

On writing memoir

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I met with my writing group as they looked over the pages of *Tribal Church*. I had written about my experience as a teenager traveling to China as a short-term missionary. I looked out of the train window and saw people everywhere—good, kind, smiling people. They were in misted rice paddies, using each inch of land was wisely. They were in the grey city, riding bicycles to factories. I tried to imagine the God whom I loved sending these people to an eternal fiery torment because they didn't ask Jesus into their hearts. I simply couldn't do it. I could not send a billion people to an eternity of weeping and gnashing, and God was much more gracious and loving than I was.

Ruth Everhart, who organized our group (and is coming out with [her memoir this fall](#)), read the story, looked up and said, "You've got a memoir brewing in you. I don't know if you realize that, but it's in these pages and it wants to get out."

Then I had two voices in conflict within me. Ruth is the sort of friend I listen to. She is not only an excellent writer, but she's a wise woman. Actually, this is a moment when capitalization is in order—a Wise Woman. If you have one of those in your life, you know to stop and listen when she talks.

But there was that other voice within me. I was only 33 at the time, and I wasn't smart enough to write a memoir. I talked with a friend in publishing about religious memoirs in general, and he sighed and said, "Pastors think that their lives are really fascinating, but they're just *not*."

A little later I met with a couple of editors at HarperOne, told them that I had gone to Moody Bible Institute and now I was a liberal pastor and they replied, "*That* would be a good book."

If you're a scrapper (like me), then you know that's the cue. I started my memoir. I got up every morning and began to type the sprawling mess of my life, pushing

down my eye-rolling internal voices that scorned, *Who do you think you are?* I spent way too much time with boring details. Then I read Christian Piatt's excellent memoir [Pregnancy](#) and asked him to help me. He mercifully chopped. And chopped. Because no one cares how the lilac soap smell on Friday afternoon resurrected memories of my grandmother's garden. He set the pacing. I asked [Doug Hagler](#) to help, and he looked it over, *while his child was being born.* (I'm sorry Pam.) And then Candasu Vernon Cabbage shaped it.

They helped me get it into good enough shape to get an agent and sell it to HarperOne. Then I asked [Lauren Winner](#) for help, because she is incredibly skilled at working with history and spirituality in her memoirs. Lauren became my editor and immediately said, "I don't know why this is a memoir."

And so, I un-memoired the book. It became [Healing Spiritual Wounds: How to Reconnect with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church](#) and is available for pre-order.

This writing and rewriting took a great deal of time, but I'm incredibly thankful for the process because I went from thinking that no one should write a memoir, to thinking every writer should. Not that every memoir ought to be published, but it was such a rich experience that I hope to repeat in twenty years.

I was able to make sense of my life, weaving the stories that other people tell about me into my own narrative was incredibly empowering.

I was able to fill the holes. There were so many things that didn't quite make sense in my past, but I could ask family members what had happened and why it happened. I had researched so many things in my life, but it was fascinating to dig deeply into my own history.

And there were many, many sacred moments in the exploration. The main one was when I talked with my sister on the phone. I paced with nerves and energy, wearing a bald patch in our lawn, and asked if I could tell her story. We had a pedophile pastor, and she was one of his tiny victims. I had put off asking her for years, because it felt too painful and intrusive, but I found I could not tell my story without telling hers. We were too entwined. She said that I could, under two conditions. I had to make it clear that the pastor was not Jamie Buckingham (he was a former editor of *Charisma* magazine and we went to his church). And I had to tell the story with love and forgiveness.

I was stunned. What grace she embodied. And I would have never known it unless I had written the memoir.