



Church on the Couch
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The names and identifying details of the individuals discussed in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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CHAPTER 1

I'm Okay, You're Okay

Learning how to fake it

God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.

Ephesians 4:15–16 (MSG)

STUCK IN A DARK, SCARY PLACE

One Sunday morning when I was eight years old, I got locked in a bathroom in our church basement during the service. This small country church, surrounded by pastures and cows, was over a hundred years old. The bathroom was virtually an outhouse in a dark corner underneath the sanctuary. Somehow the door jammed and I got stuck inside. I still remember the feeling of panic. It was dark and scary and really smelly and I desperately wanted out. When it became obvious I couldn't get out on my own, my panic grew. I realized I would have to bang on the door to get someone's attention. Doing that would disturb the service upstairs. That was even scarier than staying stuck. What seemed like hours passed as I weighed my fear of being trapped against my fear of causing a scene.

What do you do when you're stuck in a dark, scary place and you know you need help, but you're afraid that asking for it will only get you

in trouble? Or maybe you're worried it will cause people to think less of you, or see you as weak, needy, or difficult?

I don't recall how I got out of the bathroom that day, but it must not have gone well because I remember deciding to never again be a bother—especially to the folks at church. Instead I would focus on the needs of others, ignoring my own. And I got pretty good at it. I was, in many ways, the model teenager—singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, serving as a leader in my youth group, always encouraging others to take their faith seriously and do the right thing. Always well-behaved.

The older I got, the less aware I was of my own internal world, never expressing any doubts about my faith, never acknowledging how lonely, confused, or inadequate I felt, never revealing my struggles or self-destructive behaviors. I was doing what I thought I was supposed to do; dealing with problems on my own, trying really hard to keep it all together.

A lot of folks live like this. We keep saying to ourselves, “Don't tell people who you really are because the ‘fake you’ is easier to deal with.” We shut down or shut out parts of ourselves that don't fit the picture of who we think we're supposed to be.

It's inevitable that this will happen to some degree. Everyone in our lives, from the time we are young, communicates subtly or not so subtly what they want from us. Experiences with parents, teachers, friends, neighbors, coaches, and church leaders all taught us what parts of us people liked and what parts they'd rather not see. Sometimes those experiences were very painful. So we learned to filter what and how much to share in order to protect ourselves from disapproval or rejection.

In his book *Abba's Child*, Brennan Manning describes this process as he experienced it. Talking about developing a false self, he writes, “When I was eight, the impostor or false self was born as a defense against pain. This impostor within whispered, ‘Brennan, don't ever be your real self anymore because nobody likes you as you are. Invent a new self that everybody will admire and nobody will know.’”¹

DEVELOPING A FALSE SELF

Children aren't born with an impostor self. They have to learn to create one. Think about the young children you know and how they function. They don't screen their feelings or reactions. They just respond. They emote and express indiscriminately, without even thinking about it. When they are happy, they're giddy, silly, grinning from ear to ear. When they are sad, they're devastated. They sob and beg and scream. But over time, the adults in their lives teach them to respond more appropriately. Children learn that people don't want them around if they are having big feelings. So they learn to tone them down, to pull themselves together, to get over it or put a lid on it. Sound familiar?

Of course, this process of shutting down emotionally doesn't end in childhood. Most of us are still experiencing life intensely in high school. Remember how passionate you felt about things then? Causes you wanted to fight for, wrongs you wanted to right, friends you went out on a limb for, the first love you were willing to give up everything for? But over time, we learned to temper our range of emotional experience, to live less passionately, to minimize the intensity, to squash it down into this small margin of acceptable expression. By the time we're in our twenties and thirties most of us have joined the ranks of grown-ups who are pretending they are fine when they are really upset, pretending that it doesn't really hurt when they are rejected or ignored, and pretending their hopes and dreams no longer matter. We've learned to deny our internal experiences in order to fit in. We've become so socially acceptable, we are emotionally dead!

I'm not suggesting that emotional restraint is all bad. Learning to control your emotions and behave appropriately is important. Certainly it is not useful or healthy to throw yourself on the floor at Starbucks when your latte isn't hot enough, or scream at your family when you've had a hard day. But it seems that what most of us learned was less about dealing with our feelings in a healthy way and more about hiding them or ignoring them till they go away.

Now we are stuck in patterns of relating we have developed to keep us safe. And while they do keep us safe (no one can reject the real us if

they never see it), these patterns are killing our souls. We live mired in self-protectiveness, unable to grow, create, or experience real intimacy with God or those around us. We've begun to believe our own game and embraced our pretend self as if that's all there is to us.

THE FALSE SELF COMES TO CHURCH

Tragically, when we come together in our faith communities, we bring these coping strategies with us. We gather because we long to be known, to grow and connect with one another, but many of us are so numb and disconnected that we end up circling around each other, never quite managing to create the authentic, life-giving relationships we came for.

This book is an attempt to address our need as believers for more authenticity and emotional health, to encourage the church to lead in this area. I worry about the amount of silent pain that sits among us as we gather in our churches. I know it's there because clients tell me about it all week long in therapy sessions. Couples tell me that their marriages are falling apart; kids tell me no one really sees them, that they are using drugs, alcohol, and sex because they are in pain and are hoping someone will notice. Others tell me they are wracked by addictions to pornography, alcohol, or food. Still others are tormented by things that happened in the past, things done to them or choices they made. All this bubbles under the surface any time we get together, but in most churches there is little conversation about it. We have gotten used to being stuck and afraid together and have little or no expectation that we will experience authentic, transforming conversations with others in our faith community.

Many churchgoers are discouraged and disillusioned and some of them are leaving. They know God is the answer but they can't find what they are looking for. They are not experiencing much freedom or peace in their lives and they don't know what else to do to get it. They are exhausted from pretending and long for someone to show them the way out, to give them permission to tell the truth about their lives.

I believe that the church can be a place of amazing healing and restoration but I relate a little bit to Shawn Coyle in *To Hell with Church*:

I quit Church for good because it is the endless rerun of a dull plot. Like Gilligan's Island, there is no character development and no learning. . . . In each tedious episode, like each tedious Sunday in Church, our hapless castaways almost get "saved"—but no, not quite, and so we must tune in again next week at the same bad channel, same bad time.

Skipper is the pastor, Gilligan is the youth pastor, and Ginger is the one hot woman in every Church at whom all the guys steal peeps while scanning the congregation to see who showed up. Mary Ann runs the nursery, and Professor is the vaguely annoyed pseudo-intellectual who can tell you the difference between exegesis and isogesis. The Howells pay for everything. What a hoot! You just can't wait till next week to see the same thing again.

Like the castaways' home, Church is a desert island on which we are trapped into playing one of just a handful of approved two-dimensional characters.²

Maybe you too are concerned about the lack of realness and growth within our faith communities, perhaps within yourself as well. You are not alone. I hear it from people every day. They want the church to be the one place where they don't have to fake it, but it's just not their reality. The thing I love about doing therapy is that people rarely fake it there. They sit down and tell the truth. Somehow the rules they feel elsewhere are suspended when they walk through that door. Some unsaid, invisible go-ahead allows them to put it all out there, and to expect that I will understand, accept, and protect whatever I hear. Of course, that is a therapist's job, but I am often amazed at how readily people, believing they are safe, drop their guard and share things they have never said out loud before.

I really believe this level of sharing could happen in the church if we shifted our paradigm a bit and used some different approaches and tools. My hope is to encourage you to provide opportunities for this kind of sharing. To intentionally create space for the practical living out of biblical concepts such as confession, bearing each others' burdens, and living in openness. Your community will need you to lead by example. As you risk by being a little more honest, a little more open, a