purity culture is a term used to describe a set of beliefs and practices used to regulate and control sexual behaviour often within the framework of religious doctrines. Central to its tenets is the notion that a woman's worth is inexorably linked to her sexual purity, framing premarital sex as a tarnish on her character.

This ideology is perpetuated through various means, including abstinence pledges, purity rings, and purity balls, events where fathers symbolically promise to safeguard their daughters' virginity until marriage.

But purity culture goes beyond just not having sex before marriage and for me it showed up in my intense hatred towards my body, suppressing my sexuality and the belief that as women it is our responsibility to prevent men succumbing to their lustful thoughts and desires.

There is much that I wish I had done differently about my time in church and many doctrines and systems I wish I had not upheld; but I am thankful that I have never once placed the responsibility of sexual assault or harassment on the victim.

That was until the victim was me.

I still cringe at the word victim and as I type this story, there are still parts of me that shoulder the responsibility or take blame for what happened; despite knowing logically that it was not my fault.

There came a day, a very normal average day where a guy that I knew very well from church started taking interest in me; I knew him to be kind, friendly, a little shy and reserved, and perhaps not the most devout Christian; despite being an elder's son. I was shocked when he was messaging me in a manner that suggested he wanted more than friendship; he had never shown interest before, it was strange.

I had to admit to myself that the idea of dating him was enticing, not because I liked him specifically but because I loved his family - they were like my family. So, I entertained the thought for a while; but it became apparent quickly that he didn't want to date me - he wanted to have sex with me. The messages became very explicit, again I was shocked because this shy reserved guy was speaking with such graphic language.

He fetishised my sexuality; wanting me to tell him in detailed language sexual acts I had done or wanted to do with women, he was forthcoming about the fact that it turned him on. He didn't like that I wouldn't talk about this, and I kept trying to bring the conversation back to one about maybe going on a date - I look back now and wish I had seen to signs to back out now.

He continued the conversation, by making it clear that he didn't want a relationship or to date me because I wasn't his type; that he only wanted to have sex - that was all I was to him, just a bit of flesh to get his kicks; my heart, mind, faith, personality didn't matter. I decided to be just as clear, that just sex was not something I was open to.

This is where things took a turn, the messages were more frequent, more explicit, more graphic, and more forceful. He began insisting "I will come pick you up for a drive, and by the time I convince you, we will be out at my farm f***ing"; the messages were relentless for around a week or so; and then eventually they stopped.

The shock of what happened was overwhelming, I felt violated despite him never touching me, I felt like I was dirty and tainted.

I remember thinking “what is wrong with me that he wouldn’t want to date me”; after all of that, I still thought it was my fault, that it was my fault that he only wanted to have sex with me and not date me - how messed up is that!

I knew that despite the proof I had in the messages that no one was going to believe me, and even if they did; this guy was not only an Elder’s son but part of the core family clique in the church, it was only a matter of time before it became my fault.

So, I told no one initially; and only months and months later did I tell 2 close girlfriends who believed me without hesitation; something that I am eternally thankful for.

It took me a long time to call this what it is, sexual harassment.

For anyone out there who has had this happen to them: please know that this is not your fault, it is not your responsibility to shoulder and to those you trust to tell - believe them, always.

CHRISSY

I think for the first time in my life, I wasn’t on the lookout for someone to spend my life with. I just wanted to focus on my studies and my career - this was a first for me: when the church puts marriage on a pedestal, you spend so much time and energy on desperately trying to get someone to love you so that you can join the marriage club; and boy did I spend so much energy on it.

I even had a list about the ‘ideal man’, this was encouraged whilst reading a book about the same topic. I can honestly tell you that no real human man was ever going to meet that ideal that my 18-year-old self, dreamed of and prayed for.

Just as I stopped looking, a very unassuming, shy woman walked into my life and changed everything.

When I first met Chrissy, I was at a retreat for the self-care unit and all the students from Queensland had to venture down to Sydney. I spotted her across the room, young people tended to stick out, there was only a few of us; she was wearing black jeans and a red flannel hoodie. My next thought was entirely stereotypical, but I remember thinking "hmm she is screaming lesbian with that outfit"; I only had one meeting with her over that weekend and walked away thinking she was so rude and not friendly at all.

Now for anyone who knows Chrissy, you will know that she is the kindest, friendliest, and most generous person. It wasn't until the next mixed state retreat that I saw that person.

She was a different person: she was bright and bubbly and very flirty. A little 'subtle' look of my nails, and moving my hair out of my face, and sneaking plenty of looks during the lectures I was even more sure that she was interested in me. We spent nearly every second together over the course of that weekend, again another 'subtle' joke about being attracted to Cameron Diaz, a sneaky kiss, and we found ourselves having a conversation about whether this was something we wanted to pursue.

By this point, Chrissy had already been kicked out of her church, so it wasn't a concern for her; but for me it was an entirely different story.

I don't know what it was that told me to go for it; I can only describe it as a deep knowing, a deep sense of 'this will be worth it'. So, I did, and I had no idea what would come of it.

We kept our relationship quiet for around 3 months, I wanted us to get to know one another before people knew - and that is what we did. We talked every day, sometimes into all hours of the night and I was smitten, it was just so easy.

The time came for people to know, we couldn't keep it quiet any longer. I told the people that I knew would be okay first - my Mum, and my best friend. I knew that I needed to tell my church family and I knew that the responsible' thing to do would be to tell the Elders first.

THE MEETING

At this point the church had 4 Elders, but I decided to only include 2 in this meeting; it was a strategic move on my part because I had a good relationship with both, and I could include one of their wives who had been somewhat like a mentor to me for several years. They were safe people for me.

I knew what the churches stance was on this would be; from everything I had read from other people in a similar situation, I would be stood down from all forms of ministry but that I would be welcome to continue attending the church - I just couldn't lead. I thought I was okay with that, and I genuinely thought that was how the conversation would go.

Here is how the actual conversation went.

I went in and was completely honest; I remember saying "me being in a relationship with a woman doesn't affect my relationship with God and my commitment to the church, I just wanted to be open and honest", I really wanted to convince them somehow that I was still the same me, the same person that led worship that past Sunday.

Of course, they told me I would need to stop serving, 'I expected that' I thought, but then it continued into a bible lesson where all 3 of them started to tell me all the reasons why this 'relationship' was unholy, and it would be a blockage in my relationship with God. I felt like a child being berated by their parents for doing something wrong - I was getting a 'talking to'.

They went on to tell me that whilst I was welcome to continue attending the church, that I was not to be open about the relationship especially around the children and youth of the church because I was seen as a mentor for many of them, and I was to commit to one on one time with one of the Elders to explore and grow in what the bible says about relationships, marriage and homosexuality.

You know that saying, 'we can't kick you out, but we can make it hard for you to stay', that was what was happening here. So instead, I chose to leave.

I remember being so emotional that evening, just sobbing in my bedroom; I remember thinking “how could these people who say they love me, treat me so terribly” and “what is wrong with me”? I was overwhelmed with the sheer lack of empathy, understanding and love and the fierce show of judgement and rigidity.

In that one conversation, everything changed. I was no longer welcomed into a place that was like home for me, people who were safe places to land were no longer and I felt utterly lost; I felt like I lost everything that made me - me.

SILENCE

In the weeks that passed, I couldn't help but wonder, how is this a representation of the God I thought we all loved and represented.

Did we have a different idea of God? How was that loving? I had so many questions and no answers to any of them. In a stark contrast to the last time, I had left church, my phone was silent; no messages, no phone calls - nothing. Did no one care? Or was I just deemed a lost cause this time?

Before this point, I tried hard to see it from their point of view, to turn the other cheek, and to pray for them - if I can't make them see, then maybe God will. “They don't know any better”, is what I used to tell myself; and I whilst I was trying to hold onto this image I had of these people, it was getting more and more difficult each day.

As each still and silent day passed, I began to lose hope that we could reconcile and make this right and it hurt; more than anything I had ever felt up until this point. All my time and energy I had poured into the church, all the relationships built, and connections made, were now gone.

I often use imagery of standing with one foot on either side of the Grand Canyon representing my faith/church and the other my sexuality/Chrissy, slowly being ripped apart from the inside out, it was a type of inner conflict and torture that is hard to explain and that took many years to express. What do I do? Where do I go? Who even am I?

Everything felt silent - except for inside my mind.

HOLD ON

There is a statement that gets thrown around by church people, 'the church doesn't hurt people, people hurt people' and I tried hard to hold onto this despite how damaging and dismissive it is.

Somchow, I still held onto my faith.

I moved to Brisbane to be with Chrissy where we lived for 6 months; hopping from church to church, trying to find a place to land, because I still believed the message that to be a committed Christian you needed to be planted in a church. So, we tried so many different churches, different denominations and sizes and each time we had to correct people that we weren't sisters, we saw the instant awkwardness and within seconds they had to leave.

I was trying so hard, I was praying, I was reading the bible and we were trying to incorporate our faith into our relationship, I felt like I was doing everything right to hold on to my relationship with God - I was almost trying too hard.

It caused conflict between Chrissy and I because I still had learned messages unconsciously guiding me about relationships. I still had a very heteronormative ideas and was adhering to traditional gender roles, I wanted Chrissy to lead - to be the 'head of the household' while I was at home cooking, cleaning, and trying to be the perfect girlfriend. I look back now and see that I was just trying box our relationship into something that resembled a 'holy union', something that would prove to others that they were all wrong and that it wasn't affecting my relationship with God.

When we moved to Western Australia, I was still hopeful of finding a church that we could plant ourselves into.

As I begun to let go of this picture-perfect idea of a 'holy relationship', we got into a groove that felt natural - more natural than I could have described.

Did we continue jumping from church to church? You bet we did and with each church we went to I felt increasingly uncomfortable - I no longer fit in here. It was an empty and hollow feeling, church was always a place of ease for me, and I didn't know what to do with these feelings, I became increasingly distant and disconnected. I was also going through some other pretty traumatic things when my dad was killed in 2017, where was I to go with all this grief? Not only was I distant and disconnected with myself but that's also how I felt with God.

I still loved worship and listening to a sermon here and there by my favourite preachers, I would still enjoy Christian books but rarely read the bible; my faith was there but it wasn't solid - I had become what I would have called 'a lukewarm Christian'.

PUTTING A RING ON IT

On 21st December 2017 my life took another turn when Chrissy proposed. I was overjoyed and I couldn't think of anything that I would be more excited about. She proposed in front of all my family and friends at a dinner I had surprised her with for her birthday. My family were excited, there was cheers, hugs, and tears.

Marriage was something I had wanted long before I became a Christian; As a little girl, I dreamed of being a Bride and having this big and beautiful wedding. This morphed into wanting a Godly wedding into the wedding I was planning now.

I couldn't believe I was planning a wedding. We were back visiting family and so we thought it was the best time for us to ask all the important people in our lives to be a part of our special day. I didn't want to ask my best friends to be stand beside me over the phone and so I got planning. I don't do things in halves so I planned boxes that I could 'propose' to them with, with candles, the Bridesmaid's movie, and other lush things. I wanted them to feel as special as they were to me.

I had planned to ask 4 friends, 1 to be my Maid of Honour and the other 3 to be my Bridesmaids; they were my best friends, and I knew my day wouldn't be perfect without them.

What happened that day is still one of the most painful things for me to talk about.

GRIEF

The weather was perfect, not too hot and it wasn't raining; I woke up eager for the day and asking my closest people to be part of my wedding party, it never once occurred to me that today wouldn't go in any other way than pure joy.

We were at the park, and Chrissy unloaded the boxes out of the car, I felt the mood was a bit off to begin with, but I just shrugged it off, I was too excited for anything to dampen it.

So, it's worth noting here, that 2 of the people I was about to ask are 2 of the few people I was still friends with that were either from the church or Christians.

I turned to my bestie and asked her to be my Maid of Honour and she was as I expected over the moon. I then turned to the other 3 and handed them their boxes, by now it was obvious what was coming, and one was again as expected so excited to be joining the 'Bride Tribe'.

The other 2, awkwardly looked at each other and at me, almost waiting for the other person to speak first. One of them finally spoke and said the words that I never thought I would hear "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but we have spoken about this, and we have both been praying and neither of us feel that we could stand next to you when we don't believe the marriage is right in the eyes of God".

That moment is both so foggy and yet seared into my memories. I was in complete shock; I couldn't believe that I was hearing 2 of my best friends tell me that not only would they not be Bridesmaids but that they could not in good conscience even attend the wedding.

That would be giving the impression that they approved of it, when they didn't - they continued talking about how they love me, and hope that it doesn't change our friendship and that they must honour God first and what he designed marriage to be.

I felt sick, and I couldn't breathe; I needed to get out of there - so I got up and I left, crying in a way that I had never done before. I had taken a few hits to my self-worth and identity up until this point, but I have never felt so rejected and hurt in my entire life. My heart, my body and my spirit ached in a way I could never have imagined.

"How could they do this to me", I kept repeating that, because I honestly didn't have any other words. How could they expect me to be okay with that, to just brush it under the rug and carry on like it never happened. They loved me?

At this point I wasn't sure they even knew the meaning of that word because I felt the opposite of loved, I felt abandoned.

I was inconsolable.

It took about a week or so until I finally felt ready to message them; it was a crafted message that I agonised over and over, it needed to be perfect. I sent the same message to both, despite having very different relationships with each of them.

I was in pain, and they needed to hear what it was like for me and just how heartbroken I was, I told them that I wasn't just sad that they wouldn't be at my wedding, but I was sad that they had such a rigid and warped view of God and of what the bible said on this. I told them that I couldn't see how our friendship would ever be the same again and how much that devastated me.

The responses I received only increased that heartbreak. I got more platitudes about pleasing God and not man, I got more bible verses about how marriage is between a man and a woman.

What was the most painful was that one decided to make this about them, that they were saddened that I didn't see our friendship as more important to look past this and that it wasn't her making a judgement, rather just doing what God expected of her.

I was told that this was their way of being a good friend and loving me, and that they didn't think it was fair of me to put them in an uncomfortable position.

I remember thinking when did this become my fault, how was I the villain in the story suddenly? I look back on that and realise how unfair it was of them to place that burden on me when they held all the cards, but at the time I went through all those emotions; maybe it was my fault, maybe I shouldn't have put them in that position.

I blamed myself.

Despite trying to push through and not let it affect the wedding planning process, it did; each moment of the process was overshadowed by the 2 people who should have been there that weren't.

We always think grief and loss goes hand in hand with death; but the grief that I felt and still feel today over the lost friendships has been immeasurable. And as the saying goes 'grief comes in waves', there are days where it just exists and there are days where it is like a tidal wave, hitting me with full force.

I no longer feel that I was to blame, this took a lot of wrestling within therapy though, I came to realise that I was simply a young woman excited about marrying the love of her life and I wanted all my favourite people to be there - there is nothing malicious, cruel or manipulative about that.

ANGER

While we were in my hometown, we had planned to go to church before Christmas; it was still important to me to be in the House of the Lord at Christmas and Easter. I was only in contact with 2 people from the church at this point, one was one of the friends who I was now not speaking with and another who I was regularly in contact with; he was always one of my favourite things about coming back to visit.

Both people knew we had plans to attend the service and the day before the service I received a text from an unknown number. It was a text signed from not just one but all the Elders.

It read "We understand that you intend to come to church tomorrow. Whilst you are welcome to come, we would request that you do not participate in Communion as according to 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 you would be eating and drinking judgement and ill health on yourself and the broader church community. We are open to further discussion with you."

I was gobsmacked, how does someone get to control what another person does in a church; Communion for me was always an expression of your love and devotion to God, it was about being thankful for the sacrifice of the cross. How did they know what was in my heart?

Up until this point, I had not really experienced too much anger; disappointment, sadness, pity, rejection; I had felt all of that but anger not so much. Looking back on it I know that I repressed a lot of the anger, but this was the first time I had let myself feel any of it.

I was furious. I think what I experienced at this point was closer to rage than anger.

I replied with a surprisingly eloquent message, about how insulted I was and to express my anger at their belief that they had the right to judge my relationship with God. I reminded them that whilst they may own the building, it is still God's house and encouraged them to examine the state of their own hearts before partaking in Communion.

I didn't receive a reply from that Elder and I didn't expect to; but I also didn't expect for it to be passed on to one of the others for them to send yet another insulting message.

This message read "Thank you for engaging in communication, I am sorry you feel so strongly about this. We are concerned for your wellbeing and understand from the bible (I Corinthians 11:30) that taking Communion while living in sin could have serious effects on your health and those of the congregation. So, it is out of concern for you not out of judgement that we have requested you to not take Communion. We do hope that you will turn from your sinful choices and that you will be restored to full fellowship with us soon".

I didn't think I could be more shocked than I already was; I decided to not dignify this with a response, I wasn't going to continue putting myself in the line of fire for people that clearly had no real love or regard for me and my wellbeing.

I had not once but twice been rejected by a place I used to call home, I had such love for so many of the people who are still there, but I had been hurt too much.

I no longer feel anger towards them, again this healing came from years of therapy; but I would be lying if I said I don't experience pain every time we drive past that building as we go my hometown. But it is just that, it's a building now - a building where I hold memories both of joy and despair, but it no longer has the same hold on me as it once did.

J

As months passed and the wedding drew closer and closer, I found myself realising that I only had invited 1 person from my former church to the wedding; he was one of my best friends, and I deeply respected his thoughts and opinions on most aspects of life. He was one of a handful of Christians who congratulated us and attended our engagement party.

I was grateful that he was coming, considering he was one of the Elders' sons. As fate would have it though, grief was the gift that kept on giving.

Around 5 weeks prior to the wedding, I was still chasing up RSVP's and he was notoriously good at procrastinating, so when I messaged him about it, I expected a 'sorry I know I'm the worst, of course I will be there'; but I got a message telling me that whilst he wouldn't bore me with his convictions on the matter, that he wouldn't be able to attend.

I can honestly say that nothing had cut so deeply as receiving that message; I felt betrayed, confused, and abandoned. I wanted to be bored with his convictions because I wanted to understand, was it his parents that was guiding this or was it his own decision, what had changed between the engagement and now; despite asking for that conversation, I never got it. Sadly, and not by my own request I have not had a conversation with him since that day.

It deeply changed the next 5 weeks, he was not just a friend, he was someone that I shared my faith journey with - I trusted him, and I trusted his biblical outlook, perhaps more than he even realised. 'What if I was wrong' was a regular thought that occupied my mind, if he didn't think I should get married then maybe I shouldn't. I hadn't until now, had so many doubts about getting married - not because I didn't love Chrissy, that was never in question; but what if God did disapprove of it, what if I was make a big mistake?

I thought that the loss I felt with my friends, or the loss of the church would have prepared me to take another hit; but this one hit different and without warning. When someone that you love, someone that you trust and someone that you listen to, hurts you in a way that cuts you to the core of who you are; you lose a part of yourself and when you don't get any closure around it; you are left hanging, with no centre of gravity and nothing to grip onto.

This wound is one that is still open and raw and whilst I'm not sure what will bring healing to it; I do know and trust that healing will come.

WEDDING

The wedding planning process was as wonderful as it was bumpy, it meant a lot to us both to get married in a church but that was going to take some work. I thankfully had a friend who just so happened to be a Queer affirming Minister in the Uniting Church, at the most beautiful church in my hometown.

There were still hoops to jump through though, we needed to have permission and there was paperwork and steps to follow that thankfully, he took care of for us. It still came with a twinge of pain though; other couples didn't have to do this - I would often think "why are we still fighting for rights within a system that hates us, why do we, why do I care so much". A question that I still wrestle with.

Now, in the words of the TikTok viral song: 'can we skip to the good part'?

On 4th May 2019, I married the love of my life; the day was perfect, and it honoured not only our love for each other but our love for God. We did get married in that beautiful church, with the most special people standing beside each of us; we were married by a man that played an integral part of my own journey toward embracing Queerness and faith and our marriage was prayed over by a woman who on several occasions brought me back from the brink, emotionally, in my journey of faith and the ownership of my sexuality.

It was joyful.

DETANGLEMENT

Deconstruction is a trendy word, right? I had never even heard of it as a term before my therapist used it. Sometimes I relate to it and other times not so much.

I see my own internal processing as more of a detangling; specifically detangling that giant ball of Christmas lights that at times just seems like it is all too hard and we should just buy new ones; but eventually you sit down and you look at it, not just glance in passing but really look at it. You start detangling slowly, because if you try to do it too fast it will become overwhelming, and you will yet again throw it in the too hard basket.

Once you start though, you can't help but begin to see how interconnected everything is.

My detangling began with a lot of questions; I was still trying to wrestle with who God was and how my sexuality and now marriage was connected to the bible and my faith.

It also began to affect my wellbeing; we had just moved back over east to Goulburn in New South Wales, and I was completely burnt-out from my previous job and its toxic work environment, and I was exhausted not just physically but mentally.

I decided to find a therapist, but for me it had to be someone who understood the trauma I had endured from the church and was affirming on Queer relationships.

I found exactly what I needed in a former Pastor turned Counsellor - I knew if he had been a Pastor that he knew theology and I knew from the abundance of research I had done on him that he was no longer a Pastor because of his support for the LGBTQIA+ community and marriage equality.

My therapy journey is never complete because healing and growth are not destinations that we just reach and are done, its an ongoing masterpiece; but my therapy has been anything but simple.

My therapist would say I'm stubborn and avoidant and let's be fair therapists don't make the best clients.

However, it was space for me to ask the big questions I had with someone who had not only gone through their own deconstruction but who could wrestle theology and bible passages with me. I wrestled with purity culture, the concept of God, the doctrine of heaven and hell, predestination, prayer, the bible, where God is amidst the suffering and the church at large.

Now I don't have any concrete answers for those, but I did come to a place where not knowing was not causing distress within me.

I began to verbalise the pain, the grief and the trauma left within me about what and who I had lost. I began to explore, who I even was; because when you lose everything you think makes you who you are, it begins your era of reinvention and that was as daunting as it was exhilarating.

I did know who I was without God, and learning to trust myself, to tap into my intuition and not see it as inherently evil has been the biggest part of my deconstruction; it still continues.

When you are repeatedly told that you are broken, and fundamentally flawed; so much so that you needed a blood sacrifice to save you from eternal torment, you learn to shift your internal compass to the perfect and holy God - to which you should rely on, always.

I began to understand that my intuition was not evil, nor was it the voice of the Holy Spirit but the perfect whispers of my heart and my spirit.

It is interesting just how far your internal landscape reaches and how once you start to unravel and question; you can't stop, and you can't always pick and choose how your body, mind and spirit reacts to the world around you.

I began to question other systems, churches, and people I had always respected; I remember a day where I was attending a women's conference that was exceptionally popular and usually, I would have been 'soaking in the spirit' and 'leaning into the word of God' but this time I heard something different.

I heard control, manipulation, love bombing, misused scriptures, heavy focus on money, I saw the idolatry in the other conference goers where they place the people on stage on pedestals - I saw that in myself, I saw segregation and white, rich privilege.

In a nutshell, I saw narcissism and oppression and once I saw that, I couldn't look away.

I couldn't keep quiet about it then, and I will continue to call out harm and abuse found within the walls of churches and high control religion. That, I have discovered is part of my new calling and purpose in this world.

CURIOSITY

I have never been one for labels, I don't like the idea of being boxed in; but I used to always be proud of the label 'Christian' - that meant something to me. I no longer use that term to describe myself, and it took a while to feel okay about that without the need to just replace it with another identity label.

I am now in my curiosity era, and it is the most liberation I have felt; it allows me to shrink things I no longer align with and expand on areas that I do.

I can finally explore things that my heart has always been drawn to; things like Wicca, Tarot, Crystals, and Oracle Cards. I don't know whether I will love them, hate them or something in between but regardless I have the freedom to find out.

Do I still believe in God? Sometimes. Do I believe that the bible is the inherent word of God? No, it is simply a history book that is used as a weapon of control, manipulation, and submission. Do I believe in salvation, heaven, and hell? Not really. Thankfully, the uncertainty in my answers around these big questions, no longer brings up an immediate sense of fear.

Do I still hold many of the messages of the bible and Jesus' life? Yes, I believe in amplifying and protecting the marginalised and oppressed - advocating for social justice. I believe in the power of women, and breaking down the patriarchy and privilege that our society runs on. I believe in the force of love and showing compassion and mercy to world around me.

I step out into the world not armed with God, or the bible anymore; but with my own beliefs, values, boundaries, and curiosity for the world around me.

I step out into the world with freedom.

And so can you.

CONNECT WITH ME



Wanting to connect with me?

- Join my monthly newsletter where you will be the first to know about future services, products and trainings I have lined up; [Reflections, Ramblings and Religious Trauma](#)
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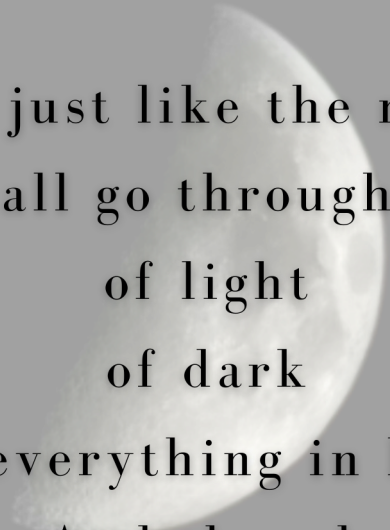
Are you looking for a Therapist? I offer services worldwide (except US & Canada)

- Head to www.anchoredcounsellingservices.com.au and fill out my contact form
- Email me at info@anchoredcounsellingservices.com.au

My friends Jane Kennedy, Elise Heerde and I have co-founded [The Religious Trauma Collective](#). A space for support, resources and community.

I also have a podcast where I give space for other people navigating Religious Trauma and Deconstruction to share their story; its called Beyond the Surface. You can find it on all major podcast homes as well as [here on my website](#).

For more information on Religious Trauma; checkout the [blog section](#) on my website.



And just like the moon,
you shall go through phases
of light
of dark
and of everything in between.

And though
you may not always appear
with the same brightness
you are always
always
whole.