A CLOSER LOOK AT SPIRITUAL ABUSE: INTERVIEW WITH DAN KOCH

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 283 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, we're going to be talking with Dan Koch. Dan is a licensed therapist in the state of Washington. He's the host of the You Have Permission Podcast and a spiritual abuse researcher who has developed the Spiritual Harm & Abuse Scale, currently in use by religious trauma clinicians around the world. And I'm excited to know about that tool and to even talk about it today with Dan. So welcome, Dan, to the Flying Free Podcast.

DAN: Natalie, thank you for having me. We should also say that in some number of months, you will be joining me on You Have Permission. So this is part one of a two-part conversation.

NATALIE: I love that. I always say, if they're listening to my podcast, then they obviously like podcasts. So if I have someone who's a host of a podcast, it's such an easy sell to say, "Try this podcast. If you like this interview, then you're probably going to like that other podcast."

DAN: And listeners, if you're thinking, "280's — wow, she must really know her stuff." I don't want to listen to any podcast that has fewer than 200 episodes. I want them to get their 10,000 hours. We're at 259. We're six months behind you or so.

NATALIE: Okay. Well, and you and I know that this is hard work to stay consistent and consistently put out a show week after week after week, year after year after year. I think that's something to be proud of. So congratulations to you for getting this far.

DAN: I appreciate it. I appreciate it. I tell people mostly like, I can't help it. It is mostly a thing that I would do anyway. I heard a phrase and this is not me speaking from a psychological lens cause I'm just repeating it, but, "healthy narcissism."

And I think, "Oh, that's about right." I've got just enough to think that people could still be helped by my ideas for 259 episodes.

NATALIE: You have to, otherwise who would put out their work in the world if you don't think that it's of any value? Well, I took your screener, and we're going to talk about this. You developed this spiritual harm and abuse scale. It's a clinical screener that people can use, and I took it. And I just want to talk about that for... Well, we're going to really kind of spend the whole podcast talking about it.

But I scored in the high abuse category overall. And of the six categories that we will go into in a little bit that you analyze and measure in your tool, I scored high in four of them and medium in two of them. And my longtime listeners who have read my newest book, which is All the Scary Little Gods, they now know why and how I scored this high on this scale.

But I was really gratified to see that there's actually an objective tool that people can take to measure spiritual harm and abuse. And I think the time in where we're at in the world today is ripe for such a tool to exist and be used. So I just want to thank you, first of all, for creating it.

DAN: You're very welcome. There is another one that some people use called the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire developed by Dr. Keller in Texas. So both can be good.

NATALIE: How does it compare?

DAN: Hers is a little bit shorter. There's some nerdy statistical stuff that I think makes mine slightly preferable, but it isn't a huge difference. If someone told me, “Hey, my therapist had me take Dr. Keller's scale to talk about it in therapy,” I'd be like, “Fantastic. I'm glad you did that.”

NATALIE: Okay, well, we're not going to talk about that scale. We're going to talk about yours here.

DAN: This episode brought to you by Pepsi, not Coke.

NATALIE: Right!

DAN: Exactly. I guess it should be “Koch,” not Pepsi, given my last name.

NATALIE: Right. So his last name, just so people know, his last name is spelled “Koch.”

DAN: Like the evil billionaires.

NATALIE: Well, and I didn't even know that, but I was telling him before we got started, there was a family in our church that had that last name, but they pronounced it “Cook.”

DAN: The other guy's name was Don. You had a Don Cook. Now you're talking to Dan Koch. I think Don Cook is my evil step-uncle or something like that.

NATALIE: He was a good guy though, actually. You know how in some churches there are families where the mom and the dad go and then their kids grow up and then they have kids and then they have grandkids? It was one of those families. It was like a legacy family in the church. That was the Cooks.

DAN: Actually, that's kind of maybe an interesting way in. And if you don't want to get quite into it yet, that's fine. But one of the subtypes of spiritual abuse that the scale measures is called “maintaining the system.” Did you go medium or high on maintaining the system?

NATALIE: I was high.

DAN: I tried to name these things in a way that are pretty straightforward. So maintaining the system, both leadership and group members tend to act in ways that maintain the status quo, which can take many forms: victim blaming, shunning, protecting leaders from consequences, social isolation, and more. That's the little thumbnail description.

But what's interesting is that as opposed to controlling leadership, which is another one of the types that I think people most commonly associate with the idea of spiritual abuse, the maintaining the system is often done by the foot soldiers. And foot soldiers is maybe even the wrong term because that implies orders from on high.

NATALIE: That they're aware of and they're consciously doing it.

DAN: Exactly — that they are like doing the leader's bidding, but that's actually not how a lot of religious groups, churches, work. I think about the church I grew up in. My parents went there for thirty years, and during that time they saw five senior pastors. How much churn was there on the elder board: probably 40 or 50 elders came and went.

So these legacy families often have significantly more power than even the head pastor has, depending, of course... It's obviously church to church. And those families, when those families are healthy and supportive, oh my goodness, I mean, I'm still close with a number of those families from my upbringing that were my parents’ friends. And they are now in their seventies and I'm still friends with them and want them in my life and in my kids’ lives and stuff.

And if those families are unhealthy, if they haven't worked through their stuff, then they can actually do more harm than a pastor in some circumstances. And that's something

that I actually don't know that I would have assumed before doing the research to develop the scale.

NATALIE: That's interesting. This family that I was referring to, they were actually healthy. It's interesting because I scored high on this, but my church growing up, it was mostly pretty healthy church. It was my family that was a little dysfunctional, and then I took what I learned from my family and then got into two churches as an adult, one as a young adult and one as an older adult, that were both very dysfunctional in different ways. There are so many flavors. It's so fascinating.

DAN: There are a few ways to get it right and a lot of ways to get it wrong, maybe.

NATALIE: Totally. So that's why I just ended up scoring high. What inspired you to research this topic?

DAN: So it started as my doctoral dissertation. We actually got it published in the journal for the scientific study of religion. I have not finished my dissertation yet, and this is already published. So I have a little bit more work to do, basically like dotting some “I’s” and crossing some “T's” to sort of finish the dissertation.

But basically I wanted to initially do something on the topic of end-times teachings and anxiety and other mental health stuff because that is my own story. That's my primary religious trauma — almost the only one in my life. Depends on how loosely you want to define it. Certainly the strongest. And I started getting into the scholarly research on it, and what I found was there's no framework for me to sort of add something on that topic because the sort of umbrella topics under which that would nest have not been explored enough yet by themselves.

There was at the time only the one spiritual abuse questionnaire, which was part of a dissertation and not peer-reviewed. No offense to Dr. Keller — I do think it's quite good. And there is no agreed-upon definition, very little prevalence data about this stuff. And so my advisor encouraged me. She's like, “I think you should develop a scale.” And she had some practice with that. She had some experience from previous research that she had done. So she was able to kind of help me in the way that a dissertation advisor normally helps.

And so that's what led me to it was thinking about rapture stories and the Left Behind books and that whole panoply of interesting — in my view — very interesting teachings that have just so little basis in reality that that actually kind of got my curiosity going. How were people so into this when literally every single end-times prediction has been

wrong? By definition, they've all been wrong.

NATALIE: Since the beginning of time.

DAN: Since the beginning of time. Everyone who has said that they know the day or the hour or the week or the year or the month or whatever, they've all been wrong. And there even are very few other predictions that are short of, "This is when Jesus will return," that even could be considered right. The big one is the forming of the nation of Israel in the 40s, which Darby got right, I don't know, 75 years prior, but he was already involved in the Zionist movement at that point. It was like a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Anyway, I'm getting on a tangent because I tend to do that. So I'll just pull back from the cliff.

NATALIE: Well, you know what? You're speaking my language because that's what my mom was into — dispensationalism. And she wasn't just into it for herself, she wanted to indoctrinate everybody into it. So when I say my church really wasn't into that but my mom was, and my mom was a zealot for expressing that and having us, her daughters, read books about it and buying into that.

So when you grow up with that's the only thing you ever know, you just think... I remember growing up and finally becoming an adult and realizing... Actually, as a teenager I started asking questions and pushing back a little bit because some things just didn't make sense. And then of course, that's when it crossed the line over into abuse, because when you aren't allowed to ask questions or when you're told that you're being rebellious or you're not being a godly person because you have questions — that can't be answered, by the way — then now we're getting into emotional abuse and control and just the whole nine yards.

So anyway, yeah, very wackadoo. And my mom hasn't talked to me for five years, but she wants her grandkids to believe in this. She's going to be eighty this year, and she's still on that trajectory. And I think it's all been debunked. I mean, does anyone even believe that stuff anymore, the whole dispensational thing?

DAN: Oh yeah.

NATALIE: Are there churches that still do that?

DAN: Oh yeah. If you look at the statements of faith on websites of any number of churches that are labeled Bible Church or Baptist churches, a lot of times, I think that's still the — I could be wrong on this — but I think that's still what's taught at Dallas

Theological Seminary, possibly Southern Baptist Seminary. There's an official one. I think that's the name of it.

So it's still big in conservative Christian circles. And I've looked at faith statements that are like, “Yeah, we expect any day now the visible bodily return of Christ in the sky.” It's still around. I think it's obviously less popular than it was in 1971 — I believe that is The Late Great Planet Earth, when that book was published — and then Left Behind is really exploding in the mid-90s. So it's less popular than that kind of thirty-year span, but still pretty big in that world.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's crazy.

DAN: There's a term that I have found so helpful around this stuff, by the way, which is “plausibility structures.” And I came across it at some point when I was trying to understand 2016 and the inordinate support for Donald Trump in the community that I was raised in. And plausibility structures is the idea that the more people around you that believe something, the people that you regularly interact with, then the more easy it is for you to believe that thing.

And that is kind of independent of evidence, independent of truth or falsity. It's like if you are raised in a jihadist, suicide cult, then for a while, you are going to assume that that view of the world is correct. You have to get to a certain age, you have to actually start meeting people or reading people that disagree because until then it's like, “Obviously Allah hates the great white Satan — we all know that. Everybody I know believes that.”

So that gets into really interesting stuff with the internet and the age of information and differences between Gen Z and boomers and all that stuff because our parents were able to be in much more sealed environments in terms of information than even we were. And then by the time my kids are learning to use computers — they're four and five months — ChatGPT will just give them any answer that they want in a digestible form or something like that. They don't even have to scour Wikipedia like I've had to do.

So that stuff is very interesting. And again, there's another classic patented Dan Koch tangent. So people are really getting a sense for how I podcast.

NATALIE: Rabbit trails. And I've been writing and doing this for a long time and people who have been following me for a long time know. It's like, “Oh, Natalie's doing another rabbit trail.” So I love that you do that too. It's a thing.

DAN: If you're going to get into the two hundreds of episodes, you got to have ways to fill time. It's not like you just have six questions for every guest.

NATALIE: That would be so boring. Yeah, we got to explore those little gullies and holes. Okay, so I want to say something too. There's part of me that's like, “Don't say it because you'll lose listeners,” but I'm not about trying to keep listeners anyway. I just need to speak. This podcast is for whoever likes it, and if this makes you not like it, then bye.

But when I think about the Left Behind books, I read some of them back in my day, and there was that political leader. If I'm remembering correctly, there's a political leader that rises to power and he's not a good person, but he makes people believe he's a good person. Did you read any of those books?

DAN: Are you referring to the Antichrist? Nicolae Carpathia? Okay.

NATALIE: Yeah. He's a president. I think he's the president.

DAN: So here's what's so implausible about it. He becomes secretary general of the UN, which all of a sudden has a global army at its command, whereas the current UN can barely even get peacekeeping troops during famines. I mean, it is an absolute conservative fever dream geopolitically that this would happen and then all of a sudden the whole world would be like, “How about just electing one UN leader to rule us all?”

It is the least plausible... I mean, just imagine. I suppose this is probably back when the European Union, maybe it felt like the trajectory there was towards sort of increasing consolidation and decreasing national identity. Obviously now, thirty years after Left Behind, we see how much trouble the European Union has had even keeping European countries united much less giving them one supreme military leader, much less including Africa and South America and China. And oh, North Korea is going to be like, “All right UN — here are our nukes.” Of course not.

But yes, that's the way it's presented in the books, and that's partly because evangelicalism in America tends to be more isolationist and very skeptical of globalism, skeptical of those kinds of things.

NATALIE: Well, I grew up just learning that the one world order, that's a totally satanic thing.

DAN: It’s also “right around the bend.”

NATALIE: Yeah. So anyway, what I remember is that guy... Maybe I watched one of the movies, I think. Because I'm picturing that person in a room and then he kind of just gets everyone. It's like he brainwashes everyone into thinking one thing even though there's another thing going on.

DAN: Yeah. In that view, he has the devil's power or something, something like that.

NATALIE: Well, then I've just been thinking... I talked to my husband and some other friends of mine that are Christians and we're just like, "We don't understand." It's hard for us to understand how Christians follow this guy who is in trouble with the law all the time. He rapes people, he cheats, he steals, he's one of the most immoral human beings on the planet. He's a flaming, obvious narcissist, and yet Christians are following him.

And the only thing I can think is they're brainwashed. And the Left Behind books even gave him a hint that this guy was coming and the only ones that are brainwashed are actually them. The ones that got the hint. I'm being facetious here, but I can't wrap my brain around it.

DAN: I know. I have felt the pull of such theories myself. I think that in my better moments, I am more apt to consider it to be a combination of ten-plus factors over many decades that really formed white evangelicalism in America and led us to eventually a place like this, where a conservative, sociopolitical identity would trump — no pun intended — all other forms of sort of spiritual commitments.

And in fact, that an appetite would grow for precisely the kind of leader that the Bible denigrates. But the thing is, we go a lot of ways with this. I'll just end it there and see how you'd like to respond.

NATALIE: Well, my brain was just going, "Oh, what are those ten-plus things?"

DAN: I can go off the top of my head. I've interviewed people about this on You Have Permission. I started covering it in 2016. I used to have a show called Depolarize. I ended up stopping it because, for me, it's not healthy to have to stay abreast of political news.

NATALIE: Oh, I totally agree.

DAN: I figured out that that was just not good for my nervous system, not good for my life, my family, my marriage. I stopped doing it, but I still will talk to people sometimes

and have them as a guest who are in that world.

Off the top of my head, there are parallel institutions. So this is a really big thing in evangelicalism that really got going with the founding of the contemporary Christian music scene starting in the eighties. But then it, of course, it goes to films and television shows and children's curriculum and the homeschooling world and all the magazines, all your Brio and Boys World and all this stuff, all the Focus On the Family stuff.

Basically by the time I'm born in 1983, if you want to, you can raise your evangelical children in an entirely parallel institutional universe to your neighbor kids. So for instance, I could wake up, even to the point of they probably made Christian breakfast cereal at some point, but after breakfast, we read a devotion and we, if you read a book in the morning, it's a Christian book. My parents take me to my Christian school where we have curriculum from Christian curriculum writers. When it's family movie night, we watch a Christian movie — the list goes on and on and on. My parents might only read Christian books. I'm only allowed to listen to Christian music.

And you get all the way down there and those institutions... So basically they set an entire segment of the population at its most at one point, maybe 50 million Americans, to be able to live in their own entire world, and as a result, to distrust mainstream institutions. For someone who's lived like that their whole life, how hard is it to believe that the New York Times and CNN are colluding to denigrate a Republican, godly president? It's very easy to believe that because you've literally spent thirty years believing something very close to that.

NATALIE: Exactly. You've been programmed. I'm so curious now about your family because my oldest son is thirty and he was born in 1993. So you're not even quite a decade older than him. Did your parents ever come out of that? Because I raised my older kids, they were all raised in the same thing. I was like your parents probably until I broke out.

DAN: That was a little bit of a fictionalized version of my parents. I had it easier. I was like a California evangelical.

NATALIE: We would have judged you.

DAN: Yeah, sure. So my dad was a marriage family therapist, and that inoculated him against most of the true silliness. He had to grow and change in some ways, but like, for instance, my favorite memory is when I was in my evangelical high school and I was applying to colleges, and our school counselor told me that she didn't think I should

apply in psychology because she only believed in biblical counseling. And she had gone to Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, and my dad wrote her a letter and she read it and she called me in and said, “I'd like to apologize.”

NATALIE: Wow.

DAN: I mean, he took her to school. He's like, “You have no idea what you're talking about. I've been a marriage family therapist for twenty years. Here's what I know. Here's what the science says.” I did have that kind of a buffer, and my mom's a little bit of a rebel. She always told jokes with swear words in them. She always had plenty of non-Christian friends.

So they buffered us a bit, my brother and I, from the kind of true parallel institutions, but I had friends just down the street. I had a friend four doors down that was only allowed to play the Bible version of Sega Genesis. But I was allowed to listen to secular music and stuff like that. So I didn't have it so bad myself, but I've known enough people and I've interviewed enough people that I could sort of present that example.

NATALIE: Yeah. So interesting. It sounded like at the beginning you did experience spiritual abuse and you know what that is. So what was that all about? Can you tell us about that?

DAN: Yeah. So the background is that I already had panic disorder before I encountered any end-times teachings. When I was in third grade, I had a series of panic attacks about thunder, not lightning, which is odd, because lightning can actually kill you. Thunder can't do anything. But I was in third grade and I didn't know any better.

And so I had a proclivity to panic attacks, and that's in my family. My mom struggled with that when I was born. Her dad likely struggled with that throughout his life. There are stories that match that pretty well. He wasn't diagnosed while he was living, but probably he had panic attacks.

So when I was in sixth grade, someone gave me a book, and I have not been able to track this down, unfortunately. It must've been self-published. It was a riff on a famous pamphlet that sold millions of copies in 1988 called 88 Reasons Why Christ Will Return in 1988 or something like that. This one was for, it would have been 1994, and the little book said that Jesus would be returning in September of 1994.

I was given this book by some adult in my Christian sixth-grade school. And they thought it was good for me to have it for some reason, and I read in April of 1994 that

essentially my life was going to end that September, and that threw me into a series of panic attacks and just tremendously developmentally inappropriate for that age. What the hell was I supposed to do with that anyway? What is an eleven-year-old going to do differently with this information is a question that this person did not ask themselves.

And then that ended up being kind of the main panic attack trigger of my life. I don't really struggle with panic attacks anymore. I did through about thirty or so, and by far that topic is the number one source of those panic attacks for me. I had to work through it and now I've come out the other side and helping other people with it, which is great, but it was absolutely harrowing and sort of set me on...

NATALIE: What did your parents do? Did you tell your parents?

DAN: You know, that's interesting. They don't remember me talking about it and it is possible that I didn't. It's possible. Because they also don't remember me telling them about the third grade ones, the thunder panic attacks. I think there's probably a mix of they weren't on the lookout for that and I was not particularly forthright about it. I imagine it's a bit of both. We're a little bit of an aloof family. I think that the part of me that can sort of segment off a part of my brain to do 259 episodes of a podcast while also getting other stuff done, you know, we do a little bit of that naturally. So I don't really blame them for it.

And I don't think of them as being primarily about it, but my mom had the Left Behind books in the house and we read one or two of them kind of together and talked about them. It was just in the water. It was absolutely the monoculture of that subculture at that time.

NATALIE: Yeah. As a parent, I can say my adult kids have come to me once in a while and they'll say, “Do you remember this?” And it'll be something that I should remember. I really should remember and I should have addressed it. And I will just be like, “I don't remember,” although I give myself a little bit of slack because I was in so much trauma myself, but I feel terrible, and I've had to apologize to them for just being out to lunch, really, on so many things.

DAN: I think it's tough. You have what you have, you have the resources that you have, you have the time that you have, you have the capacities that you have. I mean, I think about right now: If my wife remembers anything from this period of adding a second kid, the first, let's say six to eight months of the second kid's life — I mean, her brain is Swiss cheese right now. It must be — it's gotta be. Her sleep is so dysregulated. There can be real biological reasons for some of this stuff.

NATALIE: Yes. Oh, I totally agree. I think now we're talking about that, but I don't think back then you really talked about that. My daughter just had a baby last year. And then my son, his wife just had triplets last year. So there's four grandbabies, and just talking to them and watching them walk through that, just that nightmare of not getting any sleep. My daughter said, "I only have one baby and it is a real pain. I am scared to death to have another child just because I don't know if I can survive." And she loves her baby. She loves her child, but it is so overwhelming for new parents. We have to give people credit.

DAN: It's tough. We only are surviving this because of three days a week of daycare for the older one. He's not in school yet. And a couple other sort of things that we sometimes utilize as help because I'm working full-time. We live in a very expensive place, so I have to be — and I want to be, anyway — I sort of have to work. And then I kind of have to make the podcast. That's kind of what I was saying earlier. It's a little bit of a compulsion. And just trying to keep that a healthy level of compulsion.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so in your research, you identified six key factors or subscales of spiritual abuse. So you kind of touched on one of them — maintaining the system. Why don't you tell us about the other ones and how they manifest in abusive religious environments?

DAN: So the first one is controlling leadership, and this is when pastors or leaders might be significantly exalted above parishioners or above laypeople and considered to have sort of a direct line to God. And they also, and/or, might have increased access and control over the daily lives and the minutiae of their group members.

Basically, there's a really common thing in therapy and psychological science where, especially counseling psych, when you are dealing with clients, you're often asking, "What is culturally normal for this person, and is something going on here that is beyond the cultural norm?"

So it is culturally normal in a religious group that the pastor has some authority that the other people in the group don't have. That's not what we're talking about. By merely having authority, that does not make it abusive. This kind of controlling leadership is when that authority or control goes beyond the cultural norm, right? So for instance, there are items like, "I was expected to consult my pastor or leader before making non-religious decisions." Now, you might opt to consult your leader, but if you were expected to consult your leader, then that's distinct, right? That tells me that there is an environment of control at the top.

NATALIE: What if they didn't expect you overtly but it was an unspoken expectation?

DAN: I think that's still expected.

NATALIE: Yeah, because if you didn't, then you were rebellious.

DAN: It can be explicit or implicit. Another one here that's interesting is, "Being expected to follow my pastor's personal rules or advice around dating, marriage, and sex." Now, again, this is distinct from, "Well, we were all really into purity culture." Well, yeah, we all were. And everybody was expected to be abstinent before marriage if they were in purity culture.

That's not what I'm talking about here. I'm saying it's like, Pastor John has his own rubric and framework for how the young people will court or date or whatever. And that's when we're getting into he is exerting more control than the average pastor who might preach a sermon or give a talk about what he believes to be the biblical approach to dating. That's not necessarily spiritually abusive.

Now, one of the things I will say, there's not a factor here, there's not a subtype for purity culture. And at the time that I was developing the scale, there was no peer-reviewed research that I could find on linking purity culture to spiritual abuse. I wish that I had sort of made that link myself. Nobody had done that yet, and I didn't do it yet. If I ever redo this scale, I'm going to add in some stuff about purity culture because I think that can be its own form of spiritual abuse that doesn't necessarily come from a person but comes from an ideology and all of that stuff.

NATALIE: Oh, yeah. I definitely think that could be put in here. I'm thinking of in the first church when I was a young adult and was dating — actually, I wasn't dating because that wasn't the thing — but our pastors did teach kind of from the pulpit how they found their partners was kind of how they thought how God was doing it. They're like, "This is how God does it."

I wrote about this in my book, but the plan was that you would start a small group or work in partnership with a person of the opposite sex so you got to know them through working with them and serving and doing ministry with them. And then God would build a love and a camaraderie between you. You would court and then you'd get married. And that's how God would bring people together.

So when I met my husband, we were both on staff with Great Commission Ministries. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that. I don't think they call it that anymore. But

anyway, we were both on staff working with college students. And because that was the story that we were thinking and that needed to be right, we both just sort of followed along with it, and then a year later just did it. And I just thought "This must be what God wants."

DAN: There's a real problem in taking something anecdotal and turning it into a rule. And this is why we do careful, peer-reviewed research, because peer-reviewed research separates out anecdote from rule. And what I would say to that pastor is that sounds like a perfectly plausible way for a Christian couple to meet, that there's nothing wrong with that. My parents met doing Young Life ministry. Okay, great.

The minute you turn it into a rule and an expectation that this is God's way, well, now you have crossed the Rubicon. You are going out over your skis and you are being over-inclusive from one or a handful of examples and you're putting God's stamp on that when people can meet in all fashion of ways.

I think — and this is not something that I've studied. I've never seen anything written on this. If somebody knows of something, please email it to me — there's something that I think is just natural. If you believe that God, that the creator of the universe has called you to ministry, that you are just going to trust your own gut more. I think it's like at the most basic psychological level, if what I have done as an individual is responded "yes" to the God of the universe's call to do something, then of course, I'm going to think, even if I can't admit it to myself overtly, that I'm more likely to know the truth. I'm closer to the source of the truth.

And it's just not true that being a good pastor, that having really good pastoral care skills, or even being a good speaker, a good synthesizer of information, a teacher, that is not the same thing as knowing true things about the world. There's maybe a little bit of overlap in common sense maybe is a overlap.

But if I want to know the question of, "What is the healthiest way to have a Christian marriage?" here's the thing. Natalie, people research that. Christians research that. Scientists do. And there are things to find. Or you could go to the Gottmans here out of UW in Seattle. There's really good data of tens of thousands of marriages about the kind of stuff that helps people stay together. Or you can shoot from the hip and go with your gut because you're God's man. And that is just not as good of a way to get to something accurate.

NATALIE: Unfortunately, that's the way that people did that, though. That's the way people do that in the Christian world overall in general.

DAN: I mean, I think people do that everywhere. I try to be careful not to demonize evangelicals. We all have the same brains.

NATALIE: Yeah, you're right.

DAN: So we're all going to make similar moves that meet similar needs. I know you talk a lot about Internal Family Systems, which is not something that I'm officially trained in, but I've done a little bit of it with clients and I've done a little bit of training in it. And if I have different parts of my brain, then so do you and so does everybody else. That rubric applies to every person, not just Christians, not just people we don't like, people who are not on our team. It applies to the people on our team as well.

NATALIE: Yes, you're right. What's another one? Controlling leadership, maintaining the system — talk about embracing violence.

DAN: I like embracing violence because this is the one about my stuff, about end-time stuff. So embracing violence: "These communities may see violence in many forms as a necessary part of God's plan for the world. They may lack concern about what's appropriate for children in terms of fear, and they may often employ terror and horror to motivate religious commitment or moral behavior."

So these are your hell houses. This is your showing a thief in the night to eight-year-olds. This is anything like explaining to very young children that the reason they need to become a Christian is so that they don't burn in hell for eternity.

Also there's stuff like justifying violence in the world. So rather than taking a default, nonviolent approach, and a default, maybe something like just war theory, which is very skeptical that most wars can actually be justified on moral grounds, this is more like a, "Hey, God is the John Wayne of human history, and God uses violence all the time. It's all over the Old Testament, especially. New Testament, too. Ananias and Sapphira, they don't give the proper tithe — zap — they're dead. And that's the God that we serve, and so we don't shy away from violence." And that leads to some of this stuff.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think I was a little mistaken on some of my answers for that as I'm looking it over because I scored medium, but as I'm looking at the questions again, I should have rated higher. Even terror or horror being used to motivate religious decisions, I gave myself a three, but we watched that movie with the song, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." I wrote about it in my book, and now I can't even think of the...

DAN: Yeah, "Thief in the Night."

NATALIE: Yeah, “Thief in the Night.” When I was a little, small child, I had nightmares about that movie.

DAN: Yeah, terrified.

NATALIE: I still can vividly see scenes from that movie in my memory. And everyone running, running away from these people who are chasing them and going to kill them because they didn't pray a prayer or whatever. And then because of my tremendous fear, I was scared for all of my relatives and my friends. So I was telling them all about it, trying to get them to pray the prayer so that they wouldn't be left behind. So I gave myself a three. I should have given myself a five for that.

DAN: Yeah, people don't know what the numbers mean, but they are, “Please indicate the extent to which you experienced this thing across your lifelong church or religious group experience,” and, “Never, once or twice, sometimes, often, all the time.” So basically you're saying that was all the time.

NATALIE: It was. And even as a mother, even though I didn't have people telling me that, it was already embedded in my brain. So even as a mom, my terror and my fervent prayers for the salvation of my children was horrific. My anxiety over whether or not my children would die and go to heaven or hell was over the top.

DAN: That is what I think is the primary factor in teaching, but also kind of pressuring young children to accept Christ. Even before those same Christians would think that they are capable of sinning, they're below the “age of accountability,” which is, of course, not in the Bible, I think that there's a lot of psychological pressure if you accept this worldview to ensure that your children and grandchildren don't go to hell. That is the absolute worst thing that can happen.

But since that is so anxiety-producing in the individual, they will accept things that they would not otherwise accept to be able to check that box and calm down from that anxiety because it's unimaginable. If you want a real world comparison, it's the scene in “Schindler's List” where the child and the mother are separated at the concentration camps. I mean, it's that, but worse.

NATALIE: Yes, that's exactly it.

DAN: So if that's possible, and if you are told that every single child born into this world is by default going to hell unless they accept that atoning blood of Christ, just think of the pressure of that.

NATALIE: Yeah. Well, and when your children go through normal childhood development, where they're a toddler, two, three years old and learning how to say "no," and then you're taught that that's their sinful nature coming out and their rebelliousness against the God of the universe, it's like now you're trying to address something that's very normal and you're pathologizing it and addressing it also in a pathological way, even. It's a quagmire.

DAN: Maybe we could go on one little rabbit trail for this one.

NATALIE: Yeah, let's.

DAN: If people want to read about this stuff, you can basically read everything I'm saying at dankochwords.com. There's a link and there's a free download.

NATALIE: Okay, we'll put a link in the show notes.

DAN: Yeah, so people can reference this. I have a research handout that sort of explains it, what spiritual abuse is and all that stuff. But if you go back in time, prehistoric humanity, you think about the roughly... I mean, I don't know where your listeners fall on things like the age of the earth and evolution, but my understanding is in the mainstream of scientific thought that genetically modern humans have been around for somewhere between 50,000 to 200,000 years, depending on where you want to draw the line, and we were very formed by that time.

And if you think about living in a band of 150 hunter-gatherers, you are living in sort of constant terror of your children who are incredibly vulnerable to predators, to other groups of human bands of hunter-gatherers, to the weather. We evolved to be very aware of threats because that's how we survived.

And what's so interesting about, for instance, the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry what you'll wear. Do not worry what you'll eat," Jesus is speaking directly to an ingrained terror that is hundreds of thousands of years old in our minds and saying, "Here's the great thing about religion and spirituality is that you can actually relax that anxiety." And we try to follow that in some ways, but we've retained a spiritual version of that with heaven and hell.

So, okay, maybe it's not true. My wife and I, other than in the first year of life, you know, everybody's worried about SIDS, but other than that, we don't tend to think that our children are going to die. And that's true. They are probably not going to die anytime soon. The infant mortality is exceedingly low. You can still worry, but it's not an actual,

real-life, pressing concern for us. And yet we've got these anxiety centers in our brain that are ready to latch on to things. And so what do we do in some cases? Well, it's the eternal stakes here because it's not the worldly stakes anymore.

NATALIE: Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. Okay, why don't we talk about the gender discrimination?

DAN: Yeah. So this one's a little tricky. The way I describe it is usually women can be denied service or involvement opportunities or be discriminated against more broadly. Other types of discrimination also exist but were not statistically viable to be put on the scale, but there are checkboxes for them for the screener. Definitely sexual orientation is one and race.

So you can imagine race, sexual orientation, or gender. Basically, you are being denied opportunities to participate in your community because of one of those things. So with women, it can be a little bit tricky because again, there is a cultural norm for complementarianism in a lot of these worlds.

NATALIE: It's true.

DAN: And there are better and worse ways of doing complementarianism. So I would not consider it spiritual abuse necessarily if a woman who wanted to preach was not allowed to preach in her Baptist Church or Southern Baptist Church because she would not expect that she would be allowed to. And so there's no rug being pulled under you in that scenario. Now, is that good? No, I don't think so. I think that that woman should leave the Southern Baptist Church and find a church where she can preach. Like, that would be my advice. But it's not necessarily spiritual abuse.

But it is spiritual abuse, I think, or potentially spiritually abuse, if you go to a church and you are gay and the church uses a lot of language about how everybody is welcome and they sometimes talk about loving their LGBTQ neighbors, and there's not a rainbow flag outside. They're not like a part of the sort of liberal agenda, but lots of this inclusive language, and you are a singer.

And at the end of one service, you go, “I'm going to talk to the worship pastor.” And let's just say it's kind of obvious that you're gay visually. And you go up and you ask the youth pastor, “Hey, what's the volunteer process for getting on the praise team?” And you immediately see in his or her eyes what's going on. And you are told, “I'm going to have to talk to somebody about that.” And then eventually what you hear is that, “We don't accept this lifestyle and we can't have anybody on stage who is living a queer

lifestyle."

So that is a situation where this is not made clear to you from the beginning. You have started to invest in a spiritual community that uses a lot of language about openness and acceptance, and it turns out you're actually not accepted. You are a second-class Christian in this group. And what that's going to do is that's going to affect your ability to practice your faith.

And the whole point for me about acknowledging and reducing spiritual abuse is to increase people's ability to practice their faith because I believe, and I think the research shows clearly, that religious involvement, spirituality, are net positives for the average person. It's not even close, really. Especially when those people are intrinsically motivated to pursue their faith.

And this example I'm giving is of a person who's willingly going to church, getting excited to get involved, wanting to offer their gifts and go up. This is a person who is motivated intrinsically, and that's where the research is clearest. For those people, religion and spirituality are just clear net positives in so many domains of their life. And now there is a check. Now there is a hurdle. And how's that going to affect this person's faith? What are they going to think about God, about Christ, about the church?

NATALIE: Yeah, well, it's so tragic because the people that I work with are women that were, like myself, even, very intrinsically motivated, and yet, because of the things that I went through, I can't even go to church anymore. COVID kind of gave me my out. And then I got used to it and realized, "Oh, God loves me even if I don't go to church." And I just decided I just can't do it anymore. But it's not that I don't want to, it's that... I don't know. I just feel like it's not home anymore. It feels like a scary place to me now. And I think that's really sad.

DAN: That makes sense. Makes a lot of sense to me.

NATALIE: Okay, what about internal distress?

DAN: Yeah, so those are the four types of spiritual abuse that the statistical analysis of all the data brought forward and that I named and described. And then there's two more scales, subscales, that it measures, and these are internal responses to spiritually abusive experiences.

So internal distress is, these are just the most common responses to spiritually abusive experiences. Depression, anxiety, self-image issues, social isolation, anger, lack of

meaning, stuff like that.

So in the peer-reviewed research that has done careful interviews and collected other data, survey data, interview data with people who have experienced spiritual abuse, we know that these are the types of things that show up. And they map pretty closely onto just the type of things that would send someone to therapy in general. So what that tells me is that spiritual abuse just reduces people's overall mental well-being.

NATALIE: Yes, it's a good way of putting it. And then the last one, I scored high on that one, by the way, but the last one I scored medium on because my view of God actually got bigger when I got out of those kinds of environments. So it had the opposite effect on me, interestingly enough, but why don't you talk about that?

DAN: Yeah, this to me is one of the most interesting topics here. So one thing that the statistical work uncovered was this cluster of symptoms that people tended to answer either “yes” or “no” together, and that's really what creates the subscales. And this one of harmful God-image, the items here are about like God has become the villain in their story in some meaningful way — like, “Feeling that God has harmed me directly” is one of the items here.

And what's so interesting about this is that in basically every Christian understanding of God that you'd find in any denomination, any mainstream theology, God is not the villain. We don't have a trickster God. This is not Zoroastrianism with one good God and one evil God, which has a lot of psychological appeal to it. “Well, maybe there are two forces in the world and one's good and one's bad.” That's kind of a folk spirituality that you see across the globe and through time.

That's not what Christianity says. Christianity says, “No, no, no, no. There's one God. God is totally good, totally loving.” And that is very clearly expressed in essentially every form of Christianity. So for these people, their experience has disabused them of that idea to some degree, that actually maybe God is not out for their goodness.

And this is to me the most concerning effect of spiritual abuse, because if you can't trust God anymore, then you're not going to be able to do any of this stuff. It’s like in comic books the bizarro Superman who's actually the evil Superman, not the good one who wants people to flourish. And this is something that shows up in the research. And I've had some clients for whom this has been true and it's really interesting, it's powerful, it's very destabilizing. In some ways, it's the worst possible outcome from a spiritual perspective.

NATALIE: Oh yeah. It's terrifying because it's something that you trusted. It'd be like if you trusted someone and then they raped you. It's such a core betrayal, and I've had friends who've gone through this, even a son who experienced this where... It's almost an existential problem. It's like, there either is a God and He's so horrible that in that case, I don't even want to live, or there's not a God at all and then what's the point? Like, what is the point of living?

DAN: I do think it puts you firmly into the realm of what existential psychotherapy focuses on, like these kind of core anxieties of the human experience. And spirituality and religiosity are kind of protective factors against despair and depression that come from those realities, and this sometimes kind of pulls the blanket off and then will force someone to reckon with those things without the primary coping mechanism that they had up until that point.

NATALIE: Yeah. Have you read Brian McLaren's book, Faith Beyond Doubt?

DAN: I haven't read Faith Beyond Doubt. Is that the new one?

NATALIE: Well, I don't know. I think I read it a couple of years ago. I don't know.

DAN: Maybe two ago or something like that. I've had him on the podcast. Great conversation, but I don't... My McLaren reading is from years ago. I devoured his book, A New Kind of Christianity.

NATALIE: Oh, I haven't read that one. Well, the Faith Beyond Doubt book was really a lifesaver for me. I love that book — highly recommend it.

DAN: What'd you love about it?

NATALIE: Well, I read it right after COVID, and I was going to a very dark place. I was entertaining that thought because everything was just dismantling. And I thought, “Maybe everything that I believed is wrong.” I did go there. “Maybe there is no God.” And when I would allow myself to go into that dark hole, it was an endless abyss of despair and hopelessness. It was so God-awful. I would never want to relive that.

I started searching. I'm like, “I'm drowning. I'm suffocating. I'm dying here. I need something.” And somehow I found that book, and it just came at just the right time. And I just felt like God gave me that book. It walks you through the four stages of your spiritual development, and I could see all the stages. The first one is just where it's just very black and white thinking.

DAN: Are these Fowler's Stages of Faith Development?

NATALIE: Oh, I don't know.

DAN: Probably. It's an old paradigm, maybe from the nineties or something like that. Eighties.

NATALIE: Okay, well, I never heard of them before. And so he walks you through that. The third one is where you go into this dark place of doubt, the dark night of the soul. And then the last one is when you finally just accept that... You take parts of all four of this... I think I might've even done a podcast on this. Do you ever do that where you do a podcast but you're not really sure and you can't remember?

DAN: Uh, yes.

NATALIE: Sometimes I'll say to my daughter, because she's the one who does the transcripts, I'm like, "Did we do a podcast about this before?"

DAN: I think I will say about that, I think that approaches like that where it's like transcendent take your old faith and go beyond it, but include the good parts of it and faith alongside doubt. My brief take from a psychological perspective is that that paradigm is very helpful for people who are sort of in the center or on the left side of kind of the personality spectrum. People who are open to new experiences, people who don't have sort of fundamentally conservative temperaments, I think it's less appealing to those people.

And I consider myself absolutely a sort of personality liberal. Give me every new food. I want to see every country, give me change and progress. As I get older, I'm balancing that out with I think some common sense, more conservatism, to more of a moderate place. But as a person, I'm like, "Oh yeah, you want to go wine tasting in Cambodia? Who's paying for my flight?" I'm down for anything, you know?

And people who are not that way, I think, are much less likely to go through all four stages of all these things. For them, that's not really what faith does for them. I'm glad that you found that and that you found it helpful. I find that stuff helpful, too. Again, like, we don't want to overgeneralize from... And I talked about anecdote with your pastor, but also we don't want to only look at one segment of the population, at the type of people who listen to NPR and read the New Yorker, and say that those are all the types of spiritual people because it's not true, but it can be a very helpful paradigm.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's so good. I am actually more cautious. If I get a new idea, I have to really think about it for a while before I... If you were to say, “We should go to Cambodia and do wine tasting,” I'd be like, “Ooh, I don't know. That doesn't sound very safe. Is that okay? What does that involve?”

DAN: So you're closer to the middle, maybe, in that kind of temperament personality way.

NATALIE: And I think that's why it took so many decades for me to get to where I was. I just couldn't wrap my brain around that. But I love where I'm at right now in my faith. I feel like I finally just boiled it down to just, I know this is so simple and cliché, but just love — that God loves us. And if I want to be a God follower, then I'm going to love people, starting with mysel., I'm going to love and take care of Natalie, and then in doing that, I will be able to love and take care of the people around me.

But anyway, let's close by talking about your podcast. Why don't you tell them what you talk about on your podcast, and then I know people in my programs, the women are always sharing podcasts. So I know I've got a lot of podcast lovers in my community. So tell us about your podcast. He does say the “F” word, but I’ve been known to swear in my articles once in a while.

DAN: Sometimes. We bleep the “F” word or Josh silences it or whatever. I do kind of let it ride a little bit here and there. I would say if you think that you're on the left half of Natalie's listeners, then You Have Permission may very well be for you. If you're on the right half, then you might dip in, but maybe expect to be a little scandalized or send it to your more liberal friends. But I attempt to be very respectful of conservatives, of conservative religion, the role that it plays. I engage with therapy clients for whom that is an important part of their life, and I don't want to disabuse them of that at all.

But the logline is a show that takes both Christianity and the modern world of science and culture very seriously. So I try and engage with scientific research in every episode. I have a doctoral education in psychology and counseling psychology. I'm a therapist working towards getting that official doctor title in the next year and a half or so.

And there tends to be some sort of scientific or at least cultural angle to every episode. But it's a lot of faith deconstruction stuff and different options and ways of engaging the world, holding that tension between a life of faith and being open to information and knowledge from other sources beyond spiritual sources. That's probably the best way of saying it.

NATALIE: Okay, that sounds good. Does one come to your mind, an episode come to your mind, that has been a big fan favorite?

DAN: Yeah, there's two. The first one is Episode 10. And it's about a queer affirmation and it's long. It's two-plus hours. And we really dig in on sort of a biblical understanding and what's going on in the ancient world and how do we think about this today. That's by far the most popular, I think mostly because that's the hottest topic.

NATALIE: Right. It's controversial...

DAN: ...in American Christianity. The other one, it's a personal favorite and a fan favorite, and it's easy to remember cause it's Episode number one, two, three, 123. And my friend Heather Griffin gives this kind of framework. I'm trying to get her to eventually write a book about it. There isn't a book yet. So all you got is the episode, but she has a sort of a rubric of terms that she calls like the internal navigational system of evangelicalism.

And it all starts with this idea that in that world, knowledge is easy. There are certain Bible facts that everybody knows who's willing to pay attention, and this leads to a bunch of other things that actually really explain abuse and abuse cover-up. It explains patriarchy, it explains a lot of the ways that world will tend to interact with the outside world. And I just find it so helpful and so many listeners have —it's a listener favorite as well. So Episode 123. Maybe you could put that one in the show notes.

NATALIE: Oh yeah. I'm going to go and listen to that one right away. I want to thank you so much. This was an amazing conversation. I'm excited I get to be on your show in a few months. So that will be good. So why don't you remind us again of where they can find you? Where are all the places they can find you?

DAN: Yeah, I'm pretty active on Instagram now, @DanCoke. That one is phonetic because I couldn't get my real name, unfortunately. I do a lot of videos there, and sometimes we'll have podcast clips, and I'll do kind of informational stories and posts as well. And then you can listen to You Have Permission anywhere you listen to podcasts.

NATALIE: Sounds good. Thank you so much.

DAN: Thanks, Natalie.