

DECONSTRUCTING YOUR FAITH WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 262 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me the author of a brand new book called *Deconstructing Your Faith Without Losing Yourself*. Her name is Angela Herrington, and she is a faith deconstruction coach and the host of the Deconstructing Faith Summit. She helps people break free from toxic religious cultures, and today we are going to have a discussion about the subject of her new book. So welcome, Angela.

ANGELA: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

NATALIE: Okay, so first of all, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and why or how your work has led you to helping people specifically with deconstructing their faith?

ANGELA: So I'm Angela, as you said. I've been a coach for a little over a decade, and people are often surprised to learn that I came to deconstruction by going to seminary.

NATALIE: Oh, interesting.

ANGELA: So I went to a wonderful seminary, but it does what seminaries should do, which is challenge you to really get into the nitty-gritty of what you believe. And I was working on a master's degree in leadership and doing a research project on the opportunity for women to be mentored and to step into leadership positions in the church. And as we know, there's a stained glass ceiling. And so I was able to interview some brilliant women, very high up, in a few different denominations who do affirm women in leadership and find out that there were a lot of doors still closed.

And so it kind of made me sit back and say, "Well, if this is true, what else is true? If this is a system that encourages people to be lifted up but then keeps us in a hierarchy, who else am I keeping in a hierarchy? Where am I benefiting from this hierarchy?"

So it got really messy. It's a long and winding road. That could be a whole set of books, so we won't go into super detail. But I was building a ministry and kind of having my own deconstruction unfold behind the scenes, and what I discovered is that many of

the people, especially the leaders that I was coaching and that were kind of coming to me for support, were also deconstructing, and they just didn't have any place to talk about it because their job required them to have a strong faith or their spouse's job or they were attending a Christian university. And so it's kind of naturally evolved out of having vulnerable conversations about what was happening to me behind the scenes.

NATALIE: Very interesting. Well, the Flying Free Podcast listeners are mostly women of faith who are in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages and religious environments. So can you define faith deconstruction and explain how it often intersects with the process of healing from emotional and spiritual abuse?

ANGELA: Absolutely. I think faith deconstruction is a really hard thing to define because faith is a hard thing to define, right? Doubt is a hard thing to define. Questioning, uncertainty, it's really hard to define because it's very deeply rooted in our personal experience and our personal faith.

And so the faith deconstruction definition that I use is that really it's an examining of what you believe. It's a sifting and sorting and really challenging those things that you've always been taught were unchallengeable. And seeing what's worth keeping and seeing what is actually rooted in the God that you believe in or the faith that you believe is true.

And I think that's why it gets a lot of challenges because there's a whole bunch of us out here who are in it, have gone through it, and we're all defining it a little bit different. So hold that loosely because if you ask a hundred people, you may get a hundred different definitions. But that's not a bad thing, right? That's a good thing.

As far as where it intersects, that's a big question because not everyone suffers from religious abuse. Not everyone experiences spiritual or religious abuse, but I will tell you, almost everyone who I have worked with or talked to has had some sort of trauma related to religion. Now, it may not have come from the church. It might've come from a family member who, up until the point that this person realized bad things were happening, was a spiritual role model. Or it may have even happened for people who grew up adjacent to the church and were simply stuck in an imbalanced system, an unfair system that was being upheld by Christian people. So there's a lot of overlap.

And I think the other thing that's really interesting is that a lot of people who have experienced abuse either in the church or at the hands of religious people don't actually know that it's abuse until they get about halfway through their deconstruction. I have a couple of clients who have come out of, I could say high control religion, but

actual cults, and have had to leave family members behind, and it has taken years for them to get to the point where they can actually acknowledge that what they left was harmful and that it wasn't just not a good fit for them.

NATALIE: Well, I can relate to that too, even growing up and for most of my adult life. I thought the religious communities that I was living and working in were beautiful, amazing examples of God's love. But that in and of itself was almost a trauma response. It was like a dissociating from what was actually going on because when that's embedded in your psyche from the time that you're an infant, to deny that or to say that there's something wrong with it would completely dismantle your whole mindset and your entire psyche. It's crazy. And I don't think humans naturally want to do that. We don't naturally want to tear down the entire scaffolding of our lives.

ANGELA: Absolutely. Especially when it's something foundational that all of your family relations are connected to — your social relations, your support system. There's a lot of grief when you start asking questions and you lose a lot of those pieces.

And you're right about humans — neurologically, our brains are not wired to become more vulnerable when we're in dangerous situations. So our bodies are recognizing that there are unhealthy things going on and we're stressed out and we're walking on eggshells, but it feels so normal to us that we don't even realize we're in that heightened state until we get away or until it becomes so much that we just can't function in the day to day and we have to... I mean, we talk about "Come to Jesus" moments, but that's really what it is. It's like, "Wait a minute, what's going on? Why do I feel so bad?"

And hopefully with all of the documentaries that are coming out, books that are coming out of the conversations that are coming out about religious trauma, we're going to be able to saturate the planet in a way that people are closer to the resources and closer to the other people who can hold up a mirror and say, "This isn't okay. This is not what you deserve," because that's really what opens the door for a lot of people.

NATALIE: For me, I still have my faith, but I'd lost so much of that extra stuff. But I like to think that if we want to, we can find a place where we feel closer to our Source, closer to our Creator than we did before when we had all of this stuff around us. Can you discuss the role of trauma in the faith deconstruction process then and how trauma can both facilitate and also complicate the journey?

ANGELA: It seems like such a contradiction, but your question is dead on because what happens is there's sometimes an awakening — sometimes it's gradual, sometimes it's

sudden — but there's this feeling, there's this understanding that what we're living in isn't normal. And a lot of times we can't put our finger on it. But it tends to start with just feeling disconnected and feeling like God is distant or the church is distant or something's happening, and we're just feeling disconnected and unfulfilled.

And when people go into deconstruction, a lot of times when we go a little deeper and we get a little safer, a little distance, what they discover is that that's actually their body in a trauma response saying, "I can't do this anymore. I'm exhausted." And so what we see in the deconstruction space is, first of all, what the heck is trauma? You mean I'm traumatized? No, no. It really is a grief process. You can't have trauma without grief, and especially healing trauma.

So we go through those stages of grief. We go through the denial and the bargaining. And then when we can get to a point where we can really put the blame, for lack of a better term, the blame for the harm, the responsibility for the harm on the shoulders of the people who caused it and not on our own shoulders as the people who received it, that's when we start calling it "trauma."

And honestly, those are some of the most vulnerable moments, and a lot of the people that I've worked with have been in church leadership or youth leadership or ministry of some sort. And I gotta tell you, when you are trying to reconcile with this idea that not only have you been traumatized, but you've perpetrated harm on others, that's like being naked in front of the classroom. That is hard stuff. And so it takes a lot of courage to get there. It takes a good support system and it just takes a lot of vulnerability to acknowledge the trauma because I haven't met a person yet who has been traumatized but hasn't accidentally passed that on.

Now, I'm not saying that you are responsible for your own trauma. I'm saying that you can only teach what you know. And so in my case, what I passed on to my children was only rooted in what I knew. So if I was being traumatized, what else could I pass on? And we can go back to our parents and our grandparents. You can go back as many generations as you want and there's a grieving that needs to happen that goes kind of up the hierarchy and down the hierarchy and really reconciling with the harm that was done and the harm that we're doing, even on an ongoing basis. So it's messy. Deconstruction is one of the messiest things. I always say parenting is messy. Deconstruction is more messy.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. The parenting analogy, that's true too, though. So how can faith deconstruction serve as a path to recovery and healing for people who have experienced emotional and spiritual abuse inside of their faith communities?

ANGELA: That's a bit of a loaded question because I will tell you that there are some corners of the deconstruction space that are not trauma-informed, and the number one goal of those spaces is to make sure you don't lose your faith. It's just a different belief system. And sometimes it's the same system you're coming out of, just in a slightly different package or different denomination or that kind of thing.

When we talk about deconstruction, I want to make sure people are aware that you have to listen to your gut when you're listening to people talk about deconstruction. If there's anybody coming into the room and saying, "After you deconstruct, X, Y, Z will happen," be really careful, because there are no guarantees. And so when we're talking, especially about trauma, anybody who comes in and says, "Hey, we're going to work through all this trauma, but you're still going to believe in God. You're still going to believe in Jesus. You're still going to believe in those things. We can work through this in a way that protects your faith," who knows that, right? Who has the ability to say that? If I didn't even have control of that in my own deconstruction, how is somebody else going to control my deconstruction in a way where it's always safe and we know where we're going to land and we can just kind of do the work and cruise through it?

So if you find a space that gives you permission to really ask messy questions and to just not know and to embrace the curiosity that is scary for a lot of people in faith circles, you've got a better chance of getting through it. I won't say getting through it unscathed because that's just not a thing. I have yet to see a person who's gotten all the way through deconstruction without having to deal with some really hard stuff. It's not Google Maps. I talk about that in the book a little bit. You can't just put in your destination and take all the turns that somebody says to take and end up where you think you're going to end up.

It's loosening your hands, acknowledging that it's a mess and you don't know where you're going to end up, but having a belief system you can trust is the most important thing. No matter how you get there or what that looks like when you get there, just acknowledging that that's actually what you're fighting for. You're fighting for justice, you're fighting for equity, and you're fighting for hope and not having to walk around with a mask on all the time.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm thinking of collectively, just in general, the women that I work with, they tend to be very conservative Christians or come out of very conservative Christian thinking, and some of them are afraid... It's like they've experienced this abuse, they're waking up to maybe abuse in their marriage or maybe abuse in their family of origin, and then that's kind of their doorway to all of the spiritual thinking that they've been programmed with and how that kind of theology sets them up, basically, and grooms

them to be a really good abuse candidate.

But these women though — and I would put myself in their group — when you start deconstructing, a lot of them are like, “I’m afraid to open that door because I don’t want to lose my faith.” I encourage them that you don’t have to lose your faith. It’s a stepping stone. Sometimes they just need to have permission to explore without that fear that they are going to.

Now, you’re right. Nobody can tell them whether or not they’re going to lose their faith. I have a really good friend who completely lost her faith. I have a son who lost his faith. So it can go that way. But also for me, it did not go that way for me, and it hasn’t gone that way for other people I’ve known who’ve deconstructed, so it’s not necessarily true. I’m just speaking to anyone out there who’s like, “Well, I’m really interested...” They might be afraid to read — for example — they might be afraid to read a book like yours because they’re afraid that if they read it, that it’s going to just completely dismantle everything that they believed in.

And I love your book because it doesn’t do that. It gives them permission. It really does leave the panorama, the vistas of your future, wide open. It doesn’t say, “This is how it’s going to go. A is going to happen and B is going to happen and C.” It’s like, “We’re going to get rid of fear and shame and see what happens. What can we discover if we get rid of fear and shame?”

ANGELA: Right. I’m so glad you said that. Thank you for that. Because that was really important to me as I wrote the book, because there are a lot of books out there, especially in that super conservative space, that are telling you how to do it. And they’re telling you, “Don’t open those doors because it’s a slippery slope.”

And I wanted to make sure in my book, just like in my coaching... I mean, to some extent, what I believe doesn’t matter. I’m not here to teach you what I believe. I always tell my clients that I’m here to hold space free. We use the wilderness analogy a lot. And I say, “I’m here. Come sit by my fire and warm yourself until you’re strong enough to build your own fire. Till you decide where you want to set up camp, just hang out with me for a little bit, crash on my couch, curl up in my tent.”

But it’s so important to not go from one toxic religious community to another. And I see that happen a lot when people challenge their beliefs around social justice topics and they swing from a fundamentalist view to a very progressive view. But what you have to understand is that toxicity exists on all points of the spectrum. So even in the deconstruction space there’s toxicity. Even in the trauma recovery space there’s toxicity

and codependency. So like you said earlier, we're very, very vulnerable because we're conditioned to be in those systems. And so deconstruction, you got to get out of your head and you have to listen to more than just the logic brain that's been conditioned to be really susceptible to abuse and manipulation.

NATALIE: Yes. And we do that to ourselves too. We bring those rules and those ideas... Like you said, they're programmed into us, so we're always going to be scanning the horizon to try to find something to fill that inside of us, make sense of us.

ANGELA: Exactly. And every time we're exposed to trauma, we get better at seeing it sooner and responding. Now, that doesn't mean that we get better at avoiding it or better at setting healthy boundaries. Our defense mechanisms, our systems, just get faster at doing whatever our survival mechanism is.

I'm sorry for people who've been in unhealthy religion for a long time, but the longer you've been in, the harder it is going to be for you to rewire. It's totally possible, and like I said, I've worked with people who've been in cults forty, fifty, sixty years old and are finally coming to terms with the harmfulness of that system. But if you've been in for a long time, be really compassionate and really patient with yourself. It's not going to happen overnight. It might not even happen this year. But baby steps. Start asking the questions, start pulling your support system in, and then when the dam breaks, you've got a support system that you can trust, and that's how you get through the religious trauma side of things.

NATALIE: Do you have any examples of this that you could share of someone or some people who have experienced that kind of abuse in their faith community, they deconstructed, and they kind of have come out on the other side and feel really good about where they're at?

ANGELA: Yeah, I think it's kind of a compilation of people, but I think the most beautiful thing that I see is people who, like you said, come in afraid of letting go of their faith, afraid of opening those doors because they may lose everything. And instead of focusing on what you may lose that we don't have any control over, a lot of our conversations focus on what you actually deserve. Like, what kind of Creator do you believe exists? And even if you don't know, that's okay.

But sometimes we get into those conversations about what we don't believe. Like, we don't believe that a Creator, our Creator, will take the life of a young person because they "needed them in heaven." Is our God that cruel? And so we start kind of just picking away and chipping away at things, and we're no longer as focused on what we

may lose because we know that's not in our control.

And what happens is when we start peeling away those layers and we get to the heart of that individual's belief system, all of a sudden they look around and they're like, "Oh, look at all this room created for an actual faith that I believe in," or "Look at all this room that I created to not have to worry about jumping through all those hoops. I don't even know what faith looks like right now, but for the first time in my entire life, I can breathe. I can get up on a Sunday morning without having a panic attack."

I had a gal who came out of a cult and worked so hard, and it wasn't until her kiddo went off to college, and when her youngest kiddo went off to college, she actually had room for herself. So you're talking twenty-plus years of just holding on to stuff, stuffing it in the junk drawer, knowing that it needed to be dealt with, but this isn't the time until her kiddo went to school, and she was like, "Okay, I can prioritize my own healing and I can say whatever comes of this is okay, even if it breaks my heart."

NATALIE: Okay, what about people who want to stay in their churches? They don't want to leave their church. It's like their family and it's everything to them. And they're even hoping that their church will understand and support them, but they're also deconstructing their faith at the same time. What does that look like?

ANGELA: There's a balance to be had because, again, to some extent, the majority of our relationships we're not going to be able to control. We can control our side of things, but we can't control how people receive us and how they accept us. And so I always tell people to kind of triage — I have a healthcare background — so triage your relationships. And triage basically is like when you go to the ER, if you have a blister on your toe but you're not breathing, they don't care about your toe, right? It's the lifesaving stuff, right?

So kind of create these layers of intimacy in your relationships so that you have a person, two people. Sometimes they're total strangers you meet on the internet, but people that you can talk to before you open up to those that are in those circles where you're really just not sure how they're going to receive it.

And what that does is that builds up a little bit of resilience, and it also gives you a safe space to come back to. Because one of the hardest things about trying to stay in an unhealthy community is that an unhealthy community is built to protect its own power. And so anytime we step over a line that challenges the power of that system, all the people in that system have been trained to protect the system.

Sometimes we just find ourselves out on the street. Sometimes we find ourselves totally isolated. It's brutal and it's isolating, and so before you go into those deep conversations with people, give yourself some space to kind of explore it privately and just see what's out there and just see, is this something where it feels like your entire belief system is crumbling, or is this like one belief that maybe you can work on within your circle at church? Because it's hard to tell once you get into it.

The other thing that I always recommend is when we start asking who's safe and who's not safe, people can figure it out pretty quickly. And so I always recommend having some canned statements. I always say, imagine this is a note card in your back pocket. And when you go to a wedding or baptism or you go to a Christmas party and you know that there's someone there who is not going to have any respect for your boundaries at all and they start asking about faith, know ahead of time, plan ahead of time, what you're going to say. Something like, one of the ones that I've taught a lot of clients to say is, "I'm really working some things out. I'd be happy to talk to you more when I'm ready."

NATALIE: I was going to say, "I'll be happy to talk to you more in twenty years."

ANGELA: Yeah. "I'm having some hard conversations with God," or "There's some hard conversations happening between God and I. I'm willing to come back later and revisit that, but right now it's just a private thing."

NATALIE: I love that.

ANGELA: You've got to be honest with yourself because it's going to be awful if you have to lie to people. But people have to prove that they're trustworthy to get into this really intimate space of healing. Because not everybody's safe enough to be in. There may be people you don't talk to for five years until you get to the other side of it, and now they're safe to be around because they're not constantly poking you about where you're at in the process.

NATALIE: Okay, let's talk about forgiveness. That's a big one. So tell us what role you think forgiveness plays in our journey of faith if we've experienced abuse, especially in our religious circles.

ANGELA: The very, very first thing that I tell people is that forgiveness of people who've harmed you is about you. And so you can't make it dependent on other people. Because there are going to be people who aren't going to accept what you're saying, they're not willing to own their own responsibility, and so you may never get that

accountability that you really want, right? There are a lot of different layers of it, but if I want to forgive someone who has harmed me, that's my work to do.

NATALIE: What if you don't? What would you say to someone who doesn't want to forgive?

ANGELA: I would say your rage is valid. You don't have to make amends. You don't have to make peace because a lot of times in the church, when we talk about making peace, it's really just codependency and enabling. It's really that conditioning you talked about, that grooming that you talked about, where the goal is to protect the system and the powerful in the system, not to protect people who are more marginalized or who have less power because the system strips it away.

So if you feel motivated to find forgiveness or to seek forgiveness, just be careful. It could be a huge part, but also saying, "You know what? I don't want to forgive. I want to be really angry right now," cool. Don't push yourself to forgive.

NATALIE: Yeah. It can come later too. Plus, like you said, I feel like people in a lot of those communities, they'll say, "You haven't forgiven because you're not going back and submitting yourself to their abuse." Well, no, it's possible to forgive someone, in fact, healthy to forgive someone and then never have anything to do with them again if you don't want to.

ANGELA: Exactly. I have some people who I have forgiven, but I will probably never talk to them again. Now, does that mean I'm being selfish? Does that mean I'm being hard-hearted or stubborn? No, it's probably a really wise decision because I'm doing my work, but they're not doing theirs.

NATALIE: Exactly.

ANGELA: Now, if those people come to me ten years down the road and they're like, "Hey, that was a mistake. I'm really sorry. I've done my work," maybe there's room there to open the door for a relationship, but maybe there's not. And that's okay. Because what we're talking about with deconstruction is disconnecting from that conditioning and those habits and all of the things that protect the imbalance of power, all of those things that facilitate abuse and trauma. We're trying to untangle ourselves from those things. And so we just have to get used to people being mad and people abandoning us.

And it's not fair and it's not okay, especially if you're family of origin or you're religious

family. It's not okay that they abandoned you. And also, it happens. So let's get mad about it, let's grieve it, let's work through all those stages, let's go to therapy, let's get coaching, let's snotty cry when we watch Brené Brown's Netflix special, let's do all the things. But do not pin your healing on the fact that you want an apology from somebody else because you can't make them apologize. You just can't.

NATALIE: And even if they do, sometimes you can tell they don't really mean it. They're just doing it to get something from you. Sometimes that can happen.

ANGELA: My therapist said the amends need to be as loud as the offense.

NATALIE: I like that.

ANGELA: If someone isn't changing their behavior, the apology doesn't matter. The words don't matter. You can still accept them, and if they make you feel better, cool, but that doesn't mean that that person is proving to be safe. So when I do harm, if I've just lost my stuff on my kids and I end up acting in a really irrational way and harming them because I'm hurting their feelings, then I better come back and be really sorry and also say, "This is what happened. It's not okay. Here's how it's going to go. Here's what I'm working on. If this happens again, you have permission to walk away with no punishment." That's that extra step. That's reconciliation. That's not just saying, "I'm sorry," but just hiding behind my power and that relationship with my kiddos.

NATALIE: So talk about the role of community and support networks in helping people navigate faith deconstruction and abuse recovery.

ANGELA: It's really, really important to get into a space that encourages you to be messy and ask questions. I talk about this in the book, I talk about this in my coaching programs, that it's so isolating. Even if nobody's going through exactly what you're going through, just having a community to put an emoji that's like the screaming guy with the volcano coming out of his head and just say, "Argh, today sucks." Even that is something that will just help you get through on the hard days.

But again, it's got to be a trauma-informed space, it's got to be a space where you can have conversations without having to work through everybody else's issues. And that can be challenging. It can be really, really challenging because especially after the last five years, holy moly, we all have trauma. We all have issues. And for some, it's right on the top. So no matter what you say, it's going to step on my trauma. And if I don't know how to self-regulate, if I don't know how to navigate that fight-flight thing and I just get unhinged every time, it's going to be really hard for me to hold space for you.

NATALIE: I've seen that even in survivor circles where you'll get into a group that's supposedly safe, but everyone's still walking on eggshells because they're afraid of stepping on someone else's trauma.

ANGELA: We talk a lot, especially with my clients who aren't ready to call it "trauma" yet, we talk a lot about tender spaces. Because I think tender spaces, it's just a really compassionate way to say, "something that's unfulfilled in my life" or "a place that I've been harmed." And it makes it really easy to talk about tender spaces without placing blame in the beginning. And we eventually get there, right? But just saying, "This is a really tender space for me. If we talk about it, can you just hold space for me because I'm just really raw? I'm just really tender because of what I'm carrying right now," and asking for what you need.

There are times where I will go to my husband and I will say, "Today was a dumpster fire. I am so emotionally dysregulated. I just need to rant for a couple of minutes and I need you not to take care of me. I can be totally irrational and that's fine and I will recover later, but for the next two or three minutes, I just need to be a dysregulated toddler and just get that out."

NATALIE: I like that.

ANGELA: But there's other times where I'm like, "Babe, I don't know what to do here. Because I'm dysregulated, I'm having trouble processing this thing. Can I blurt it out and then I will sit here and be quiet and you tell me what you see, and then I'm just going to walk away and think about it?" I'm showing up the same way, but the level of self-awareness that I have is different and so the response that I need is different, but that didn't happen overnight. That took us a lot of years and a lot of therapy, individually and as a couple, to build that rapport.

So I would just say the same thing for online communities as what we were talking about with in-person communities. Facebook groups can be fantastic — they can also be so traumatizing. So what I would recommend is before you go in and start talking and asking questions, just hang back for a week. Just see. If there's an introduction post, introduce yourself, cool. But don't get super vulnerable right out of the gate until you see the tone of the group, until you see how the moderators respond when things get unhealthy and you see how far it goes before someone steps in.

NATALIE: That's good advice. Are there any specific practices or resources that you recommend for people who are going through faith deconstruction?

ANGELA: There's a bunch, but what I would say is try to prioritize what you need in the moment and just pick one resource or maybe two resources. So if you're looking for community and you go join a Facebook group, don't join twenty. That's a lot. Join one. If you start listening to a podcast or if you want to watch a documentary, a lot of these documentaries are amazing because they give you an outside view of some of the things you experienced. But I'll tell you what, they're also very triggering and they can also bring up a lot of trauma. So don't binge them all on one weekend, right?

NATALIE: Unless your therapist lives with you.

ANGELA: Yeah, exactly. And then at some point they're going to need to sleep, so maybe stagger it out over a week or something, right? Embodiment is one of those things, mindfulness. There's a lot of really crummy sort of spiritual bypassing trauma, bypassing stuff that's out there that's just like, "Oh, if you just breathe deep and you just do these things, everything's fine," but it doesn't actually involve trauma recovery. And what I've seen in my field and from others that I trust who are in related fields, you've got to do the trauma recovery and the embodiment, because as you start to do those beautiful deep breathing and relaxing and yogas and gentle movements and all those things, your body's going to start releasing some stuff. And so you've got to find a balance in that.

So there are lots of great things that are online. There's a great site, I think it's doyogawithme.com, that's free. Just go find a little five-minute deep breathing exercise. All the Spotify's and Pandora's and all those guys, they have a lot of podcasts now that are five minutes of deep breathing or even five minutes of chakra healing music. And I'll tell you what, if you don't believe in chakras, that's okay. It's just music then that helps you kind of disrupt the tailspin that you're in.

There are also some practices we talk about in the book, really embracing curiosity and understanding that most abusive systems, whether it's a religious system or not, the very first thing they do after they woo you in with all the love bombing is they start to strip away your autonomy and they start teaching you to not trust yourself. And so, like we talked about earlier, all of that conditioning lives in your head. If you try to walk through any religious experience or deconstruction or anything else just in your head, it's going to be really hard to find healing. So even just doing some deep breathing and getting curious about what's going on in your body, even if it feels stupid — because sometimes it does.

I had that when I first started. I'm like, "This is dumb. How's my body going to talk to me? It's just cells, right?" But asking simple questions like, "Where is that fear living in

my body? What happens when I get scared and I get triggered?" For me, it's my airway I notice. When someone is pressing my voice or I'm feeling like I'm getting run over, it goes straight to my throat and my voice starts telling like this and my shoulders go up and my whole body freaks out. If I hadn't asked those curious questions, if I hadn't just said, "What's going on here?" I never would have known that. And so then you don't recognize until your fight or flight is five steps down the road. It's really hard to stop at that point.

But if you just start paying attention to how things land on your body, I think what you'll find is that your body is not as separate from your brain as we were taught. There's goodness in you. There's absolute goodness in you. Even if everything you've ever done has been a mistake, which it hasn't, but you know, if that's where you're starting.

NATALIE: Well, some of us were told that.

ANGELA: Absolutely. So why should you touch your body if your heart is deceitful, especially as a woman? Why should you trust your body if a feminine body and a feminine will is actually what created all the sin and suffering in the world?

But what if it's not true? Who cares where you land in the end? Just start with, "What if it's not true? What if there's something else out there that nobody taught me?" That embodied curiosity is really the practice that opens up a lot of the trauma so that we can then release it, and then you just walk around feeling lighter. Even if you don't lose any weight, you feel like you've dropped five pounds because your body's not holding it. All those chemicals aren't getting trapped in your cells.

NATALIE: I can relate to that, that feeling of heaviness and the feeling of what it feels like to have that be gone. It's amazing.

ANGELA: It is, and it's surprising how much better life gets. Every time you can release something, even if it's tiny. Just releasing a little bit. I was going through something really stressful the last few days and my husband came and had lunch with me and he's like, "You worked through it, didn't you?" I was like, "How'd you know?" He goes, "Your skin tone is totally different." And I believed him, but I went to the restroom about an hour later, and yeah, my skin tone is different because all those chemicals aren't trapped in my body saying, "Things are unsafe. This is scary. Be ready to run. Be ready to fight." You don't think about the big things. Just think about the little things and go day by day and give yourself permission to try new things or to say, "This sucks. I don't ever want to do this again," and not do it again.

NATALIE: Right. Man, when you talk about your skin tone, that's your skin tone, but think about all the other organs of your body that are impacted. So many people have chronic pain and chronic issues and you have no idea. I know I was sick constantly, so my immune system must have just been shot or overactive or whatever it was. I'm rarely sick anymore. My kids will all be sicker than dogs and I'll be fine.

ANGELA: Yeah. There's a really fine line. We just have to make sure we're really careful because I think there's that spiritual bypassing that says, "If you're good, if you're holy, you won't get sick," and that's not what we're saying, just in case anybody's out there and they're like, "Do I have cancer because I'm stressed?" No, that's not what we're saying. What we're saying is the biological process that stress kicks off causes inflammation, it changes the way your blood flows, it stops your bowels.

Okay, so let's just be real for a minute. If you are right on the edge of leaving religious trauma and you feel like it's really overwhelming, listen to your belly. Are you constipated? Do you have diarrhea? Do you get heartburn? Is it hard to eat? Do you binge eat? Let's just start with that little piece, because the biological process of dealing with stress influences our whole body, but especially our bellies. Is your period off? Have you missed a period for a long time? Are they heavier than usual? All those things can really, really open the door for self-discovery.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's so good. I'm so glad you said that, because I was giving my example. That's for me, and you're absolutely right. That is not necessarily true for everyone. Okay, why don't you share with us where they can find you and also your book? So her book is called *Deconstructing Your Faith Without Losing Yourself*. That's the name of the book, and Angela Herrington is the author. Why don't you tell us about it? Right now it's a week before the release date, but tell us when it's going to be released.

ANGELA: So it should be hitting shelves on February 20th. Every once in a while it's shipped out a little early. So if you hop in and do a pre-order, you can order from Amazon, Barnes and Noble. If you go to my website, there's even a link — I love this — it's for an independent bookshop directory. And so if you want to shop local, you can even call them, give them the information, go to Amazon, get the name, get the ISBN number, and then go to your local bookshop and say, "Hey, can you order this for me?"

You can also go into your libraries and request it. That's something libraries are really great about. If there's a book that people are asking for, a lot of times they'll order it. And I don't care if we sell a million of them. I'm just happy to get it on the shelves where people can check it out.

So the easiest way to get ahold of me is if you go to angelajherrington.com, and you'll see a little banner right at the top that gives you all the information about ordering the book. Click on that and it'll take you to the page where those directories are at. So you can definitely pre-order.

I run a group called the Faith Deconstruction Cafe, and we're going to be doing kind of a virtual book club in there right after it launches. I've got to wait a few days to make sure everybody has their copy. Once we start seeing people getting their packages from all the bookstores, then we'll start talking about it in that group. And that group is free. So even if buying a book or taking a course just isn't in your budget right now, come into the group and just soak up the goodness and let us hold space for you. And you can be as anonymous or as outspoken as you want to be in this season.

NATALIE: That's amazing. We will also put direct links in the show notes for anyone who is listening and couldn't catch it or maybe you're driving and you weren't able to write anything down. So just go to the show notes. Direct links will be there. Thank you so much for sharing your beautiful book with us. I wish you the best of luck on its launch. I think it will be a great resource for people who are going through this. Deconstruction is such an important job, I think, that we all will eventually do on one level or another in our lives.

ANGELA: My biggest hope for those of you who are listening and those of you who are interested in the book is that if nothing else, just learn to trust yourself a little more. No matter where you end up on theology or who you work with as a coach or what therapist you go to, I just hope you learn to trust yourself a little bit more because that's a revolutionary thing, and that's how we change ourselves and then we change our world around us. Thanks for having me. This has been fun. I always love talking to people and it just is so inspiring.

Hey, beautiful butterfly. Thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to flyingfreenow.com, and until next time, fly free.