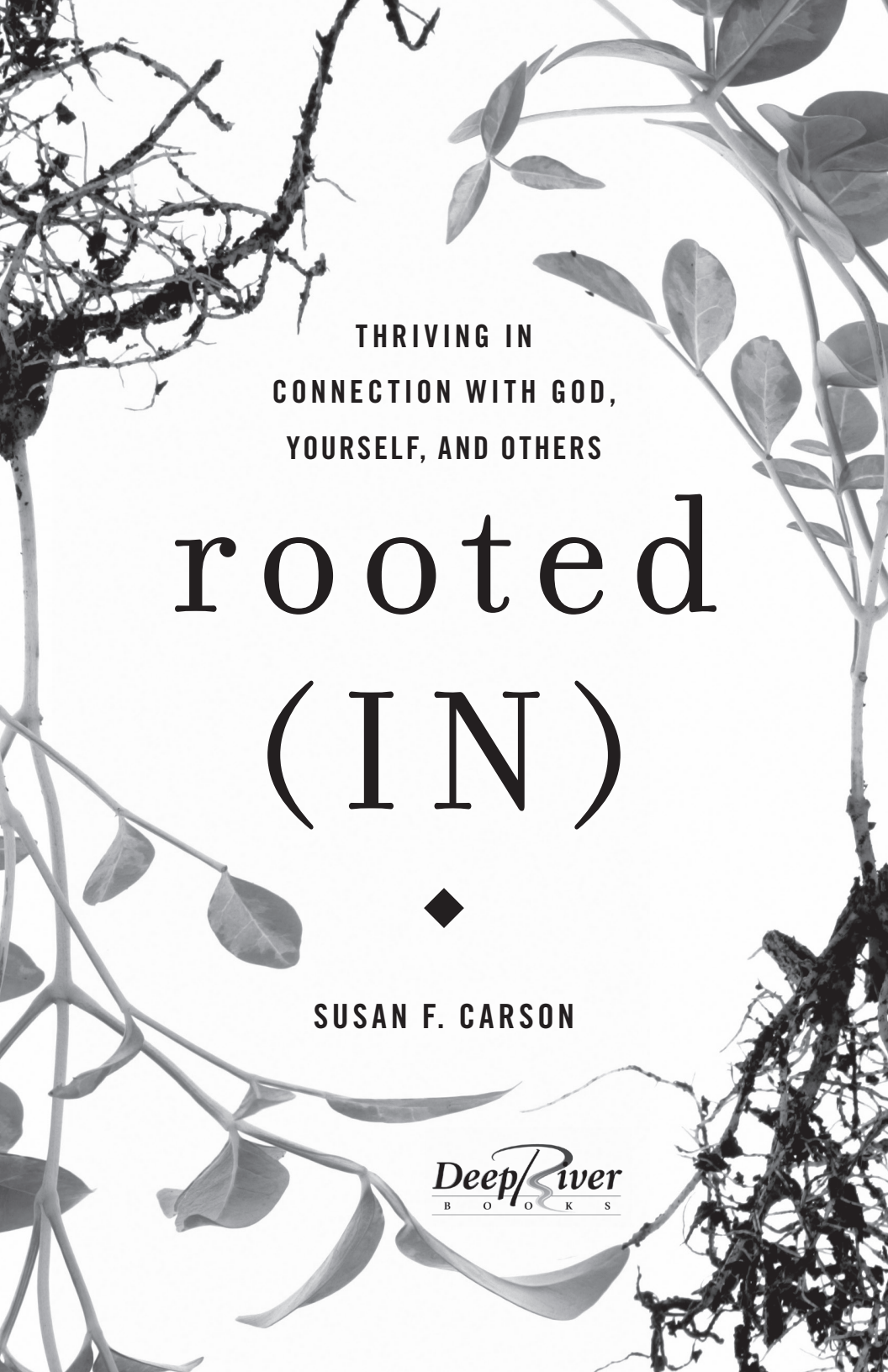


rooted
(IN)



THRIVING IN
CONNECTION WITH GOD,
YOURSELF, AND OTHERS

rooted
(IN)



SUSAN F. CARSON

Deep River
B O O K S

Rooted (IN): Thriving in Connection with God, Yourself, and Others
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WHAT LEADERS ARE SAYING ABOUT ROOTED (IN): THRIVING IN CONNECTION WITH GOD, YOURSELF, AND OTHERS

“Susan has written such an accessible guide to spiritual growth and transformation. Personal, practical, and authentic in style, this book will help you go to the next level in your relationship with God and your enjoyment of life in Him.”

Chuck Mingo
Teaching Pastor and Oakley Community Pastor, Crossroads Church

“Susan has a beautiful way of offering truth while being vulnerable. She dives deep into God’s truth on how shame and lies distort who God made us to be. This is a story of leaving shame behind and stepping into the deepest kind of love, firmly rooted in truth, and connected with God. What a gift to the faith community she has given us!”

Beth Guckenberger
Co-Executive Director, Back2Back Ministries; speaker and author of
Start with Amen: How I Learned to Surrender by Keeping the End in Mind

“Susan Carson shapes a space for freedom and transformation. She’s learned it from years in ministry—drawing on ancient practices, scriptural wisdom, and personal experience—and now makes that space available in this book. If you will enter *IN* to this gracious, imaginative, hopeful space, you may just find yourself in a new place with God.”

Mandy Smith
Pastor, University Christian Church; author, *The Vulnerable Pastor*

“In *Rooted (IN): Thriving in Connection with God, Yourself, and Others*, Susan Carson shows you practical ways to heal your hidden brokenness and unhealthy behaviors by recognizing the root. This book equips you to live fully, joyfully, and lovingly, with healing and wholeness in Jesus Christ. I am excited that Susan has written this book, including her personal healing journey. It will empower you and stir your heart to draw closer to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. If you want to grow in with love God, yourself, and others, you will love this book!”

Rev. Dr. SueLee Jin
Pastor, Anderson Hills United Methodist Church; faculty mentor,
United Theological Seminary (Randy Clark Scholars Focus Group)

“With wit and candor, Susan Carson masterfully weaves story and Scripture and sages’ quotes into this inspiring book. Clearly she knows what it means to live deeply rooted in the love of God—a relationship forged through her own healing journey with Jesus and the remarkable friendship that has ensued. No reader will be untouched or left doubting that Jesus is still very much among us, working miracles in the midst of life’s most confounding challenges!”

Beth A. Booram
Co-founder and Director, Fall Creek Abbey;
spiritual director; author, *Starting Something New*, and
coauthor with husband David, *When Faith Becomes Sight*

“In the current climate of fragmentation in almost every arena of life—God, ourselves, others and the world around us—Susan sets forth a strong and winsome image of being rooted in God’s love in the whole of our stories. The book is an invitation to engage in more than simply believing God loves you . . . but to actually engage in practices like silence and solitude. This book gives you the principles and prayerful practices that a person needs to stop being stuck

and start living a life marked by joy, meaning, and abundance. She is speaking God's desire for each of us to be who we really are in Him. If you have not yet embarked on this journey of being who you really are, or gotten stalled along the way, this book will guide you well."

Sibyl Towner

Coauthor, *Listen to My Life*; cofounder, OneLifeMaps.com;
and codirector, The Springs Retreat Center, Oldenburg, Indiana

"With disarming vulnerability, Susan Carson deftly balances her own story and experiences with Scripture and time-tested practices. This is not the work of a theoretician, but a fellow sojourner and practitioner offering practical help and hope. In our hurried, frantic culture, this deeply life-affirming book is much needed cool water for thirsty souls, gently reminding readers of the Father's love and the much richer life He offers."

Dave Workman

President, Elemental Churches; author, *Elemental Leaders: Four Essentials Every Leader Needs . . . and Every Church Must Have* and *The Outward-Focused Life: Becoming a Servant in a Serve-Me World*

"A thoughtful book about life with God that is both informative and provocative, written with heart and soul that is relevant and relatable. I appreciate the inclusion of practical exercises within the book that offer daily application for going deeper in the spiritual journey."

Dr. Candyce Roberts

Author, *Help for the Fractured Soul* and
Sharing a Table: Knowing the Love Of God in Community

“Susan is offering the authentic pathway she used to find the deep joy and contentment that we all seek. She tenaciously pursued the real God and found him to be trustworthy and crazy in love with her. You’ll be inspired, challenged, encouraged and thankful for Susan’s vulnerability, sense of humor, practical wisdom and doable suggestions for finding spiritual wholeness void of performance-based living. She’ll lead you to know and experience how God is crazy in love with you, too!”

Dr. Marcia Ball

Co-founder and Executive Director, Kerus Global Education;
co-author, *It Takes Courage: Promoting Character and Healthy Life Choices*

“Through her story, Susan Carson opens readers to their own stories, helping them connect with their true identity as ones fully loved by God. We cannot fully love ourselves or others without first receiving the love of a Father. I recommend this book to anyone wanting to grow in the deep parts of their journey with God. The invitation is open to all, no matter where you are in your journey. There’s always more to discover. His love is never ending and His invitation is always steady.”

Kristan Dooley

Discipleship Pastor, Anthem House Church; Director, Renewal Women;
author, *Bigger: Rebuilding the Broken*

To Virginia

For your journey of becoming who you already are



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INTRODUCTION



The Journey (IN) and Why Roots Matter

*The farther the outward journey takes you,
the deeper the inner journey must be. Only when your roots
are deep can your fruits be abundant.*

—HENRI NOUWEN¹

*The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is
loved. The faith that one is loved by God.*

—THOMAS MERTON²

WE ARE ALL ON A JOURNEY of becoming who we already are. We are already fully loved, created with intention to live with joy and significance. To thrive in spirit, soul, and body. To live deeply connected with God, with our true selves, and with others.

But something is in the way.

I've experienced it, too. Shame, pain, and disappointments leave you isolated and separated from God, yourself, and others. You end up going through life outside yourself, striving for acceptance, longing for love and grace.

Rooted (IN) is a journey out of shame into love. The spiritual paths and practices in this book open the way to living rooted and grounded in the healing, restoring love of Christ. Over decades and as director of Roots&Branches Network, I've had the honor of praying with

hundreds of people, helping them do the same. And I've learned the only way out of our shame and pain is (IN).

Rooted (IN) gives you the principles and prayerful practices you need to stop being stuck and start living a life full of joy and meaning with your tribe. Just as the word *IN* is held within parentheses throughout this book, you are surrounded and held by the unflinching, unchanging love of God. And it is this (IN) that makes all the difference.

WHAT'S AHEAD

In Part One, we'll explore foundational principles for a life rooted (IN) and remaining (IN) the love of God. In Parts Two and Three, we'll explore spiritual practices for living more deeply rooted (IN) loving connection with God, with ourselves, and with our world. In each chapter of this book, we'll experience new ways to connect, to put down roots deep and wide in grace that nourishes and heals the soul. Each chapter represents a principle and practice that will help you live more rooted. Listening in the quiet. Listening to God, to yourself, to others. Silence. Solitude. Sacraments. Grace. Truth. Healing. Prayer. Ancient and modern paths and practices that bring life.

To get the most out of this book, I encourage you to do three things:

1. Read the book and understand the journey (IN). Do this with yourself or with a few friends.
2. Do the "Deeper (IN)" experiences at the end of each chapter.
3. Pick a few new practices you'll engage in regularly.

You are made to live rooted and grounded in a lasting experience of God's love. With new practices, you'll learn to remove roots blocking and breaking this connection—roots that have gone down in places of pain and disappointment, carrying toxins of doubt, fear, and judgment to body, soul, and spirit. You'll learn how to replace old, unhealthy roots with new roots connected in love and truth. And you'll learn to live more present to God, to your own heart, and to others.

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

—J.R.R. Tolkien³

The root is certainly a more decisive factor than what is growing above ground. After all, it is the root that looks after the survival of an organism. It is the root that has withstood severe changes in climatic conditions. And it is the root that has regrown trunks time and time again. It is in the roots that centuries of experience are stored, and it is this experience that has allowed the trees survival to the present day.

—Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*¹

PART ONE



LIVING ROOTED
IN LOVE





CHAPTER 1



Deeper (IN)

*Love is like a tree: it grows by itself, roots itself deeply
in our being and continues to flourish over a heart in ruin.
The inexplicable fact is that the blinder it is, the more tenacious it is.
It is never stronger than when it is completely unreasonable.*

—VICTOR HUGO¹

I REMEMBER BEING ALONE. A lot. Not that my parents weren't there; they were. But what I feel as I journey through memories is almost nothing. A vacuum. Emptiness of substance, emotionally, spiritually. And I see myself alone. Playing alone. In my room, mostly. Or in the family room with the '60s red shag carpet. My mother somewhere in the house reading. My father gone, at work. Or angry. Mostly, I remember being alone.

Some of my first memories are of my best friend Sheila, who lived right across the street, and several other friends who lived just houses away. Our neighborhood felt like one big playground. Our mothers sent us outside in the morning, and we played together all day long—first in my backyard, then in all the others. It was magical. It felt safe. I belonged. Until we moved.

My father's anger and inability to stay very long in any job meant we moved several times as I was growing up. At the end of second

grade, we moved from Cincinnati to Lexington, Kentucky. I still remember looking out the back window of the car as we pulled away, waving to Sheila and sobbing. My sense of security was slipping away with each mile.

Lexington was hard. Then McAllen, Texas, for seventh grade was harder. On the border of Mexico. Culture shock. Then North Webster, Indiana, for eighth grade and high school. A tiny, one-stop-light lake town. Another kind of culture shock. Each move was harder. And as an introvert—an extreme, please-don't-make-me-talk kind of introvert—I had more and more trouble connecting in life. Friendships were lost with each move. I was lost more and more with each move.

A disconnected teenager will do almost anything to find affinity and affirmation. It's a bit of a cliché. Troubled teen makes bad choices. That was me. Without any emotional or spiritual grounding, without any sense of myself, I was desperate to find the people who would provide that. The summer before my senior year of high school, I decided I would do whatever it took to be popular, to finally fit in, belong. I wouldn't compromise my grades, because my grades were my identity. But I would compromise myself in every other way. In our school, the popular crowd was smart—honor-society smart. And the popular crowd partied hard. Drinking. Drugs. They were very happy to bring me in and took great joy in my corruption. I was finally in. And I was more alone than ever. Darkness and depression swallowed me whole.

Word that I was out of control, struggling, reached three teachers. These three ate lunch together every day in an office with doors open, open to students who wanted to talk. Two of these teachers knew Jesus. And one was my physics teacher. One day during a lab, Mr. Kitson called me into his office, closed the door, and started talking about Jesus. I wasn't raised in church. I knew next to nothing about Jesus—except that Christmas and Easter had something to do with him. I didn't have a grid for anything he was saying. I might

as well have been listening to Charlie Brown's teacher: "Wha wha wha wha wha, Jesus, wha wha wha." But what I knew when I returned to my lab was something about Jesus was important, and someone cared enough about me to throw me a lifeline.

A few weeks later, as I stood in our kitchen holding a knife to my wrist, I had a rare moment of clarity. I could end it now. Or I could try the God thing. Since I had nothing to lose and the rest of my life to gain, it seemed like giving Jesus a shot was a good idea. The next day I asked Mr. Kitson what I should do. He pointed me to a church within walking distance of my house, filled with people who loved Jesus, and he said I should get a Bible and read the book of John. I immediately did both.

The people at that little church embraced me, and the youth group took me in. I started reading the book of John and I could not stop. The stories were alive to me, and it was all such amazingly good news. How come no one had ever told me about this Jesus? News this good, a story this good, everyone should know. When I finished John, I kept reading, making my way through the New Testament. A few months later I was about midway through the book of Romans when my youth pastor called the question: Was there any reason I wasn't ready to follow Jesus? All the reasons not to were gone.

We knelt together at the altar rail of the little church. Just the two of us. And I prayed. I told Jesus I'd messed things up. I needed him. I needed forgiveness. And I would follow him. I gave everything to him that day. And a world sideways and gray turned suddenly upright and full color. When I opened my eyes, everything looked different—which I know sounds weird, but it really did. Like going from an old black-and-white TV to HD color. And I felt different. Joy came in.

So much changed when I gave my life to Jesus. But the depression of my childhood still hung like a shadow around me. Six weeks later I began my freshman year at Vanderbilt University, knowing little about my new faith and even less about myself. I began to learn more

about Jesus and what it meant to follow him. I learned about Bible study tools, Scripture memorization, serving, prayer, and many good things that formed a foundation of faith in my life. My head learned a lot about Jesus, and I loved him more than ever. But my heart was disconnected from so much of what I was learning, unable to experience the truth of his love for me. I worked hard to do all the right things, because that's what a perfectionistic performer does. And it helped for a while. And then it didn't. At the core, I was still alone.

I realized gradually, through years of counseling and healing prayer, that I had no sense of self. No sense of myself at all. I was afraid that if you peeled back all the layers of me, there was nothing at the core. Nothing of substance. That after more than twenty years on this planet, I really didn't exist. It seems crazy, but there it is: The part that is uniquely me, my spirit, had never been seen, recognized, blessed, connected. The aloneness I'd experienced as a child and the lies that came with it had embedded in my soul. I struggled for years with depression as I walked into greater measures of healing.

I am still walking. Still healing. Still becoming more fully who I've been all along.

ROOTS MATTER

For trees and everything that grows from the ground, roots are the life source. And since we are made from the dust of a garden, the same is true for us. Nourishment for our soul—our mind, will, and emotions—comes through the roots. What we are rooted (IN), what we are connected to and through, matters.

As an only child growing up in many ways emotionally and spiritually disconnected, I put down a very big root in isolation. My identity drew (in part) from this root of isolation, nourishing the message that I was alone, unloved, unchosen. My true self withered, and false self flourished, as my identity—my sense of self—grew twisted, misshapen by lies.

At the same time isolation was rooting in my life, my grandparents gave me a gift of belonging. They purchased a farm in Wilmington, Ohio when my grandfather retired, with the intention of creating a special place for their grandchildren. For me, that place was magical. It was the constant in the midst of all our moves. It was long days with my cousins. Coffee cans filled with fireflies. Barn cats. Tractor rides. Pond frogs. A secret clubhouse (OK, maybe not so secret) in the shed. In this place, I also put down a very big root. My identity drew (in part) from this root, nourishing the message that I belonged. That I was not alone. That I had a place. The gift of the farm and my time there nourished my true self in a way that sustained and formed me, in spite of the lies.

That place, the farm, remains in me. Those memories and all that's embedded in them, the belonging and safety, are life to me. Every time I see fireflies or Queen Anne's lace, it all comes back. In the summer we'd pick these beautiful lacey white flowers and put them in empty jelly jars filled with water and drops of food coloring. Then we'd watch as the flowers slowly began to change colors. The stems of the flowers drawing the blue or red or purple up into the lace. Just as those flowers were changed by color they drew from the water, I was changed by the stability I drew from the farm.

ABOUT A TREE

Our unique stories shape us, for better and worse. Memories embedded in our souls (neuroscience would tell us exactly where in our brains) hold emotions connected with our beliefs about what we experienced (or didn't experience). A child who remembers being alone holds sadness and the belief she is unwanted, unchosen. A child who remembers being connected holds stability and the belief she has a place. It's all in there together, with a whole lot more. And it all forms the soil we draw from, the places we are rooted. We are all a very mixed bag of nuts—the good and bad together.

So maybe, since we've been talking about roots, it's not a surprise that our story begins with a tree. In a garden. A tree that held the fruit of the knowledge of good and bad together. In the garden, Eve and Adam walked and talked in the open with God. Nothing hidden. Nothing covered. They lived completely connected with the God who'd made them for himself and for each other, connected with one another as equal partners made together to contain the fullness of God's goodness. They enjoyed the beauty of the garden and the fruit of all the trees, save one. They were one with God. One flesh together. And they felt no shame, no sense they had anything to hide.

And then they ate. You probably know the story. Eve and Adam believed the lie told by the serpent that they needed something more—that who they were, what they had, was not enough. (Does that lie sound familiar at all to you?) They ate the fruit because it looked lovely and promised wisdom, a greater knowing . . . or so said the serpent. But these two were made only for the good, and suddenly they felt something God never intended. Good and evil together. And with that evil came shame. They covered up. And we still do the same thing today.

When Adam and Eve heard the sound of God walking in the garden, they hid. And perfect union, unbroken connection, was shattered in the silence. "I heard you in the garden," Adam says, "and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."² The knowing brings shame, and the shame brings fear. And all work together to separate. Adam and Eve no longer felt safe with God. Nor with each other. And with that, our shared journey through pain, out of shame and fear, our journey back to connection, begins.

ROOTED CONNECTION THAT HEALS

So how do we deal with the shame and the fear and all the places we see the fruit of bentness and brokenness in our lives? Religion's answer is focused on outward behavior—a try-harder kind of legalism. Read more, serve more, pray more, repent more. People look good on the

outside, but they're dying on the inside. They hide their true selves in shame. The message is that who you are is not OK—in fact, your heart is bad and you are bad.

But the good news is so much better than this. (IN) Christ, connection is restored. As our shame is unearthed, we live more and more rooted in love, becoming more and more who we already are. Created in his image. Fully known. Fully loved. This journey of becoming begins with the simple wanting and asking. It begins with a prayer:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.³

Stop for a minute. Read this passage again slowly. Out loud. As a prayer. Breathe it in. Breathe it out. Rootedness is the place of fullness, the fullness of God in us. God's love permeating us, forming us, nourishing us. In this place, this rooted and grounded place, we know the unknowable. We know, not in a heady, cerebral, factoid, I-just-listened-to-a-great-podcast kind of way. We know in the real, experiential, feel-it-in-my-core kind of way. We know and live from the vastness of God's strong love for us. This is rooted living.

This is my favorite prayer in the Bible. I pray this for myself and for others a lot because I don't know—we don't know—the size of God's love for us. We have no idea. (Or maybe you do. In which case I'd like to meet you and buy you lunch and hear all about that, because I have a whole bunch of questions for you.) And what I do know I forget. All the time.

We are meant to live rooted and grounded in the love of God. The love expressed to us in Christ, in creation, in our life and breath, in every good gift. We are meant to live with the very person who is God's love expressed, the Spirit of Jesus, dwelling in us. With this Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness filling us, seeping out of our pores. We are meant to live with the power that comes as we know this love, the huge expanse of it. Wider, deeper, thicker than the ocean. This fullness, this love that surpasses knowledge, filling us with the very fullness of God. (Holy cow.)

Living rooted in this—knowing this deeply, experientially, not just in my head, but in my heart—changes everything. It changes me. It changes my relationships with others. It changes my relationship with God. This love is the beginning and end of everything. We can only be rightly connected with God, ourselves, and others to the extent that our roots go deep and deeper still in love.

Social researcher and author Dr. Brené Brown defines connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”⁴ Brilliant. And I think this is also true between people and God. When we experience being seen, heard, and valued by God. When we receive from God without judgment. And when we derive strength and sustenance from God. This is when healing happens. And this sounds a lot like love, doesn't it? It's the atmosphere in which love takes root and grows. Masks come off. We uncover and come out from hiding. And we become a little more whole.

This kind of connection—the “I see and know you, I am here for you, I accept and value you” kind of bond—comes with a knowing that is experienced. It's not a thought or an idea. It's a reality we are meant to feel deeply because we've known the presence of God with us, in us. The fullness of all of God's love crashing in on us and spilling out of us. This kind of connection nourishes the soil of our souls, soil

ready to receive the seeds that bear the crop of joy. In the words of Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton:

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.⁵

REMOVING TO RESTORE

Roots go down in our lives in the moments when deep agreement is made with a belief (true or false) about ourselves, God, and/or others. This happens in childhood. In adolescence. It may even happen today over lunch. Things happen to us and around us, and we make decisions about what these things mean. A parent says something in anger. An abuser violates. A friend or partner abandons. A teacher gives a grade. A parent encourages. A friend or partner gives unconditional love. We have a sense of place and constancy. We lose a sense of place and constancy. We are shamed. We are blessed. We are bullied. And through it all, we make judgments, both good and bad, about ourselves, others, even about God, based on our perceptions of what we've experienced. When we agree with these judgments, we put down roots in good soil and in bad; and these judgments, the true and the false together, nourish and shape our lives.

Soon after I was born, my mom had a series of miscarriages. I don't have any cognitive memories of these first years of my life; but at some point I became aware that these miscarriages had happened, and I made some decisions, from my child perspective, about what

that meant about me. I decided these miscarriages meant, since my parents wanted more children, I wasn't enough for them, and it was my responsibility to make up for all those children. I had to be all those children for my mom and dad.

Sounds crazy, right? That a child would draw and live from conclusions like this. But as children, we perceive and interpret as children, internalizing messages that the adults and authorities in our lives may have never intended. My parents never said this to me. I don't think they ever intentionally acted in a way that would have led me to this conclusion. But as a child, I observed and decided. I put down a root, picked up a huge burden, and the lie of "not enough" was planted in my soul soil. From this root came the fruits of performance and perfectionism, and behaviors driven by the need to be more and other than I was created to be.

In the same way, roots go down when we are violated. When we experience pain and trauma. When we experience life, blessing, and encouragement. Roots go down in places that bring death and make our souls and bodies sick. Roots go down in places that bring health and life to our spirit, soul, and body.

When we are rooted in the false, we live from unhealthy beliefs that lead to unhealthy emotions and behaviors. When we are rooted in the true, we thrive. Who and what we are connected to, what we are rooted in, matters. Life and health are in the roots. It's true for trees. It's true for us.

THE FRUIT WILL LEAD YOU TO THE ROOT

Where do you feel stuck in your life? What patterns and behaviors keep repeating, no matter how hard you try to break them? And I mean, you've tried. Counseling. Dieting. New disciplines. More prayer. Support groups. Meditation and mantras. You're still stuck. And that big overreaction yesterday—where did that come from? The nice lady in the car in front of you is driving a little too slowly. You are, after all,

in a hurry for something very important. And you're saying, maybe screaming, not very nice things about her. Why are you so angry?

Why do you seem to attract only toxic relationships? Why are you continually worried about the future? Why can you just not seem to break that habit? The unwanted, unhealthy fruit in your life, the behaviors and beliefs you desperately want to change, is a signpost. An invitation. It invites you to look deeper. To find a place where you're living rooted in something that's not bringing life. That angry overreaction in traffic may point to something deeper. Perhaps a place you're rooted in anger, still angry about something that happened yesterday or last month or when you were five. Unhealthy patterns in relationships, addictive behaviors, coping mechanisms, depression, phobias . . . the fruit you see in your life will lead you to the root. And when you find the root, the real reason you've been so stuck—and it's almost never what you think—you can make the exchange. False for true. Bad soil for good.

Roots and trees and lives and relationships thrive when they are planted in good soil. Jesus shared this timeless principle in a parable:

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.⁶

Seeds need enough of the right soil, good soil, to grow and produce fruit. The worries and troubles and hardships of life work to steal and choke and scorch the life right out of you. But in good soil, good seeds put down roots that sustain life. Jesus says the good soil

refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. Someone who hears and believes and begins to live in the truth that God is here with me, (IN) me, to redeem and restore in love. Where our soul soil is good, the truth about God, us, and others takes root to produce good fruit. Where our soul soil is still tainted by lies about God, us, and others, we remain unable to sustain life. It's what we're rooted in that determines whether we wither or thrive.

THE OTHER TREE

Turns out, it all comes back to a tree again. The tree of life was the other tree in the garden at the very beginning. It's been here. It's been God's intention and invitation all along.

Then the angel showed me the river of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing the twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.⁷

The fruit of this tree is available to us now, today. Fruitfulness coming again and again in our lives, over and over, as we are restored. And not just us. Did you notice? It's a healing in community. A healing of the nations. God making us one again, connected in love.

So how? you ask. How do I find the roots and remove them? How do I cultivate the soil of my soul? How do I exchange the fruit of the one tree for the other? That's what the rest of this book is about. So keep reading. Keep journeying. Love is waiting.

DEEPER (IN)

Each chapter will end with a spiritual practice or two to help you connect with the principles. These experiences will help concepts migrate the long distance from your head to your heart, to help you experience what we're talking about. You might find a journal helpful for writing your responses and reflections. Let's dive (IN).

Breath Prayer

Let's look again at the prayer in Ephesians 3:16–19:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now make this prayer personal by turning it into a breath prayer. A breath prayer is a short, simple prayer of just a few words prayed with an inhale and an exhale. Three or four words on the inhale. Three or four words on the exhale. Slow and steady.

Write your own breath prayer from Ephesians 3. Just six or eight words that reflect your desire for deep connection. As you craft it, practice it to be sure it feels unforced and unhurried. This week, pray your breath prayer throughout each day. If it still isn't feeling right, keep changing it until you land on your unique prayer. Continue to breathe this prayer in and out throughout your journey (IN). This simple prayer will open the way for the transformation ahead.

Journeying with a Few Friends

If you decide to take the journey (IN) with a small group, these three things will be helpful:

1. Read about creating a rooted community (page 223) together. Commit as a group to creating a noise-free, shame-free, formula-free space for one another.
2. Come prepared to share what you learned or experienced through the Deeper (IN) activities. The more honestly and authentically you share, the deeper your group will go together.
3. Use these discussion questions as guides as you process each chapter together:
 - What ideas or concepts did you find most helpful?
 - What questions came to mind as you read?
 - What stories from your own life came to mind as you read?
 - How do the concepts from this chapter apply to your life today?