

The Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Episode 352 - The Subtle, Insidious Nature of Spiritual Abuse

Heads up, friend: What you're about to read is a raw, unedited transcript straight from the robots. That means you'll find some weird words, funky punctuation, and moments that make you go, "Huh?" If you want the real experience (and to actually know what's going on), I recommend reading the polished article, listening to the full episode, or watching it on 1.5x speed with captions on. Your brain will thank you.

Natalie: What if the very place you went to for love and safety became the source of your deepest wounds? In this episode of the Flying Free Podcast, I sit down with Katherine Spearing to talk about the subtle insidious nature of spiritual abuse, how patriarchy has fueled it for centuries, and what healing can actually look like on the other side.

If you've ever been told God doesn't want your happiness, he wants your holiness. Then this conversation is going to challenge everything you thought you knew about faith, love, and freedom.

Today we have with us Katherine Spearing. She is the founder of Tears of Eden, which is a nonprofit that supports survivors of spiritual abuse. She's also the former executive producer and host of the Uncertain Podcast that pioneered pivotal conversations around spiritual abuse. She's a certified trauma recovery practitioner who works with clients who have survived cults, high control environments, spiritual abuse and sexual abuse, and she has a brand new book out called *A thousand Tiny Paper Cuts, the Subtle Insidious Nature of Spiritual Abuse*.

And life on the other side. So today, guess what we're gonna be talking about? Woo hoo. Spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse. Exactly. Religious trauma. And also how the patriarchy has been a powerful weapon all throughout history that has propagated both. So, welcome, Katherine. I am so excited to be hanging out with you again, Natalie.

Awesome. Okay, so let's just dive in. For anyone who is not sure what a sp, I mean, there was a time when I didn't know what spiritual abuse was. Me too. Absolutely. And so why don't we talk about spiritual abuse and maybe a little bit

about how it's different from other forms of abuse that people might be more familiar with, like physical abuse or emotional or psychological abuse.

Katherine: Yeah. Yeah. So, um, one thing. Similar to, similar to other forms of abuse, is it, it can be an umbrella term that under other forms of abuse fall underneath, or it can be its own form of abuse that is very direct and overt. Um, I define it in my book as when someone is deliberately using God. Deliberately using God or the Bible to coerce, manipulate, control, shame, uh, exploit all of those things.

And, uh, it gets a little complicated within a high control religious environment because you'll have people in that setting really intentionally wielding the Bible to intentionally control people. Then you'll have. Uh, just as many, probably more people, good, decent human beings, doing the exact same thing.

Believing that they're doing what God wants them to do, and that when they're doing it, they are being loving to you because that is the way they have been conditioned to operate. Yeah. And that is way more complex and way more painful, in my opinion, than the person who is doing it on purpose. Yeah. But very complex.

Natalie: I'm glad you brought that up because, uh, you know, most of the people that I have been in that have, you know, spiritually abused me, they didn't know, like they would never call, think of themselves as being abusive or intentionally trying to hurt anyone. Yeah. They thought they were genuinely doing what was gonna be the most helpful to me.

Katherine: Yeah. And so it's so confusing, right, because they, yeah. They believe it so deeply and so. Like how if, if you feel bad when it's coming at you, then you're like, basically feel like you're rejecting their love, which is then a whole messy pile of crap.

Natalie: Exactly. It kind of falls under the umbrella of relationships.

This is just what we do in Christian relationships. I mean, I, I mean, if, if we're gonna be honest here, I was spiritually abusive to people too, because I was telling them what they should and shouldn't do based on what I believed that the Bible was teaching and mm-hmm. Yeah. So, wow. So what are some, um, like more subtles, uh, su subtles, subtle examples of spiritual abuse that people might miss because it is so normalized in these environments?

Katherine: Yeah. Well, one that I was thinking about this morning and actually. Texting with some friends about this morning, and I now, right now, I don't think it's subtle. I think it's powerful and at the heart of all of the abuse, but it is so normalized in high control religious environments that. It. It has a flavor of subtlety because we're just so used to it.

If you've ever heard a sermon on God doesn't want your happiness, he wants your holiness,

and that

Katherine: being one, we are so conditioned to do the right thing to. Sacrifice, martyrdom, um, suppress our desires, and it's so embedded into the culture. I feel like it's like kind of at the core of all of it.

Yeah. But

Katherine: because it's, it's just this baked in thing within the culture of high control Christianity.

Like we don't even see it. Right? It's just so normalized and why, you know, women stay within abusive marriages and people are like, well, why did you stay if you weren't happy? Well, we don't even have a category for happiness.

Natalie: We don't. Exactly. Well, it's not really, is it even a, I mean, is it even really fundamentally allowed in some ways.

Right, right. Are you even

Katherine: allowed to have your own desires? Like Yeah. It, it's like a, it's like a dirty word, right? Yeah, yeah. Autonomy is a dirty word. Happiness is a dirty word. Selfish. It

Natalie: means you're pursuing selfishness and, yeah. Yeah, exactly. I think that, um, we do, we do this to ourselves and we also do it to other people where we say.

Like, if we're trying to encourage someone to stay married, we're telling them, 'cause I, I did this. Mm-hmm. I actually, I did this with a friend of mine whose husband was cheating on her, and, and she was trying to decide do I file for divorce or not. And I remember, I remember pacing my living room floor, having a phone conversation with her and saying, God wants you to, to stay.

It's not, I really did, I don't know how I worded it, but really was what was going through my head was it's not about your happiness. This is not about you getting out and then finding happiness somewhere. This is about you doing the right thing, right? We need to do the right thing, and God will reward you if you do the right thing.

And I believe that for me too, that's why I, I mean I was in the middle of an abusive relationship also. So very committed to doing the right thing and even getting out A lot of times, um, mothers who get out, their older children who've been raised in this 'cause the moms, I believed it. I taught my kids this.

They're looking at their mom going, what are you doing?

Yeah,

Natalie: what are, why are you pursuing? Like your own happiness. And at the moment I was, when I was getting out at the moment, I was thinking, I am not happy. Yeah. And getting out is not making me happy either. Like I am not, I'm not seeking after happiness, I'm seeking after peace and just like a feeling of rest and sanity.

That's it. Like I don't want happiness. I don't. I would never dare to think that happiness could be mine. I just want like, people to leave me alone and let me

Katherine: not

Natalie: hurt so bad. Yeah.

Katherine: You know, and like, like just, I'm like suffering. It's not even a question of I wanna be happy. It's like I'm suffering so much like life and death to some extent.

Right? Like, we are so miserable and it's like I'm just choosing. To just be alive for a little bit. Exactly. Like we're not even at a place where we can even consider our own happiness at.

Natalie: Exactly. I time just wanna breathe

Katherine: at, I just wanna breathe. They just wanna breathe.

Natalie: Yeah. Yes. So how does this impact their relationship with God then?

I mean, when they have these people, when they have people like me telling you, you know, you have to stay in your marriage. Or you're not, or you're not doing the right thing by God, by your relationship with God. I see. Then how does that impact their relationship with God when that's what they're thinking?

They're kind of associating God with all of those ideas.

Katherine: Absolutely. Yeah, and I guess, I mean. I, I talk about this in my book a little bit about, um, 'cause I was in a domestic violence situation, but, um, in the environment that I was in, uh, it was daughters weren't allowed to leave, uh, their father's home and leave their father's authority.

And so I was an adult within this context. And so it was a domestic violence situation, just not a marriage. Um, and I, I remember. I was like, so, so miserable and there was this little part of me and I was not taught God is love. Like that was not something that I was taught. Oh, interesting. I, I read that in the Bible myself when I read the Bible, but that was like.

Like this, God wants your, your holiness, not your happiness. Uh, God wants you to serve him. You're on this earth to figure out what God wants from you and to do that, whatever it may be. Um, and, and there wasn't this narrative of, there is this loving God. There's this God of grace there. Like, and I, I found that kind of on my own and I just, I just remember thinking when I made the choice, uh.

The first time that I made the choice to like rebel and to not do what my father told me to do. I remember thinking like, a god of love can't be okay with this. Like, like a god of love. Can't be okay with this. And if God is a God of love, if, if, mm-hmm. Maybe. Then if I'm making a mistake by saying no, then this God of love will forgive me.

And like that kind of just being how I justified making this choice. Mm-hmm. And like I'm doing this with good intent. Maybe God will be okay with this. Maybe God will be gracious in this, uh, uh, situation. And I think for every individual it is very complex and it is very unique, very, very common. Um, uh, thing for someone leaving a high control religious environment is this feeling, this phobia of God is gonna strike me down by lightning.

Yes. And like I have rebelled. And that God is coming after me and, and no one may have ever said that is what God will do if you quote unquote disobey again. So baked into the culture that if I am not doing it, it exactly this way, and if I

dare to think I just wanna breathe as you said earlier, and I just need to, to get away so I can just live and survive.

That, um, some, some God is gonna come after me in some way. My life is gonna be terrible in my life. And it is a struggle, right? Like those initial months and years right after leaving are so hard. Mm-hmm. Um, it's very easy to internalize. It's hard because I quote unquote disobeyed. Even though it's just hard.

'cause life is hard, right? Yeah, yeah, exactly. Life is hard for everybody. It is, yes. Yeah. And when we're dealing with trauma and trying to start a new life or a new career or a new relationship, it's just challenging. Right? Yeah. And we're taught to believe that if it's hard, then uh, we must not be doing something right, which then leads to us because life is just hard.

Right? Yeah. Suppressing. All of the hard things and pretending they're not happening within this community. Anyway. Yeah. So many far reaching tendrils of this. I know. I

Natalie: know. As you're talking, I'm like, there's so many things I wanna say in response. I recently, just actually this last week, I answered a question in our, in my private forum where a woman was like, I, I am so angry at God, but I'm afraid that if I express this anger to him that he will cut me off and I will not have a relationship with him.

And I was like. First of all, God knows you're angry at him. Yeah, right. Keeping anything from him. I like how you phrased it. If God is, you know, if God is so powerful that he could cut you off, pretty sure he knows you're mad at him. He already knows you don't have to. Yeah, exactly. But also, if he's so powerful and if he loves you so much, then why would he cut you off?

Right? Mm-hmm. And why would he not be able to? Like that's a pretty emotionally weak Yeah. Being if he can't handle the anger. Exactly. Can you handle the anger of your toddler? Yes. So I think pretty sure God can handle your anger. Exactly. Right. Exactly. So it's okay. Like you're not, he doesn't, you know, we don't.

Leave our daughters on the edge of a freeway because they had a temper tantrum and now we just have to cut them off.

Yes.

Natalie: We don't, we don't do that with our children. Yeah. And got for, and we're decent parents don't. Yes. Yeah, exactly. That's true. That's true. Um, and then also, uh, I just wanted to say, you mentioned that you were an adult daughter who stayed.

Um, my, just the, I think. Well, this was a, a recent episode that we did. Now, by the time this one airs, it'll be a couple months ago, but if anyone's interested, and you might be interested in knowing this, uh. We did a testimony, her name, uh, the, the name of the podcast, the episode was called Out of the Poison Pond, Jenny's Story.

Mm-hmm. And Jenny was a mom who, who was sort of blinded to the whole abuse thing. I mean, she knew that there was something obviously terribly wrong, but she didn't know, really, really recognized it until her daughter was in her mid twenties. Yeah. And her daughter wanted to get a job and the dad, so she'd never been to college, never worked.

The dad said no. Yeah. And that was when, that was the mom's wake up call and she's like, you know, I, I wouldn't, wasn't willing to fight for me. Yeah. But all of a sudden I realized I gotta fight for my daughter. Something is not right here. And my daughter deserves to have a life. Yeah. And so, and that's how, that was the beginning of her mm-hmm.

Of the end for her. She ended up getting out of that marriage.

Katherine: Yeah. So many women wake up. When they see how it's impacting their children. Yeah. And I, and I think that's wonderful and beautiful and totally natural. And I want women to also believe that they deserve to be treated well too.

Natalie: Exactly. And hopefully, hopefully we're living in an environment now.

Yes. That ha there's enough information out there. And you know that, I mean, this is gonna sound really terrible, but it's like if a, if divorces in Christian environments is on the uprise, I think that's a really good thing. Because it's a great thing. Yeah. Because if we weed out all of the destructive.

Basically un they're really rooted in, in unbelief and mm-hmm. Uh, satanic ideas, right? If those kinds of marriages can be set to the side, then we can establish tr marriages that are built on mutuality and love and fellowship and true. Um. True alignment with the heart of God. Yeah. And, and that's not possible as long as we're clean, hanging onto this porcupine Yes.

And refusing to let go of it and, and, and start over. So, and we have to do that. And that this

Katherine: institutional marriage becomes so important that the individual people within that marriage Yes. Are suddenly not important at all. And that includes our children.

Natalie: Yeah. It includes the children of those marriages.

Yeah.

Katherine: Absolutely does.

Natalie: And then one other thing that you said that I wanted to, uh, go off a little bit on a tangent is you mentioned the Bible that you were, you know, the, you were getting these ideas from the Bible and I just, um, we're doing a Bible study in my Flying hire program where we're going through the mirror Bible.

Have you ever heard of that Translation? Oh, it is unbelievable. It's a, okay, it's a newer translation. It's called The Mirror Bible. You can look it up on Amazon. Um, it is the most refreshing. It what, what, what I'm realize it's, it's a study bible, so there's lots and lots of notes and they go into the etymologies of words, but they do it in a way that makes it really easy to understand and it's flipping on its head So many verses.

That are, so we're studying it like side by side with traditional versions. Mm-hmm. So we can see, look at the difference in the tone. Mm-hmm. And what this. Translation is communicating. Mm-hmm. Versus what the Bible actually was communicating from the root, you know, the Greek. Yeah. Because some of those words that are used are selected by certain translators.

They are specific. A word can mean a lot of different things. Yeah. And then depending on the context, it's used in different ways. Mm-hmm. They're purposefully selecting words. To build up this, uh, very much power and control and patriarchal Right thing,

Katherine: like there is an agenda Yes. Behind translations 100%.

And I learned that in seminary and I was like, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. You skipped over that a little bit. Go back. Go back. Seriously. Say that again because that is,

Natalie: that is important. That is so important. And the average person does not have any idea. No idea. I had no idea. No idea. No. So anyway, it's just, it's kind of exciting, but Oh, that's very cool.

Yeah. That's

Katherine: very, very

Natalie: cool. I'll check that out if you Yeah. 'cause you would like, that would be totally up your alley to read that and just, uh, it's, it's. It has just awakened all of us to see that the gospel really is good news. Like it is the best news and um, and we are free and we are loved, and we don't have to do anything anymore.

It's already done. Jesus Christ did it all. I know we pay lip service to that. I know that I heard things like that in my churches, but then also it was like, yes, Jesus did it all, and also you need to da da.

Mm-hmm. You

Natalie: know? Right. Any church that's gonna excommunicate you, it's like, I thought Jesus did it all for me.

I thought, grace, you know what about all the grace you used to teach, but now I'm being excommunicated.

Mm-hmm.

Natalie: I don't get it. I don't get that at all. So there was so much cognitive dissonance. It just, it's like, it's insanity. Yeah. It literally doesn't, doesn't make sense.

Katherine: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, and I think, like my father, I talk about this in the book as well.

Uh, my father like. Was so entrenched in this reality that there's only one way to interpret the Bible. Um, and I guess just miss that there's like 900 different translations of like, right. How many thousands of different denominations just I guess didn't just miss that part of it, but was so convinced there was a right way and that his way of interpreting the Bible is right.

And I re I, I remember asking him one time, like. Okay, so if I'm reading the Bible and be, and you're reading the Bible and we are reading the same thing,

and we're both using the Bible to justify our decision, but we come to a disparate conclusion about what something means. Who, who wins? Like who's, yeah, who's whose interpretation wins.

And he didn't answer me, but I remember him just being so confused. 'cause he just didn't, if like, you're reading the Bible accurately, you wouldn't, you're not gonna, we're all gonna agree. And I was just like. No, no, it's just not reality.

Natalie: I thought you were gonna say something like, well, the one with the penis wins.

The one with the penis wins. Which is

Katherine: what implicitly and explicitly he said on other occasions. Yeah. But I think he just wanted us to like use scripture for justification for things so badly. Like that was like a big deal to him. And so it was kind of like. Well, what if this scenario happens when I'm doing the thing that he like wanted me to do?

Um, and at the time I'm like, I had like 30 things in my head, right? That I was just like, this isn't adding up. This isn't, this isn't making sense. But I can't tell him that. Like, I can't, yeah, I can't say actually, I don't know that that's actually what that means or whatever.

Natalie: Because you just end up in a, in a, in a, going in a circles because it's, yeah.

And

Katherine: it would come down to him being an being his interpretation. Winning. Yeah. And him making me feel dumb in some way about something. Yeah. Um, yeah.

Natalie: Yeah, we had a member, uh, tell us also this last weekend. She was like, yeah, I got this letter from my elders, you know, basically chi me for, I don't remember if she was, if it was a separation or a divorce situation, but it was basically she was holding her, her husband accountable for things.

And she got a letter from them and she said, I. Pretty sure that they prayed over the letter and yet the conclusion that they got from God, the message that they got from God was so different from the message that I'm getting with God. And so now I'm confused like, right, who's God telling the right message to?

Right? And I'm like, well, you're, you can get your mail from God. You don't have to get it from other people because if you are gonna look for your mail from God, from everybody else, you're gonna get a lot of mail. And it's all gonna say different things. And yes. You know it's not, and is that God, I mean, you know, he's, you just need to, yeah.

I love that. Focus on your own beliefs. Just get your mail from God. Exactly. Get your mail from God. Exactly. I don't know why. And plus, you know, they wrote that letter from their frame frame of reference. Mm-hmm. And, and so, you know, they get to have a right to have and probably do believe. Yeah.

Katherine: They probably

Natalie: genuinely believe they're doing the right.

Totally. Totally. Yeah. But, you know, but what do you believe you get to, you are the one in charge responsible for deciding what you believe. So,

Katherine: yeah. And their, and their beliefs do not supersede your beliefs. Your beliefs, exactly. Just as important. As their beliefs and they're allowed to believe whatever they want.

That's, that's a, that's a gift. I feel like on the other side of high control religion is like, I'm not responsible for other people's beliefs. That's right. I can believe what I believe and I don't have to change anybody else. And like, you're so ingrained with like this accountability thing that you have to like save people and like make them believe a certain thing and like now it's just like, Nope, I.

I am responsible for me. I'm not responsible for making other people agree with me. Yeah.

Natalie: Uh,

Katherine: and that's very freeing. It is so

Natalie: freeing.

Katherine: Cool.

Natalie: Also, if, if, if your God is big enough, I mean, if your God is kind of little and he really depends on you to come through for him, 'cause otherwise he

just can't, you know, connect all the dots, well then, you know, then you have to step in for that kind of God.

But if your God's really big and pretty much in control and can handle all of this. Then you can just be a child playing in the romping through the wilder wilderness. Yeah. Romping through the fields of grace with your Abba father, you know? Yeah. And you can let him manage everybody else. Exactly.

Katherine: Yeah, exactly.

Yeah. Like what we were taught to do was really sticking up for a very insecure, emotionally immature God, and you're just like, wow, you were really helpless,

Natalie: weren't you? I know. I know. We had to really take care of him, didn't we? Oh my gosh. Their own image uhuh. Exactly. Okay, so let's shift to talking about religious trauma.

So how would you describe the difference between religious trauma and just maybe everyone probably has a bad experience here and there in church with different people. We're dealing with people, so relationships are not always gonna be the best, but, or, and we might, you know, you might hear a sermon, I mean, are you gonna really agree with everything the pastor preaches from the pulpit?

Probably not. So what's the difference though?

Katherine: Yeah, the difference between religious trauma and, um, a term that, uh, Dr. Laura Anderson, I believe was coined the term adverse religious experiences. And, uh, the difference between the two is trauma is the reaction that our body has and what is stored in our nervous system.

Uh, when we have. A traumatic situ, uh, situation into something that is too much, too fast, too soon, and it gets stored in, our nervous system gets trapped there. Uh, and to the point that like we didn't get to complete the stress cycle. We didn't get to, to, um, resolve this thing and it's kind of trapped in our body.

So then when something happens that. Mirrors that or looks like that or reminds us of that situation that happened, that bad situation that happened, that our body reacts, uh, with a, with a survival response to that situation, registering it as dangerous. Um, uh, and adverse religious experience might be abusive.

Uh, it might just be something that's uncomfortable. It might just be something we don't agree with. It might just be. Somebody was a human being and made a mistake or whatever, but it doesn't necessarily, uh, have to land as trauma. It might and, and if it lands as trauma, um, it is, uh, it is really, there's a lot of factors that would lead to it landing as trauma for somebody.

And a lot of it has to do with power and how much power we feel in the situation. Mm-hmm. Um, which I work. Almost exclusively with women. Um, and you do too. And, and women, because of the patriarchal structures of these higher control environments, uh, tend to have a lot more trauma because they don't have a ton of power in this space to resolve.

These situations. And so two people can be sitting in a, in the same queue, hear the same sermon, and for somebody it lands as trauma and it, it, it is traumatizing and, and it gets trapped in their body. And for somebody else, it's like one goes in one ear, right out the other. Same sermon. Same message, yeah.

Might also be harmful, but. For someone it's trauma and someone, it's not, doesn't mean the person that it lands as trauma, that they're weaker or there's something wrong with them. It, it kind of just speaks to how much power they had in the situation. And, and did they get to move through it? Yes. Uh, in that space.

Natalie: Yeah. Um, I wanna come back to that whole idea of moving through trauma, but before we do that, um, and, and how you do, how you move through trauma. I, what you just said reminded me of a, um, I actually wrote a blog post about, it's a few years ago now, but I was going to a church, this was after I was excommunicated, started going to a, a different church and the pastor preached a sermon that I knew that women who were sitting in the pews, um.

It was kind of a meta experience for me because I was filtering it through their eyes because that's my filter. It wasn't impacting me in any kind of traumatic way because I had already worked through a lot of stuff, but I could feel the energy in the room. Yeah. And I could feel that there were a lot of women sitting in there who were taking that in, and it was.

It was a very much a shutting down experience like mm-hmm. They were being shut down and so I emailed him and I told him what it was that I told him specifically. I took very copious notes and I said, you know, when you said this, this is how these women under these circumstances would've heard this is what they heard.

Yeah. You said this. And I know you probably didn't mean this, but this is what they heard. And then when you said this, this is what they heard. And I went through everything and spelled off from, 'cause I was trying to show him, I'm trying to help you exactly. Like this is at least a third of the congregation.

That's experie that's hearing it this way. Mm-hmm. Maybe more. Mm-hmm. Yeah. So you, you need to know it. I think it's important that you know that this is how they're, even if you had just gave a couple of caveats mm-hmm. And I gave 'em some ideas. That would have softened the blow and helped unhook them from the message that you were giving so that they wouldn't have landed the same way.

But you didn't do that. But you know, I suggest maybe, you know, you might wanna try to do that next time. Yeah. So that you can. Love these people. Well, that you call your faith family, right? Yeah. He, uh, came back at, he was a total wolf in sheep's clothing. Yeah. He came back on the attack, like majorly attack.

He pretended that he was being victimized by me. I was just like, what? He wanted me to come and meet with him and the elder board. I've never met, I've never met this guy, or talked to this guy at all. Wow. And I was like, oh. Uh, he was threatened. He was so mad. Well, he ended up getting, uh, the boot, the elder board board actually ended up booting him out because he was doing bad things with money in the church too.

So, uh, there he was not a good person, but he was a very, had lots of charisma. He was one of those very, uh, sure, absolutely. And he brought, and he had grown the church like exponential. I know the tide. Yes. Mm-hmm. He was exactly like that. And I remember the first time I ever heard him, I was like, there's something off with this guy, but I couldn't put my finger on it, you know?

Mm-hmm. And, and everyone like worshiped the ground. He walked on and Yeah. You know what he ended up doing? He went away for a year and then he came back and just started another church.

Katherine: Yep. Of course, in the same area. Course he did. Of course he did. Because he have the same skillset to like, you know, draw people in and Yeah.

Build a big congregation. And most people are attracted to that. And, um, I wouldn't be surprised if. What he was saying in that sermon, like he was actually being intentional, like, oh, as a form of control.

Natalie: I could never prove it. 'cause I never met his wife, but I'll tell you this. Yeah, pretty sure I know what's going on in that.

Yeah. Yeah.

Katherine: You told on yourself in that,

Natalie: in that sermon. Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. All right, so let's talk. Can you, can you explain, you talked about how, you know, if people can't, aren't able to move through trauma or going through that stress. Uh, the stress, what's the word? Stress cycle. Yeah. Yeah. The stress cycle.

The stress

Katherine: cycle. Yeah. Why don't

Natalie: you talk about that? 'cause I'm sure there are women here or that, that are listener listening right now that are like, well, how do I do that? Because I think I've got that issue inside of my body, but I don't know how to mm-hmm. Like get rid of it.

Katherine: Absolutely. Yeah. So, um, a trauma response.

So there's a survival response and there's a trauma response, survival response. We are supposed to have a survival response right when we're in danger and our reptilian brain does not know the difference between I am being attacked by a lion and my life is in danger. And, uh, uh, an emotionally dangerous situation.

We're gonna have a very similar. Survival response, which is the fight or flight or freeze or peace, please and appease, which is very common in high control spaces for women. Yeah. We, we go into how do I please you? How do I make you happy? How do I, um, and so and so that is, our body doesn't know the difference between my life is in danger and that might, and so we have a, a similar reaction in that situation.

We're supposed to have that response when we're in danger, when we're. In a trauma response, we're not actually in danger. Something has happened to make us feel like we're in danger, and so we have to communicate to our body in some way that you had that reaction at this time because you actually were in danger.

And we have to figure out a way to communicate to our body that we're allowed to. Release that because we're not actually in danger now. Um. Many, many different, like somatic ways of approaching our bodies to do this. Um, but one of them is if that trauma is trapped in our body, we didn't actually fully escape that situation, and we didn't, we don't actually believe that we have left that situation and we are out of that dangerous situation.

And so one way, and maybe even, and this happens a lot in high control religious spaces, like, you know, I get abused by a pastor. And then I go tell my friend that it happened and my friend doesn't believe me and validates it. Doesn't agree that this happens. Um, like tries to justify why the pastor would do that, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

That situation, the pastor's now stuck in my body because I didn't get it out. I didn't get it processed. I didn't have a chance to have that validated. A very different situation is I'm abused my pastor. I go tell a friend. My friend is up in arms. That is crazy. That should never have happened. I cannot believe that happened to you.

Validating the fumes, validating the experience. Like we are like, let's get outta here. We're writing a letter. We're done. We're getting outta here, and we get to escape the situation. We get to remove ourself from the situation. We get to complete the stress cycle. In that situation, we didn't have that experience.

When that trauma got stuck in our bodies, we have to recreate that opportunity. And just a very simple, simple, simple thing is. It's like the exercise of like, if you have a song stuck in your head, the fastest way to get it out of your head is to listen to the song all the way through.

Yeah. You

Katherine: have this thing that's coming up in you.

The fastest way to let it process itself is to let it say what it needs to say. Yeah. And give it the validation and the care and the tenderness that it's needed at the time that the event happened. And I can look. It's very, very different. It also, if we have like chronic situations, which spiritual abuse tends to be chronic, a thousand tiny paper cuts over a long period of time.

So that's not gonna be just like one event and oh, we validated and we're moving on. It's gonna continue to rise up. And giving ourselves the compassion that we deserved at the time that these events happened is just one way of

helping our bodies complete that stress cycle. Yes, in a time when we're not in danger anymore, but, and you have to not be in danger.

Like we can't, we can't complete the stress cycle if we're still in danger. So that's a really important part

Natalie: of the cross. Yeah. Yeah. If the lion is still standing over you, you're probably not gonna be able to complete the stress.

Katherine: Yeah. And we probably shouldn't, right? 'cause our body's doing what it's supposed to do and telling us Exactly.

We are in danger.

Natalie: That's right. There's a quote, um, that I. Pulled from from Peter Levine, and I stuck it in my book. All the Scary Little Gods that says that trauma is what happens in the absence of an empathetic witness. Yeah. So you need to have an empathetic witness to help to just like you said, to validate what you've experienced.

That friend that comes along and is like, mm-hmm. I can't believe it, blah, blah, blah, blah, and I'm gonna help you. That is what you need. But not everyone has that. Mm-hmm. Especially if all of your friends are all drinking the same Kool-Aid. Exactly. And you're all in the. Name poison. So, um, one a picture that helped me, um, figure that out.

Was when I got excommunicated. 'cause that was a very, that was a traumatic experience for me to get excommunicated. I was a, a good Christian girl, like quintessential. Yeah. Good Christian girl my entire life. Served in the church. Mm-hmm. Gave my money to the church, you know, gave, invested my whole entire life in the church and all of a sudden I get excommunicated because I said no.

To, to a bad marriage finally, you know? Yeah. And this is after years of me begging for help. Please, somebody, please help me. Yeah. Um, but I, how I pictured it is I thought that the church was the world.

Mm-hmm.

Natalie: And I found out when I got excommunicated, I found out, 'cause they kicked me out of their sandbox.

I found out it was just a sandbox. Yeah. And their sandbox was built. On the shore of the ocean. Yeah. That you could not see. One side of the you, you looked down this side of the shore and it went on forever, and you looked down that side of the shore and it went on forever. And the sandbox was this little tiny box.

Mm-hmm. With a few little 6-year-old boys in it. Who were the K, you know the king Cubas in the box, right? Yep. And they said, you can't play with this anymore, Natalie, you have to leave. And I was so sad until I got out of the box and looked around and went, and God was like, Natalie, I got a big surprise for you.

Like, oh yeah, exactly. Yes. The whole entire beach belongs to you. Yes. It belongs to you. Yes. And look around you. There are lots of people on the beach and Absolutely. They are all ready to play with you. You don't need Exactly. You don't need. Love

Katherine: it. Yeah, love that picture. Yeah, absolutely. Love that picture.

Natalie: So that really helped my internal nervous system. Unhook from mm-hmm.

That,

Natalie: that trauma. Yeah,

absolutely.

Natalie: And then too, I love the name of your new book. A thousand Tiny Paper Cuts It. When I think about my book, all The Scary Little Gods, it's like that really was, it was, that was my telling. In trying to tell in a way that wouldn't like overwhelm people.

You know about the tiny paper cuts and how they happen while you're growing up. Mm-hmm. And the little subtle ways that they happen when you're growing up and they get, it's like little tiny a, a call it a cut or a little stitch or little whatever it get, and it stitches together this story that, that creates, uh.

That creates the perfect storm, I guess. Yeah. Really. Yeah. And um, absolutely. And getting unhooked from that and healing from all those. Those cuts is really important. Yeah. Okay. We're gonna shift to patriarchy. Yeah. I love talking

about the patriarchy. Yes, yes, yes. I remember when I was in, well, I'm sure you do too, in circles where patriarchy was, we love patriarchy.

Right? Like, that word was a golden word. Mm-hmm. And I, I, and I just had no idea. I just had no idea. I, I think, yeah. I think, uh, ignorance about church history and about world history even. Right. Really? Um, it's not new. It's not new. I know. I It's not, it's not. So how has it influenced. Our theology in our modern evangelicalism today.

Katherine: Yeah. Well I would say when we talked at the beginning of that idea of God doesn't want your happiness, he wants your holiness, that that being kind of the mechanism of control, especially for women mm-hmm.

To

Katherine: uphold a patriarchal system. 'cause if you're in a bad marriage, well, God doesn't want your.

Happiness. You wants your holiness, and this is, you know, refining you and this is helping you, you know, serve the Lord and all of that kind of stuff. That messaging keeps women trapped in. Bad marriages. It keeps women and people trapped in these, uh, abusive church environments. Yeah, it works. Yeah, it totally works.

Um, and, and patriarchy is almost always at the heart of high control religious environments of cults. Like even if a cult is led by a woman, there's still a patriarchal element and like, it's just, it's just. That being such a huge component, um, of these issues. And I was in a cult, uh, the Christian patriarchy movement that was like, men are the head women, wives are the sex slaves, and they take care of the kids.

Yeah. And then the kids are there to fulfill their father's vision until they marry and create, you know, other little, little fiefdoms and. And it was basically just gave fathers men the license to create their own little family cult. Yeah, it was very overt. Then I get out of that and I go into these churches that were like, men and women are equal.

They just have different roles. And I thought it was so much better. I thought it was so much better. I was

Natalie: like, Aw, did we have exact same journey? I just wanna know, were we living on the same,

Katherine: on the same plane? Yes, and And I thought it was so much better. Yeah. I thought it was so much better and I'm in these churches that are telling me I can't be an elder and I can't be a pastor.

I'm like, that's okay. As long as I can like do ministry, which is the thing that I was going to seminary to do and getting trained for. I don't need the pa, I don't need the title. I'm okay. Yeah. Then I realized. The title gives you respect, the title gives you a pay bump. The title gives you a seat on the board to like be able to make decisions and to vote.

And it took me a really long time to like recognize the same thing that's happening in this Christian patriarchy cult that I grew up in is happening here too. It's just so much more subtle and so much nicer, and they're never gonna tell you straight up. Like men are superior to women, but that's what they believed underneath.

Yep. And it was so much harder to parse. Ouch. Because it was so much more subtle, which then makes me feel like it's also more dangerous because you can't see it as clearly.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. Did you, were you, uh. Did you run in John Piper circles or reformed?

Katherine: Yeah, that was a part of that was that was their, he was one of the, one of the fathers.

The founding fathers. Yeah. Yeah. Of,

Natalie: yes. Yeah. That was the church that I got excommunicated from.

Katherine: From John

Natalie: Piper's.

Katherine: Yeah. Church from Miss. Oh, fun times. Yeah.

Natalie: So, I mean, he, I remember, uh, oh, I, I must not remember it very well, but I think it's online where he's trying to explain how you would ask directions from a woman if you had, if you were forced to do that.

And there's a way that women are supposed to give directions to a man so as not to overstep their authority. What I know. No, there's also, there's a lot of really whack things out there. Yeah. I remember

Katherine: being in seminary and I was in a. A Complementarian seminary that believed in Complementarianism. Um, but it was also like a bunch of millennials too.

And so we were kind of on this like, eh, how do we feel about this? Um, and there, and there was a quote, a recent quote from John Piper that was like, it's fine if women write theological books. It just needs, we just need to make sure that it doesn't sound like a woman. And everyone was just like, what?

Cracking up. They were like, what the fuck? Like that

Natalie: doesn't

Katherine: make any sense at

Natalie: all. I don't know how he is so relevant in this world today. I don't know how he still has a platform. I honestly don't. Yes, it's so

Katherine: big mean. It feeds a lot of egos for these small little men. I suppose, I

Natalie: suppose it's that sandbox.

Yes. They're still absolutely throwing sand from their little sandbox there. I'm glad they're having fun though. Um, they're having a good old time over there. Okay, let's talk this about the stay at home daughter movement. I mean, that is pretty fringy, but I was part, I mean, I was, I, yeah. I ran in, uh, first Bill Gothard circles, but then, um, yes, I was into the whole vision forum thing.

Yes. Were you? Yes. Yeah. Yeah. That was where the stay at home daughter thing came in. Mm-hmm. For me, I don't know if it was for you as well. Yeah, that's

Katherine: where it started.

Natalie: Yeah. So I remember there was a time when my daughter, who, right now my daughter who did graduate from college and actually is going to

eventually be a nurse here and she's, you know, we've completely shifted our entire focus.

Yeah. So all my daughters can get an education if they want to, but way back when she was maybe, you know, five or six. I was thinking, yeah, I don't think we're gonna have her. Why would we have her go to college? She's gonna have children and stay at home. Yeah. So, and, and as she grew up, thank God I got out of it, because she's not that, I mean, she does, she's pregnant with her second child, but that is all she wants to have.

And being a mom and she's not who she is. She is the best mom. Yeah. And also she. Needs to get out there. Absolutely. She needs to be out there doing stuff with other people. Mm-hmm. Also, which is probably a better

Katherine: mom

Natalie: because she

Katherine: gets to do

Natalie: this stuff. Yes, yes. She is an, she is, she is the mom that I wish that I could have been that I feel like my beliefs just kind of, you know, my beliefs, they, they.

If they had me, I was totally brainwashed.

Yeah.

Natalie: And I even, even, even while I was doing things in my parenting, I was thinking, this isn't right. But I don't know what else. I don't know what else there is. Like I don't, yes, exactly. I'm just doing what I know and I. I'm doing it. Even though there was so much, it just completely did not align.

Yeah, with my core values in so many ways, but I could not figure it out. It's like, I can't even describe the feeling, but it's, it's like drowning and not knowing that you're drowning, but you kind of know that you're drowning.

Katherine: It's, and then you're also like, you're kind of abusing yourself, right? Because you're like forcing yourself.

Yes. To like do something to do you don't want to do. Yes. And you are do like, and that's like the genius of these systems, right? They get us to abuse ourselves, they get us to police ourselves. Yeah. They get us to shame ourselves.

Yeah.

Natalie: And then they're like, and so much

Katherine: fear,

Natalie: like just so, just tremendous fear of your kids going to hell and your kid's.

Mm-hmm. Not, you know. So anyway, let's talk about, let's talk about that. Um, yeah. What is Christian, Christian patriarchy, how does it relate to the stay at home daughter movement? Um, yeah. Where did the stay at home daughter movement come

Katherine: from and,

Natalie: yeah.

Katherine: Uh, yeah, I think they're one and the same. The Christian patriarchy movement, the stay at home diner movement, like that's kind of the model is, you know, fathers become, you know, the heads of heads of the homes.

The daughters stay home to, uh, serve their father until they get married. They're never not out from underneath the authority of a man. Um, and so that's kind of the makeup of it, the stay at home daughter part of it. Um, I don't know who coined it. Um, uh, but my friend and colleague, Kate West, who, who, whose memoir *Rift* is about her experience in the stay-at-home donor movement, she was the first person that I encountered on Instagram talking about it.

And she was the one. I, I first heard use that term and I was like, there's a word for us. There's a term and people are, and that's so important, right? After these experiences have language to movement, like people on the outside

Natalie: are talking about you guys. Yeah.

Katherine: Yeah. And I don't think the Christian patriarchy movement coined that term.

I think it, those of us who left. Started using that term to describe us because it's not, it's kind of derogatory, right? It doesn't like sound good. Well, what was that

Natalie: do? Did you see that documentary that the Botkin sisters put together many, many years ago?

Katherine: Uh, video. So much more. So much more than one.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But yeah, they wrote a

Natalie: book and then they kind of did a video on it. Did you see that? Yeah. I

Katherine: think about them. I don't know if I watched the video. I did. Get the book, you know, as like a graduation gift or something. Yeah. You know, and it was all about just like making, you're, you're the crown of your father's head.

Mm-hmm. And like, making your father look good. And I think about them all the time because I, I knew them. Like, I met them like through, through Vision Forum. And these are the, the older women who are like showing us the way. And I just, I just think about them and I'm just like, are they happy?

Natalie: No, I think they broke out.

I think they broke out. Really? Yeah. They're out. Yeah. I think they're all, they're all, they're both on their own now and because I, I don't know that I need to

Katherine: go stalk them. Yeah, no,

Natalie: I, the last I heard, which was a few years ago, but I have, I have a connection, uh, re through through my ex who is, who is sister, uh, my ex's sister, her and her husband.

Um, their son married a cousin of one of the botkin sisters, and so you get updates. Yeah, so I just was at a wedding for my niece out in California. Was it Cal, California? And I saw the cousin. I was asking her, you know, how are they doing? And I don't remember, she didn't give any details, but she said that it sounded like they were doing well and that they kind of broken out of that whole thing and work whoa.

On their own now. So I need

Katherine: to

Natalie: go like, well, can you imagine? I mean, you get to be, I don't know, 35, 40 years old. You're like, I think I need to. I think it's time for me to build that life working. It's not working. Like somethings not working. Exactly. That's, it's so ridiculous. But yeah. Yeah. I'm, I was glad to hear that.

Oh, and I saw, I saw like, uh, I was, I just saw, I don't even know how I saw this, but Shawna Pearl. She's Pearl. You remember the Pearl? Oh yeah. Yeah. Is she a daughter of the Pearl? Yeah, she was one of the daughters. She is divorced, has four kids, and she talks about divorce and. Um, and her beautiful life now that she's out of her abusive relationship.

Wow. And so, you know, these children like these, these, these people who set these whole things up and did their, and really experimented honestly Yes. On their own progeny. Mm-hmm. Have their experiments all failed. Yes. And the, and the PE and those kids are breaking out and breaking those cycles in those families.

Mm-hmm. And I just think it's beautiful to see.

Katherine: I, I 100% agree with you. And like you even telling me that they have like broken out and they've gotten out. I like, oh, that just makes me so happy because like, I don't, I don't you, I'm like, they don't probably, they're probably like me in that they don't even have a category for happiness.

They're not even like they. Asking if that's even a thing. Yeah. Or do I even observe that and, well,

Natalie: I don't think that, I don't, I didn't get the impression that they were like, and I don't know, I, again, I don't know the details. I didn't get the impression that it was like a rebellious thing or like a, mm-hmm.

Like a, I don't have any contact with my family anymore kind of thing. I got the impression more like it was just, you know, this is, we've outgrown this, we're moving on and you know, yeah. Doing our own thing. Now we're doing something else. And still, still. Still intact with the family and, and it's fine. I think maybe the whole family has probably evolved a little bit.

Sure. Hopefully. Absolutely. And, um, which is a good thing. I don't follow, I don't run in any of those circles anymore. Right. For obvious reasons, so I don't really know. Well, I mean, vision Forum I guess broke up. Yeah. The Bill Goard

thing. Has been falling apart for several years. Yes, absolutely. Um, so, you know, things that are dumb.

Just eventually you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes, right?

Katherine: Amen. Amen. Uh, yeah, and it just. Yeah, but it does, it, it does leave a lot of damage in the wake, especially Yeah. For the women and then for the men in those spaces, the next generation, which is really sad to me of watching the men in those spaces, even though they saw how their sister suffered in their mother suffered creating the same dynamics.

Yeah. I, I know I, it's happening again, like there is a, a new generation of it. Growing and being out there because it is so tantalizing right to, to very weak, insecure men. Yeah. It like, it gives them so much power over a very small group of people and they don't have to do jack shit for it. And so it is very, uh, seductive to a certain group of people and it still exists and people are still being harmed by it.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. I just feel. I, I feel better about it only because there is information now. Yes. I, back when I was a new, I didn't have new mom. I hadn't, there wasn't any information. Yeah. There wasn't the, I mean, I was a, I had small children when the internet became a thing and. And so there was nothing, there was no, there were no books written about it.

Mm-hmm. There were, now we have, so there, there is information out there. There is help. If I was to Google now versus when I Googled the first time 14 years ago, I would, I would find help now. Exactly, exactly.

Katherine: There was a lot of, and I didn't, you know,

Natalie: I didn't really find anything back then. So I do think that for people who are searching and seeking for answers, and eventually you will, when you're young, you don't.

Mm-hmm. 'cause you just, you're, you just know what you know, and that's all you care about. But as you get older and it doesn't work, and this does not work. It just doesn't, yeah, it doesn't work. You at least those people will be able to Google and get therapy and figure it out and they'll be able to get help much faster than some of us.

And you go to,

Katherine: uh, a library and Google safely. Exactly. You're not, ips not being tracked. Like Yes. I've even, I remember like Googling things in my father's home and like deleting my history, but then my father was an engineer, so I was like. He has the capacity to like find, you know, like just being fearful, right?

Yeah. That he was gonna, he was gonna find it. Oh my gosh. Question me on it. Um, but yes, there are, there's so much more information, um, in the world, um, about like your, your, your information. Tears of Eden. Your books. My books. Like they're, they're there. People can, yeah. Can get them.

Natalie: And I have noticed that the age demographic of people that are joining my program is going down slowly.

Like they're younger. Yeah. They're younger. People are starting to come in. Yeah. And um, I think it's because they're learning about it sooner.

Katherine: That's so good. Yeah. I'm so happy. I'm so happy to hear. Yeah.

Natalie: Yeah. I mean, do you feel like, what is the age, what is the basic, maybe average age of the women that you're helping

Katherine: in

Natalie: your back?

Um,

Katherine: they're around my age, I would say, and they're, uh, late thirties, early forties, so. Okay. So that's

Natalie: amazing. Yeah. I mean, I didn't start waking up until my mid forties. Okay. Yeah, good. There wasn't very much help back then, so.

Katherine: Sure. Yeah. That's good to know. Yeah, and there are definitely, um, a lot of women early thirties who are, are waking up and.

Just asking que just starting to ask the questions. Um,

Natalie: that's amazing. Yeah. Because, I mean, twenties is anyways, is just a very confusing time for anybody Absolutely. In any walk of life, so, okay. Yeah. So twenties doesn't count, but you get in your thirties. If you can find help right away in your early thirties, then you're good.

Yes.

Katherine: Yes. You should be. You should be here to go your whole life ahead of you. You should be good to go. Yes. Yeah, that is a good point that, uh, that folks are a little bit younger, finding help.

Natalie: So how long have you

Katherine: been out of your, of this whole thing? Yeah, out of the Christian patriarchy movement, uh, probably about 12 or 13 years.

Um, out of the complementarian, uh, religious world. Uh, six, six years. Okay. Yeah. And where are you, where

Natalie: are you located in the country? I live in St. Louis. Okay. In the middle,

Katherine: middle of the state.

Natalie: Yeah. Kind of in the middle of the, of the states? Yes. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. All right. Well, why don't you tell us a little bit about where we can find your work and, and what you do.

So in case anyone wants to work for you, they can find you easily.

Katherine: Absolutely. So, uh, my book is coming out, a thousand tiny paper Cuts. It'll be out by the time

Natalie: this airs. It'll be beyond Amazon,

Katherine: so you can go right over there and buy it. Fantastic. So yeah, October 14th. So, uh, that is available wherever you buy books.

Um, and then the nonprofit that I run, it's called Tours of Eden. Um, and then I also, uh, work with private, private clients, um, trauma, doing trauma recovery, and, and most of my, um, clients. Are, are, are women who have been impacted by, uh, high control religious patriarchy, patriarchal systems. Um, and you can find me on Instagram at Katherine Spearing, and then my website is Katherine spearing.com.

All right. That sounds great. I'll

Natalie: make sure to put all of those links in the show notes. Thank you so much. Yeah. It was

Katherine: a delight to get to talk to you, and it was so fun to talk with you too. So much. Thank you so much for all of your work. I do send, send folks your way, um, just as have a, have a sounding board.

Thank you. Thank you.

Natalie: All right. Thanks for listening everyone, and until next time, fly free.