

Breaking the Cycle: Turning off the Gaslight For good.

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I'd achieved a great deal in my life by 2016 and was thriving in all areas. As a PhD candidate in Linguistics, I had cracked the code on productivity and was writing an innovative dissertation with joy. I was also teaching fitness classes to hundreds of undergraduate students, grad students, faculty¹ and staff at this east coast university, while having found a home as a bassist, vocalist and choreographer for the worship team at a local church. Furthermore, I had a deep and intimate spiritual relationship with my God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, taking international adventures, and experiencing the guidance, protection and divine revelation through prophesy, dreams and general fellowship with Holy Spirit. Life was good. My body, mind and soul were being nurtured and I was moving forward with my vocation and personal development with joie de vivre.

The end of 2016 was a rude awakening. I now recognize that I had prided myself on having no needs, and requiring nothing from others because I was overflowing with love and joy and purpose from my relationship with God². Well, when the Charleston shooting occurred where 9 Black congregants were gunned down for their race despite their hospitality, I found that my evangelically aligned predominantly white church turned a blind eye to the pain I and others were feeling as a result. Worse, they vilified those who admitted their pain or confusion, which was pretty much just me. Instead of hearing and walking with me and others, the central leaders called engaging the topic or our pain, “political” on a good day and ‘heretical’ on others.

At the same time, the dissertation committee I had chosen began to crumble. I had picked individuals who I knew had not shown kindness and support to me in the past, but were the experts in the topic I was studying. I received support, encouragement and even mentoring from other experts at other universities and abroad and wrote a fantastic dissertation. The product was a groundbreaking work that used novel data and methods to identify something one chair member mentioned that they had not been able to identify in 30 years working on the topic.

When it came time for the committee to sign off to start the completion process, however, they also noticed that their academic fingerprints were nowhere to be found because they had either been too busy or aloof to contribute or had spent mentorship meetings pointing out every potential drawback of each method, theory or approach perhaps not recognizing that I received their feedback as constructive critique leading me to plug up every potential hole in my analysis.

¹ One of my group fitness regulars became the outside member on the dissertation committee that awarded me my degree.

² Typical Enneagram 2 profile, though I was consistently mistyped and thus did not lean into enneagram for personal development until 2022.

At this moment, the tables turned and instead of apathy, I experienced an all-out war generally waged through circular meetings and emails, helpful-sounding words that were the opposite of the actions or inaction taking place to move me to completion.

Now you may be wondering why I would choose people who were not supportive to shepherd me through one of the most seminal rights of passage one has in their pursuit of a PhD. You'd be right to ask. On one hand, I really wanted the approval of one advisor. To me he represented finally being accepted as a useful contributor to the field of syntax (hear club Chomsky). But to be more transparent, I later learned I had a condition. It's called codependency. I was someone who grew up feeling they had to perform to merit the love, attention, acceptance, friendship and care that healthy folks know is due to us for simply showing up on the planet. Codependents (many who may also be empaths) are the willing prey of those who participate in narcissistic abuse.

The term narcissism here is not vanity, a person who spends too much time in the mirror or spends the entirety of dinner boasting about their their accomplishments. Narcissism is defined as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. It is a psychological condition described in the DSM5 and is rampant in a capitalist culture that has prized profits over people. Bosses, parents, siblings, CEOs, teachers etc who display patterns of behavior consistent with narcissism can only function when they have what is called "narcissistic supply." The unhealed wounds and lack of boundaries of an individual who is codependent or an unhealthy empath is the perfect type of supply. Narcissistic abuse is the cycle of psychological torment and trauma executed by an individual (or system) with narcissistic traits and perceived power with an individual perceived as prey.

In my story, the primary chair of my committee demonstrated many of the text-book characteristics of a narcissist. I had seen how almost all of the American born women who worked with him somehow were too discouraged to finish after a few years of close "mentorship." This individual was charismatic and self-deprecating. He wore dapper suits that were interesting—bordering on costume—and had a large wall art collection of masks he found in his travels. The costume-like nature of his dress and masks is an interesting metaphor for narcissism. The narcissist lacks empathy and the ability to manage their emotions, so they paint an alluring picture of themselves to their various circles that seeks to insulate them from criticism and anything that could damage a fragile sense of self. Anyone who threatens or sees through the self they project is a threat to that mask which hides a malnourished soul.

On my committee, he had done the things I'd witnessed or overheard he had done to the women who had left. Attempts to discredit ideas without also suggesting what might support the work were frequent. Since I was working with experts internationally (by God's grace) I was unphased. The dissertation was solid, but that mattered less to others in my department or university—less than his insistence that my dissertation was illegible (despite what those internationally were saying).

I watched faculty and administrators ignore emails and feign ignorance about topics they were experts in as a means of keeping distance from helping me sort out the pathway to finish. Even quite supportive and professed justice-oriented faculty grew distant recognizing that supporting

me might make life hard for them interpersonally within the department or on their path to tenure. Ancient Hebrew scriptures lay out a process of complaint: first one must go to the person who has wronged you, then bring one friend, then to the leadership of the organization, then to the organization at large. I did just that hoping at every turn, really believing, that as I fought this, the chair would recognize that I was not one to back down to injustice but wanted simply to finish. I wanted to show them that despite the damage, I desired to preserve their reputation. I petitioned at the department level, OMBUDS, Graduate Deans Office, and Equal Opportunity Office. I feel foolish now recognizing that all of the support systems are employed by the university.

After a trivial EO investigation by the university, I contacted the Massachusetts Council of Discrimination and a year later was able to retain a lawyer.

What 3 years of a legal battle to win the right to complete my degree showed me was that I had built a life on Christ alone, but had surrounded myself with those who were a barrier to my walk into destiny. It was God's grace that plucked me out of that program, gave me 3 years of protected time to heal and *unlearn* the dysfunction I had inherited and championed. Had no friction occurred, I'd likely have recreated that same system of church and career elsewhere.

That 3-year stretch moved me from the East Coast to Dallas, TX where the Lord pieced my heart back together and provided for me people places and things that were a healing balm. While I employed many spiritual tools to prune the lies I had been believing that led me to such a shaky relational foundation, I also had to do a deep dive to rid myself of the foothold the enemy was exploiting that kept the door open to the influence and sympathy for toxic people and toxic organizations.

If you've made it this far, congrats! You are invested. Likely you are sensing that you or someone you know may have experienced narcissistic abuse and you are looking to learn and heal. Yes! It is time to break free and break through into destiny, whole and not smelling like smoke³. Below I share some of the resources that supported me through my healing process.

Prayerfully identify those that are useful to you.⁴

I recommend binging this content in place of tv/social media/podcast etc. It's perfectly ok to consume this passively. This information is going to rewire your brain to be hyper aware of narcissistic traits and environments. This content is not aimed at labeling individuals, for none of us can judge and most of us are not licensed to diagnose. Instead the goal is to share tools for identifying patterns of dysfunction and toxicity, that once identified can be overcome by our living out the knowledge of who we are in Christ. Through hearing these various voices, you will recognize you're surrounded by an army of folks who have decided to no longer tolerate a way of thinking, believing and engaging that draws or enables these people or systems to have any influence or jurisdiction in your life and the lives of others.

³ Daniel 3:26-27

⁴ When I was healing, many Christians were not talking about narcissistic abuse. I asked the Lord to guide me to the resources and shepherd me through hearing with discernment. If you are one who can only learn from professing believers, the resources with a dove icon are for you.

YouTube Channels

- Vital Mind Psychology
 - Series on empaths and narcissism
 - Abdul Saad: Scientific and somewhat pastoral
 - Note: I actually did a few coaching sessions with Abdul Saad, Australia based psychologist specializing in healing from narcissistic abuse! Super helpful!
- ICan Coaching and Development 🕊
 - Pastors Robert and Dixie Summers
 - Series on Narcissism (sometimes discussed as the Jezebel Spirit in faith circles)
 - <https://youtu.be/hsEa70ADahl>
 - Instagram @apostlerobertsummers
 - I have done coaching with him and found his spiritual guidance practical
 - Author Page:
https://www.amazon.com/Robert-Summers/e/B00OAR9ICA?ref_=pe_1724030_132998060
- Permission to Exist 🕊
 - Black Christian female⁵ talking mostly about narcissism in the work place. Stories and useful strategies for survival found here.
- Inner Integration
 - White female providing mostly stories of narcissism from her childhood to the present and how she identified and began to heal from the influences. [Narcissism in the mother relationship and male-female romantic relationships]
 - Does discuss some new age spiritual practices (ex: Use of ayahuasca⁶ treatment through shaman or spiritual guide in Mexico)
- Melonie Tonia Evans
- Dr. Carmen Bryant
 - Mental Health Professional
 - Black and Christian
- Richard Grannon
 - Mental Health Professional and Survivor of Narcissistic Abuse turned Coach/Content Creator [Narcissism from women in romantic relationships]
 - White Male Brit with a penchant for sports (rugby/martial arts) and pubs
 - Cusses some.
- Dr. Ramani Durvasula
 - Psychologist, Professor in Los Angeles
 - Content Creator, Guest on Red Table Talk
 - Here is her TEDx talk: <https://youtu.be/aHHWgG7dB6A>
 - I had a lovely conversation with her via phone as well in 2017. I just emailed her and set up a phone call as I was seeking to find a committee. She commiserated

⁵ We never see this person's face but as a linguist specializing in Black American Language and Culture I am pretty confident about this identity. It was helpful to me as a Christian Black American female to hear the experiences and healing strategies of someone like me!

⁶ <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/ayahuasca/>

with me and gave me strategy to select a healthy dissertation committee. She is more well-known now so I am not sure she is as available.

- o Hosts Workshops and Webinars for Survivors of Narcissistic abuse
- Allison Harbin
 - o Academic Advocate
 - o Documentation of Narcissistic Abuse in her PhD process.
 - o “What would you do if a month before your PhD defense, your advisor had just published your work... under their name?”
 - Written Account:
<https://www.allisonharbin.com/post-phd/2017/8/1/a-field-where-the-old-d-evour-the-young-is-a-field-that-is-dying-a-post-about-graduate-student-em-powerment>
 - Talk: <https://youtu.be/DUna4nPyR14>

Relevant Psychological Vocabulary

- Narcissistic abuse
- Trauma bonding
- Hoovering
- Triangulation
- Narcissistic supply
- Flying monkey
- Complex PTSD (CPTSD)
- DSM-V
- Cluster B personalities
- Codependent
- Enmeshment
- Golden Child
- Scapegoat
- Grey Rocking
- Word Salad
- Narcissistic Injury
- Narcissistic Supply

Relevant Christian Vocabulary

- Jezebel Spirit
 - o Main function: Control, manipulation
- Ahab Spirit
 - o A leader who abdicates their role through inaction, neglect or unwise delegation giving power and influence over their reign over to the one/ones harboring the Jezebel Spirit
- Main targets: Prophetic People; Leaders and those with kingdom influence
- Key Scripture:
 - o Story of Jezebel: 1 Kings Chapters 16-21 2 Kings Chapter 9
 - o Toleration of the Jezebel Condemned: Revelation 2:20

- Spiritual Warfare
- Armor of God

Secular Books

- The Human Magnet Syndrome
 - o A nice resource for personal stories and overview of narcissism. This author has some video content and interviews but I do not recommend those.
- The Gaslight Effect
 - o The book that brought this word back into popular use
 - o Self-help with lens toward helping victims stop behaviors and worldviews that unconsciously invite, support and enable further abuse

Christian Books

- Victory in Spiritual Warfare
 - o Tony Evans
- Prayers for Victory in Spiritual Warfare
 - o Tony Evans
- Pigs in the Parlor
 - o Frank Hammond, Ida Mae
- They will Expel Demons
 - o Derek Prince
- Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit
 - o John Paul Jackson
- Enough: Liberating yourself from controlling Jezebelic relationships
 - o Robert Summers

A lot of these resources focus on narcissistic abuse in families and romantic relationships, but the themes still apply to narcissism in the work place, organizations or other relationships. I read at least 10 more books about narcissistic family systems which were helpful as it seems to me the many systems from schools to churches etc function a bit like a large (often times dysfunctional) family.

Furthermore, sometimes we learn to tolerate the dysfunction of narcissism in the familial contexts first. I found that understanding patterns of narcissistic family systems showed me how to make sense of what happened to me in academia.

Advice for healing

- Make sure to write down⁷ what happened or what is happening! Be as detailed as possible.
- Get it all out so you'll
 - o 1) have something concrete outlining your journey because what happened to you was REAL.
 - o 2) Feel more able to “they” less and “Im’ma” more, I.e. move from victim to agent in your own liberation in your own personal narrative

⁷ Or speak it out while recording. You can use systems like Otter.ai to convert your speech to text to make it searchable and available for sharing later.

- o 3) Have clear documentation for future use
 - Legal support
 - Memoir/Documentary
 - Coaching/Consulting
 - Personal Development

If you need further support or want help walking through this healing process, feel free to sign up for an introductory coaching session with me. Email tracy.conner@gmail.com with GASLIGHT SUPPORT in the title.

You got this!

Prayerfully,

Dr. Conner