

How I Got Over: An Interview with Katherine Spearing

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So, the first part of my story, I grew up in a completely patriarchal movement. Stay at home daughters.” she says, settling into my other gray office chair.

It’s a bitterly cold day in mid-November, and I’ve invited Katherine Spearing to my studio to see some of my thesis work in its early stages. And, I’ve invited her to tell her story and talk some about spiritual abuse, narcissism in the church, and helping victims coming out of cult and church spaces.

Nice cheerful topics.

It is cold, and I shiver as I stand by the big oak doors

of Weil Hall, where my studio is, waiting to let Katherine in. She comes up from the parking garage, looking cozy and sunny, with a robe-like coat and some generously fuzzy mittens. She’s breathless from coming up all the stairs, and I’m grateful she found me, as it can be quite the maze on campus.

We trek up to my studio on the third floor, making small talk about the building and the program I am in. I offer her a seat, and she sits in my other gray office chair as I sit in mine. She takes off her mittens while gazing at the work that papers the walls of my studio. She chuckles as she reads the words “Purity culture: nasty, manipulative, woman-controlling patriarchy. And creepy dads.”

It's a phrase that nearly sums up the art I am currently making even as it sums up some of Katherine's own story, which I ask her about as we settle in. I knew from reading her blog that she grew up in a cult, and so I'm suddenly curious when she mentions the stay-at-home daughter movement. It's something I know a little about and have some personal experience with, but I'd never thought about it as a cult before. I ask her about it, and she sighs, "Basically, it's a movement that allows fathers to turn their own families into cults. That's exactly what it was."

I nod as she continues, "It's only been in the past few years that I've been able to name what I experienced as not just spiritual abuse but a cult. What I grew up in, I was just kind of programmed to 'you're going to be a mom, you're gonna have kids' and like, that's going to be your life. And then our entire world was centered around our father and just like doing whatever he wanted and making our father's vision come true. And then you get married and you make your husband's vision come true."

I wonder about how this confident, honest, independent woman got from being a daughter in her father's control to where she is now. Listening to others stories, and even from my own experience, I know how hard it can be to see another way of doing things, to see a way out when you are deeply enmeshed. Katherine goes on, saying "That was what we were raised to be or to do. And so there is a lot of stuff leading to unpacking and realizing something's not right. Something's not okay. I don't want to do this. I don't want my parent's marriage. I don't want to have as many kids, you know? I want to have a career. I want to be a writer. I want to, you know, do all these things that I'm told I'm not allowed to do."

Beth Allison Barr talks about patriarchy in her book, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, noting how patriarchy is all about the control of women, subordinating them to male power and authority. But patriarchy is a slippery thing; it looks different in different times and places, and it often masquerades under a variety of assumed names. It can look like a father demanding total obedience from his wife and children as a God-given right. It can also look like a church space that accepts women's labor without allowing women's voices to be heard, especially in leadership. It can even fly lower, hiding in spaces that practice progressive and egalitarian values, but never address structural patriarchy in any meaningful way. It's an aggressive misuse of power that nearly always hurts those who practice it and especially those they practice it on.

What's insidious is when things like patriarchy and the

harm it causes get tied to the Divine. "God said" might be two of the most dangerous and damaging words in the English language. By tying patriarchal authority to God, it looks like God sanctions abuse of power and the subsequent fallout. But, sometimes, hope steps in. Certainly, in Katherine's story, what "God said" gave her the glimpse of light she needed to get out.

She tells me about how her family expected her to study and read her Bible, and in so doing, she began to realize that her father wasn't "teaching the whole Bible and he was just picking things that fit his mission and vision, and kind of discrediting a lot of other things in the Bible. There was a lot of behavior control, mind control,

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information control, fact control, emotional control that went into this, and in how they kept us from reading certain books or watching certain movies. And then, I'm just like, reading the Bible, which is very violent, and there's multiple wives, and guys farming out their wives for sexual favors. I'm like, there's a lot of stuff in the Bible."

I chuckle here, thinking of all the times I've joked with friends that if someone were to turn the Old Testament into a tv show it would rival Game of Thrones for spicy content! And though we joke about it as she's talking, this theme of dissonance comes up again and again as Katherine navigates Christian spaces.

Sitting in my studio, the conversation rolls away to other things, but later on I'm curious about how she got out. Leaving a stay-at-home daughter situation is notoriously difficult, and so I follow up with her later and she tells me more.

"I was 25 and I got kicked out of my parent's house for a bit. I remember going back and realizing, like, the next time that I left I needed to be able to leave for good and that the reason why I couldn't leave was because I didn't have a job. I didn't have a resume, I didn't have money. I didn't have a college degree. I ended up borrowing money to buy a car, got a job as a nanny, and the woman that I was working for as a nanny was a night nurse. I would put her kids down, and then I did college online and would

have like from 7:30 to 11 every night to be able to study while I was also working. That was an amazing, miraculous thing.

“My parents will say that they did not disapprove of us going to college, which is a lie. They very much discouraged and shamed me anytime that I brought it up and put me in a situation where I had to do it in secret because, if I didn’t, they’d sabotage my plans for leaving home. Then, my friend who was also a stay at home daughter, her parents were going to be gone for two months, and she asked me if I would stay with her for those two months while her parents were gone. It was night, and I loaded my car, and then I just like moved into her house and it was just like a two month thing.

“I just remember being like, I’m not going back. I do not care if I have to live in my car. I’m not going back to live with my parents. And so it was like an easy, ‘oh this is temporary’. But it was not temporary for me. I just knew not to make a big deal about literally anything, and just do it and do it under the radar. Just escape and just get out. I did, and I never went back. It was really hard. There was one time for about nine months I lived in a garage with roaches in it. But, I never did, I never went back to live with them.”

I think about the courage and strength it takes to leave everything you’ve ever known. I think about how wrong it is that one should have to leave their home because it’s a place of toxicity and abuse of power such that one can’t be human and flourish. And I think about how happy endings only exist in fairy tales.

This is not a fairy tale.

After leaving home at 26, Katherine went on the mission field and helped plant a church in Mexico. She then went to seminary, and later worked in a variety of churches doing youth ministry for almost a decade. She ended up at a church in L.A., which is where we picked up the next part of her story.

“It became another chronic situation of spiritual abuse, and probably more commonly what you’re gonna find in spiritual abuse situations in our community,” she says.

I nod. We are entering territory I am more familiar with, sadly.

She goes on, “Mine was like, childhood and young adulthood, that was cults. And then what I experienced in this church was cool, cool, like, control. But it wasn’t like at

that cult level and is probably going to be the more common experience for folks who have experienced abuse in an Evangelical community. But, as I’m going through what I’m going through at that church, at this point, I had been on the mission field and I’ve lived in a bunch of different cities and I’ve been to seminaries. I’m hearing other stories that are very similar to what I have been through, you know, Mark Driscoll’s story comes up, Ravi Zaccharias story comes up, Carl Lentz story comes up and it’s like, this is not just an isolated thing that I’m experiencing. The same thing is happening everywhere, and either people are seeing it or they’re not seeing it, but it’s literally happening everywhere. And because of the work that I’d already done, in recovery from the cult experience, I already had some language for it and understanding of the impact of spiritual abuse. I knew what it was to be in a situation of chronic spiritual abuse, and so I was more aware of what was going on, like while it was happening.

“A couple of people told me, like when I made the decision to resign and leave, they were just like, ‘Katherine, you figured it out a lot faster than most people did.’ And I really believe it was because I’d already done it.



“That experience allowed me to look back on my other experiences and other church experiences, and I realized it was literally in every space, though maybe it wasn’t as obvious, not as chronic. There wasn’t always, necessarily, a narcissistic pastor and a culture of narcissism. But there was definitely that element of control, and like, we are the best and we have the answers. And if people are not, you know, doing church the right way, then they’re not the best Christians, you know?”

I nod. I do know. In fact, it’s part of the reason I asked Katherine to come and speak with me. Spiritual abuse is quickly becoming a hot topic, with hundreds of podcasts,

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books, seminars, videos, and social media posts trying to dissect the issues and get some form of healing or justice. But what is spiritual abuse? I’ve read several definitions, and I’m curious to know how Katherine defines it.

She says, “The definition that we use with Tears of Eden (her non-for-profit) is ‘a deliberate use of God and/or the Bible to cause shame and harm leading to a breakdown in relationship between God, Self, and Others.’ We have the results and the impact of spiritual abuse included in the definition, because a lot of times people can be spiritually abusive, and, like, shame people with the Bible, and they’re doing it because that’s what they were raised to do. They were just told this is godly behavior, and this is what you’re supposed to do. And then there are people who are deliberately manipulating the Bible. They’re deliberately making the system work for them and deliberately silencing victims, creating victims and then silencing them.

“I feel like to some extent, like you know, any of us can shame someone and do it in the name of God, but we’re not necessarily abusers, we’re not necessarily abusive people. But then I believe that there are abusive people in the church, who are deliberately using it for their own gratification, which is pretty much the definition of abuse; taking someone’s agency away for your own gratification. And so in the context of a spiritual abuse situation, it is taking away someone’s agency and their ability to think for themselves and interact with God and have a relationship with God on their own. You’re taking away their agency, but it’s for your own gratification, for your own power’s sake, which is a lot of what abusers do. It’s like, ‘I want you to not embrace your autonomy because if you do, then you’re gonna know what I’m doing, and if you do, you’re not gonna worship me, you’re not gonna pay my salary.’”

“Has this definition changed for you over time?” I ask.

“Not really,” she replies, thinking for a moment. “I think that my understanding of the impact of it and how far reaching it is has changed, and how, in terms of the damage that it causes being as bad, if not worse, than sexual abuse in terms of just stripping away someone’s identity. And, then, taking away access oftentimes, because a lot of people use spirituality as a part of the healing, and spiritual abuse takes away this access to spirituality, which is often a way people heal. And so taking away identity, and then removing a healing tool, makes something that could be really good and beautiful suddenly painful.

“Even stuff like, you know, like community; you’re taught to shed your identity to keep unity, so that now even just friendship feels dangerous. It’s like, is this really my thought or is it their thought? Relationships are difficult because of that. Community is difficult. Music is difficult, you know? Certain things that were once safe have now become unsafe and damaged. And so, I would say that the definition of spiritual abuse has remained the same, but my understanding of the impact of it has expanded.”

There’s a question that haunts me daily. It’s a question that the more I answer it, the less I feel like I have an answer. It drives my own research. Why? Why are people who suffer from spiritual abuse so wounded? It makes no sense that going to church, or even working in ministry, could be as damaging or even more damaging than sexual abuse.

Katherine provides another layer of insight, telling me about her podcast and a guest she recently interviewed: “she is a therapist who works with survivors and she was just talking about how the parts of the brain that are used for spirituality and sexuality, or like sexual intimacy, they’re very, very, very similar. Think about the sensory stuff that is used in like an intimate spiritual encounter and then like a sexual encounter.”

I think about it as she is talking, and I can see it. I’ve been to many church services where the lights are low, there is music playing, and someone passionately speaks, appealing to my emotions as well as to my spirit. I can think of times where the hair on my arms stood on end, and I felt moved to jump up, to sing, maybe even to dance in place. More than that, I think of times alone, reading my Bible or praying. There is a feeling of closeness, of one-ness with something beyond me that I cannot explain or put fully into words.

The more I think about it, spiritual encounter and sexual encounter do seem pretty similar.

Which makes Katherine's next comment even more potent; "Think of like, prayer. I've had a really hard time with prayer itself. I remember a pastor, when I was leaving California, moving away, and he was like, 'Let's get together'. He was a pastor who also used to work at the abusive church that I was leaving, and he was now working in another church. So we got together, and as we're ending the conversation, he was like, 'Can I pray for you?'"



"And that was the first time since leaving and since COVID stuff that someone had asked. It just caught me off guard, because normally I would have been like, sure. But my first reaction was like, no...and like I totally hesitated. And then he prayed for me anyway. When the prayer was over, I had that feeling of like, I've been violated."

"Prayer is very intimate. And if someone has been injured in a spiritual context, it's painful, right? Like, to force prayer upon someone, which was not his intention, but it is what he did; he forced prayer upon me. It was violating; it was like an intimacy-boundary violation. And similar to just like sex and consent, I'm like, you need to have consent before you present."

The need to ask permission, to acknowledge a boundary, to listen and respect a no, just doesn't seem to be an ethic of the Evangelical church in America. Some of that no doubt comes from the core tenet of evangelism that is central to most types of Evangelical theology. When one is concerned about souls going to hell, it seems like the greatest care one could show is to pursue them relentlessly with the Gospel.

But for people coming out of abusive, especially spiritually abusive situations, this often feels like another attack. It can trigger feelings of violation, fear, panic, etc.

Katherine's story is a perfect example of how something like prayer, which should help a survivor heal, can so easily be used (even if unwittingly) to cause further harm and betrayal.

Given the pervasive nature of spiritual abuse in Christian settings, I ask Katherine about what red flags to be on the lookout for, and the conversation quickly turns to narcissism in the church.

Chuck DeGroat, in his book *When Narcissism Comes To Church*, notes how: "For centuries, ecclesial systems have been structured hierarchically privileging particular people over others. Male leaders, the educated, people with resources, or the well-connected traditionally have greater access to power than others. Structures are not necessarily to blame for narcissism, but particular structures do create an environment where it can grow unchallenged."

He goes on a little later in that same chapter to say, "Narcissistic systems thrive in structures that prop up

those with authority and persona, while subordinating others according to gender, social status, theological understanding, perceived giftedness (or lack thereof), ability, and more. What's more, these systems perpetuate shame among those who are not as holy, connected, charismatic, intelligent, or powerful."

I know from reading through Katherine's social media posts that a large part of her story is grappling with spiritual abuse that results from working with a narcissist in ministry. So, I ask her about that and if there are any specific red-flags that people should look out for when it comes to narcissism or to spiritual abuse?

She nods her head vigorously, and chuckles, "I'm actually writing a book right now, currently titled, *How to Spot a Narcissist and Other Things I Learned Working at an Abusive Church*. I would say I would start just from the standpoint of like the victim, like knowing something is wrong. And just like that feeling, and I would say that I have had this experience in every encounter with an abuser/narcissist that I've ever experienced, of walking away from conversations with them with this feeling of confusion, disorientation, like, what just happened? Someone with a narcissistic personality, they live in a world that is genuinely centered around them, and they believe that that is the way the world should exist. So if something

inserts itself into that world or starts to appear in that world, that does not revolve around them, then their narrative is, 'I am the victim because someone is not operating according to the rules, their rules, which is the rules of the narcissist's world.

"Little things that I picked up on, or like watching patterns of things, like how a lot of times they're really bad at communication and time management. Just like not showing up on time or coming through on things. Or not communicating, and then being upset at you that you didn't know that that's what he wanted, but then he makes it your fault, because everything revolves around him. So like, they can show up 30 minutes late and not apologize and not even acknowledge it because you should have known that. Or, delay in response. I'm like, I've heard stories of people who had situations with pastors where they just delayed on purpose. And it was just a power move of like, 'I can respond whenever I want', because everything revolves around them. 'Then when you try to stand up for yourself, or even just do something small, like not even an attempt to stand up for yourself, but it's something that doesn't actually contribute to their world, that's called a narcissistic injury. They perceive that they have been injured by you. They can retaliate and mistreat you, but in their mind, they believe you



deserve it because you have injured them, even if you didn't do anything. And I had experienced this with my boss at the church in California. I realized that something was wrong; like we're having all of these like mediation meetings to resolve a conflict and people were like, 'The Lord wants people to live in harmony' and like, 'you two are both amazing, God fearing people, there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to work together'. I remember one time my boss was like, 'Katherine thinks that she can do my job better than I do. Katherine's been trying to steal

my job'. I was like, until this moment, that thought never crossed my mind, but the reality was I was better at youth ministry. I was naturally better, and so my presence highlighted his ineptitude. So then it became my fault, and I was after his job. A healthy leader would say, 'Oh, I like that. You have these gifts that I don't have, this is good for the ministry', but instead it was like a personal attack and a threat against him.

"The misconception is that a narcissist will target people who are really weak, but that's often not actually true. They will actually target competent people because those are the people that A, by association, make them look good, and, B, if they can control that person then it's an achievement for them. They also tend to go for people who are very empathetic, as an empathetic person is going to be more likely to be introspective and gaslight themselves, which is totally what I did.

"I started to realize too that I was giving him benefit of the doubt, but I wasn't getting that in return. I was always like, 'Oh, maybe he just had a bad day or he's under a lot of stress in seminary or he's, you know', like all of these things. And then I just realized he was not doing that for me. He always had the worst possible motivation for everything that I did. It was never, "oh, Katherine's just adjusting to ministry or

trying to figure things out,' you know? It was always that I was insubordinate, or that I was, you know, after his job."

This idea of insubordination brought up the topic of leadership, hierarchy and headship, which we didn't get too deeply into, but Katherine did bring up the example of her father again. She could see similarities between the pastor she worked for and her father, and it came down to this way of seeing the world where everything has to be the way you think it is, and it's not possible for someone to disagree.

“I remember like my dad emphasizing so much, like, you need to know the Word of God, you need to know scripture. But, one time, I asked him, which was already about the time that I was starting to, like, uncover these things that were like this is not adding up. I asked him what you’re saying the Bible says and what I’m reading in the Bible is just not adding up. And I asked him, I was like, so what happens if you read the Bible and I read the Bible and we come to a different position? And I remember his face, it was like, he could not fathom that that would ever happen. This is the way that he read the Bible. And if you’re reading the Bible and you’re studying the Bible, then you are going to arrive at the same conclusions. And if you don’t, then you’re doing it wrong.”

Katherine talked about how leadership at the church she worked for apologized once for failures in leading the church. At the time, she thought that to be mature and thoughtful, but as things went on, she began to see it as less than genuine, especially given the same message was given three times in two years, and no significant changes were made. “I had to see it three times before I was like, wait a minute. This is not real. Like, I don’t believe you know, because this is the third time that this has happened. And that’s why all these 25 other people have already left because they’re like, ‘we’re done, we’re not doing this anymore’. So some of it is just patterns. And you don’t see it right away. Like, that’s the way it’s designed. It’s designed to hoodwink you and to lie to you; it is designed to paint a false image. And so you’re going to see things at first, and you’re gonna be super excited and you’re gonna think it’s great. And then, once the veil is removed, it’s gonna be disappointing. There’s gonna be grief and there’s gonna be anger and there’s gonna be a lot of emotion that goes into that. And it’s not your fault.”

Narcissistic leadership is not unique to the church; it’s seen in politics, in education, in business, in pop culture, even in families. But the dissonance of finding a narcissist leading in a church can be staggering. Katherine’s story shows not just the red flags, but also the painful journey one has to take in order to get some sense of freedom and personhood back.

When she left this church, several other staff members left at the same time too. Katherine told me how much easier it was to process this time, as compared to leaving home as a 20-something, because there were others who understood deeply what was going on. She had a community to process with, to share resources with. And that helped birth the non-for-profit she now runs called Tears of Eden.

I asked her what some of the challenges and some of the joys are, and she said, “I would say the hardest part is, like, politics. People having very strong opinions about the way things should be done and then being very disappointed in you if you don’t agree with them. There’s also a side of working with traumatized people that can be tough, because they can behave in ways that are not healthy and can still hurt people. And having to put up boundaries with people when you know that they have been abused, you

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know they’ve been hurt, you know, but they are still hurting other people in their expression of that trauma; having to put up those boundaries and knowing that they’re gonna see that as rejection, that’s probably the most heart wrenching. Just like, this is not what I’m doing to you, but I know that’s how you’re perceiving, and I have no control over that aspect of it.

“But then, it is just really cool to interact with people and see the healing that comes in watching other people interact with each other and be like, ‘Oh, you have the same story. Oh, we want to do the same thing. Oh, we’re not alone.’ And just like we have support groups, and like being in this community of people and we’re laughing about stupid things or like, you know, making fun of a pastor. We have this camaraderie of like, this shared thing, even if we weren’t in the same church. I experience, like, my own healing, but then also witness that kind of healing happening between other people. Yeah, this is why we’re doing this stuff.

“I would say that with spiritual abuse currently, because it’s just such an under-researched thing, like, therapy is not enough. Yes, go to therapy. Yes. Yeah. I’m a huge fan of therapy! I love my therapist! But, she doesn’t come from that world. Yes, she understands trauma, but she doesn’t understand religious trauma to the extent and at the level that I’m like researching. I do feel sometimes that like, I know more about religious trauma and spiritual abuse than she does and that’s probably true. Just because of my own research and experience and training and, and how that shows up in a survivor. And so just knowing that, like, Tears of Eden is filling a niche that a mental profession may be able to, not as a substitute for therapy, but as like, a supplement to therapy to aid healing.

We talk a little more about therapy and healing, and Katherine makes an interesting point, saying, “It’s really hard to be in a traumatized state needing care and looking for a therapist. Like it’s just a really, really sucky season. I would strongly discourage finding a Christian counselor, especially for someone coming out of religious trauma or spiritual abuse. They are not helpful. I have way too many stories of that being harmful for people. I’m a trauma recovery coach and with my current clients, I spend a lot of time undoing harmful things that their Christian counselors said to them. I’m not saying that you can’t be with a therapist who identifies as a Christian. But, if their title is Christian counselor, don’t do it. I would ask them when you’re interviewing them (cause usually there’s like a 30 minute consultation call or whatever), ask them things like what kind of training they’ve had, what modalities they use, like EMDR or somatic experiencing. Ask them what books they’re reading. Ask them what their specialties are like where they focus the most. There are more therapists who are becoming more aware of religious trauma, but I would also look maybe for organizations like Tears of Eden, or Reclamation Collective or whatever, who already have databases focused on representing people and who are working with people who have religious trauma and spiritual abuse.

“And one final thing about this is there are folks who understand trauma. But then there’s another layer of folks who actually understand abuse. More and more people are

understanding of trauma, but less and less people understand abuse and I think it’s really helpful if you’re healing from religious trauma, to also have people who understand abuse. And honestly, at this point, I don’t even think you should train the church in trauma because they’re just going to use it against people. Like, I don’t trust church in general enough to put that knowledge in their hands, especially if it’s a culture that supports narcissism. I’m not somebody who’s like ‘churches just need to be trauma informed’. A lot of other stuff has gotta be handled first. There’s some systemic stuff.”

We wrap up our conversation, and Katherine wraps back up in her coat to brave the icy weather on the way to her next appointment. We say goodbye much as we said hello, with me shivering by the big oak doors of Weil, and her waving a fuzzy mitten in farewell. I walk back up to my studio, contemplative, processing everything we discussed. I’m at once filled with hope and with despair. Hearing story after story of abuse and neglect in church spaces makes the problem feel insurmountable. But, hearing Katherine’s story, seeing how she persevered and made a way, not just for herself, but for others to find healing, I see a glimmer of hope. It just might be possible to remake the church, so it is not a place of violence but of peace.

I get out my camera, and I get back to work.

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