

The Books that Helped Me

Ryan Nielsen

Part 1: Untying the False-Self

So much of what I learned came from books; just like in my dream. I read, and read, and read. Here are a few of the most important ones to me.

The following books showed me what went wrong. They taught me to identify and challenge the systems, thoughts, and beliefs that fed my illness. They gave me the tools to deconstruct the false-self, and the courage to start believing my true-self.

Healing the Shame That Binds You by Jon Bradshaw
The Drama of the Gifted Child by Alice Miller
The Truth Shall Set You Free by Alice Miller
Resilience by Boris Cyrulnik
An Adult Child's Guide to What's Normal by John Friel
Bounded Choice: True Believers in Charismatic Cults by Janja Lalich
Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism by Robert Lifton
Combatting Cult Mind Control by Steve Hassan
Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships by Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias
The Origin of Satan by Elaine Pagels
Darwin's Dangerous Idea by Daniel Dennett
The Moral Landscape by Sam Harris
God Is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens
Healing the Child Within by Charles Whitfield
Co-Dependent No More by Melody Beattie
The Language of Letting Go by Melody Beattie
Combatting Cult Mind Control by Steve Hassan
The Gifts of Imperfection by Brené Brown
Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love by Riane Eisler
Between the World and Me by Te Nehisi Coates
The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander
Americanah by Chimamanda Adichie
Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson
[*God on Trial*](#) by Frank Cottrell Boyce

Brief Summaries

Healing the Shame That Binds You by Jon Bradshaw
Perfectionism (trying to be more than human) and self-destructive behavior (trying to be less than human) are both sides of the same coin: toxic shame. Toxic shame fuels addictive behavior. The first rule of a dysfunctional family system is to NOT talk about the center of the system, whomever

that may be. (consider Dallin Oaks: “It is wrong to criticize a leader of the church, even if the criticism is accurate.”)

The Drama of the Gifted Child by Alice Miller

Believe the emotional truth of your memories, love the child within, and embrace uncertainty.

“We despise weakness, helplessness, uncertainty—in short, the child in ourselves and in others.”

Miller explains the harm of the grandiosity I learned: “The contempt for others in grandiose, successful people always includes disrespect for their own true selves. . . . Their scorn implies:

‘Without these superior qualities of mine, a person is completely worthless.’ This means further:

‘Without these achievements, these gifts, I could never be loved, would never have been loved.’”

She also explains well-being: “The true opposite of depression is neither gaiety nor absence of pain, but vitality.”

The Truth Shall Set You Free by Alice Miller

We are willing to do so much to hide our true selves. “Who is he really? No one knows—he himself probably least of all. To find that out, he would have had to stare into his own inner void, and it

was precisely to avoid such an insight that he employed such amazing ingenuity for so many years.”

Miller writes with confidence in our loving nature: “The split off, denied, and repressed parts of their personalities can be reintegrated. Once that happens, there will be no more need to preach love and responsibility to them because they will see the necessity for themselves.”

Resilience by Boris Cyrulnik

To tap into our innate resilience, we need people who hear us and believe us, who allow us our feelings, and we need to create. “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story.” (Thank you, John, for letting us tell ours.) Cyrulnik points to how connected we are, with stories of people on the brink of giving up whose lives are forever changed by an unaware invitation to participate in creating. “A person should never be reduced to his or her trauma.”

An Adult Child’s Guide to What’s Normal by John Friel

Friel offers empathy for why we get stuck in unhealthy patterns. “Something happened to us a long time ago. It happened more than once. It hurt us. We protected ourselves the only way we knew how. We are still protecting ourselves. It isn’t working anymore.” And he gave me concrete examples of how to change those patterns.

Bounded Choice: True Believers in Charismatic Cults by Janja Lalich

Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism by Robert Lifton

Combatting Cult Mind Control by Steve Hassan

What happened to me was neither unique nor innovative . . . organizations across the globe use similar systems of control. My experience within Mormonism was honed for feeding toxic shame, and for cutting myself off from my true self. It appears we are wired to create communities like this. These books also offer tools for recovery. Steven Hassan’s model of undue influence within a cult focuses on psychology; Janja Lalich’s focuses more on social systems and ideology.

According to Dr. Lalich, a charismatic cult is a hierarchical organization that places true believers in a state of “bounded choice” where obedience to leaders is the only path to freedom. In groups like these, the only legitimate “choice” is to follow the leaders, under penalty of loss of spiritual and/or temporal life, salvation, or enlightenment. Hence, bounded choice. Without going into the details of this model, to my shock and bitter grief, my experience in Mormonism batted 1000% when examining it through the lens of the *Bounded Choice* model.

Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships by Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias

A practical guide to recovery. Their discussion of “Dealing with the Aftereffects” was especially helpful to me. They discuss black-and-white thinking, “floating” (the disconnected smiling non-confrontational receptive state of mind), and triggers, giving practical tools for dealing with each as they come.

Also includes a useful summary of dangerous leaders as “master manipulators.” “Cult leaders have an outstanding ability to charm and win over followers. They beguile and seduce. They enter a room and garner all the attention. They command unwavering allegiance and strict obedience. . . . Paranoia may be evident in simple or elaborate delusions of persecution. Highly suspicious, they may feel conspired against, spied on, cheated, or maligned. . . . Any real . . . unfavorable reaction may be interpreted as a deliberate attack on them or the group Beneath the surface gloss of intelligence, charm, and professed humility seethes an inner world of rage, depression, and fear.”

The Origin of Satan by Elaine Pagels

Because I spent so much of my psychological and spiritual life feeding fears about Satan, this book was incredibly powerful. It demonstrates the historical evolution of the concept of Satan in a way that removed its power in my mind. “While angels often appear in the Hebrew Bible, Satan, along with other fallen angels or demonic beings, is virtually absent. . . .”

Darwin’s Dangerous Idea by Daniel Dennett

The Moral Landscape by Sam Harris

God Is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens

No-holds-barred tools for critiquing religious literalism. Those tools shored up my boundaries; gave me the strength to try standing on my own two feet. At first, their certainty was intoxicating. Eventually, I realized that their dogma resembled the dogma of my upbringing. Like the literal Mormonism I was taught, this atheism divided humans into two groups; only instead of “saved vs. damned” it was “enlightened vs. unenlightened;” those dumb enough to be religious, and those smart enough to see through the “sham.” And, like the Mormonism I inherited, certainty was their rallying cry. Still, studying those books smashed down barriers in my mind and gave me new ways to critically engage literalism. (For a beautiful rebuttal of that dogmatic approach to atheism, I highly recommend [this conversation](#) with Marcelo Gleiser and Marilynne Robinson.)

Healing the Child Within by Charles Whitfield

An impassioned advocate for trusting the child in us all, and dis-covering our relationship to it. Builds on Alice Miller’s work. More tools to healing from shame; more empathy for the time we

spent stuck in it. “While we are in a dysfunctional, shame-based relationship, we may feel like we are losing our mind, going crazy. When we try to test reality, we are unable to trust our senses, our feelings and our reactions.”

Co-Dependent No More by Melody Beattie

The Language of Letting Go by Melody Beattie

Though at times a tad too “pop-psychology” for my preferences, these books were still really helpful. They offer tools to recognize enmeshed thought patterns as they emerge, and offer healthier alternatives as well. Beattie is a wonderful advocate for letting go of feeling responsible for everyone else’s well-being and emotional state of mind. “I used to spend so much time reacting and responding to everyone else that my life had no direction. Other people's lives, problems, and wants set the course for my life. Once I realized it was okay for me to think about and identify what I wanted, remarkable things began to take place in my life.”

The Gifts of Imperfection by Brene Brown

Everything we value about ourselves and about others grows in the soil of imperfection. This was a powerful balance to the perfectionism I inherited. “Wholehearted living is about engaging with our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion and connection to wake up in the morning and think, ‘No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.’”

Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love by Riane Eisler
Powerfully dismantles patriarchy. Helped me challenge so much of the sexism I inherited, with a focus on human sexual relationships as a metaphor for social models. Eisler simplifies the question of harmful power by exploring two types of relationships between men and women: hierarchical models versus partnership models. A monumental work, she traces the historical evolution of harmful patriarchal practices from pre-history to the present. Truly stunning.

Between the World and Me by Te Nehisi Coates

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

Americanah by Chimamanda Adichie

Helped me deconstruct the racism I inherited. I return to them regularly. *Between the World and Me* is a letter written from a father to his son about how to navigate living in the United States as a black man in a world of “dreamers” who “believe they are white.” A painfully honest discussion of things I never had to consider. *The New Jim Crow* lays out the historical and legal evolution of racism in the United States, from its intentional creation by property owners in order to keep the “lower” economic classes divided, to chattel slavery, to Jim Crow, through the Civil Rights Movement, to the Southern Strategy, the New Jim Crow, and Mass Incarceration. Totally heartbreaking, and tremendously urgent and timely. *Americanah* is a novel whose main character is a Nigerian immigrant, and explores—brilliantly—how race operates in the United States. I was never be able to see our society the same way again.

Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson

A compelling look at the implications of cognitive dissonance theory, and the mechanisms in all of us that makes it so easy to justify the hurtful things we do. The chapter on marriage was especially useful to me. “Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification.”

[*God on Trial*](#) by Frank Cottrell Boyce

A play set in Auschwitz, in which the prisoners place God on trial, prosecuting him for breaking his covenant with the Jewish people. Poignantly explores the confusion of a faith crisis.

Church History

After my experience with my true-self, I knew what my heart was telling me; but, being Mormon, I needed my mind to confirm it. (D&C 8, right?) I needed a ton of evidence to support the Bursts I’d experienced. This was just too big.

The following books/documentaries were critical to supporting my intuitive bursts about the church, and to creating a more complete version of church history than the one I learned growing up.

Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith by Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery

In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith by Todd Compton

Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet by John G. Turner

Rough Stone Rolling by Richard Bushman

Neither White Nor Black ed. by Lester Bush and Armand Mauss

[*The Mormons*](#) a documentary by Helen Whitney

Mormon America by Richard and Joan Ostling

The American Religion by Harold Bloom

The Mormon Murders by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith

Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith by Jon Krakauer (The most concerning part of this book was not the narrative itself, but the church’s apologetic response to it, which Krakauer responds to in a later edition.)

Important Podcasts

Several podcasts/interviews were tremendously important to me as well:

Mormon Stories by John Dehlin

- Tova Mirvis (Ep. 865-866)
- Carol Lynn Pearson “The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy” (Ep. 860-861)
- Tova Mirvis “Losing Faith and Mixed Faith Marriage as an Orthodox Jew” (Ep. 818-820)
- Gina Colvin “Kiwi Mormon and Fearless/Faithful Mormon Heretic” (Ep. 542-543)
- Infants on Thrones Podcast (Ep. 514-515)
- David Michael “A Non-Member Reads the Book of Mormon” (Ep. 513)
- Lindsay Hansen Park “On Bulimia, Body Image, and Faith” (Ep. 460-462)

- The LDS Indian Placement Program (Ep. 456-457)
- Greg Prince “Faith and Doubt as Partners in Mormon History” (Ep. 439)
- Hans Mattson “Former LDS Area Authority Seventy” (Ep. 430-434)
- Top Ten Mormon Mental Health Issues (Ep. 389-391)
- Fiona and Terryl Givens “The God Who Weeps” (Ep. 385-386)
- Carol Lynn Pearson “The Hero’s Journey of the Gay and Lesbian Mormon” (Ep. 388)
- Joanna Brooks “The Book of Mormon Girl” (Ep. 366-367)
- John Delin “Scrupolosity, OCD and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” (Ep. 323)
- John and Brooke McLay “From CES to Ex-Mormons” (Ep. 313-316)
- Jana Riess “Flunking Sainthood” (Ep. 305-306)
- Dr. Jennifer Finlayson-Fife “LDS Women and Sexual Desire” (Ep. 300-301)
- Terryl Givens “An Approach to Thoughtful, Honest and Faithful Mormonism” (Ep. 289-293)
- Dr. Michael Coe “An Outsider’s View of Book of Mormon Archaeology” (Ep. 268-270)
- Jared Anderson “An Academic Introduction to the New Testament” (Ep. 239-243)
- Mr. Deity’s Brian Dalton (Ep. 205-206)
- Richard Dutcher “A Filmmaker’s Journey” (Ep. 195-199)
- Bill Bradshaw “A BYU Professor on a Biological Origin of Homosexuality” (Ep. 191)
- Carol Lynn Pearson “Mormon Author, Poet, Playwright, Feminist, and Philosopher” (Ep. 173-177)
- Natasha Helfer Parker “LDS Sexuality, Depression, Faith, and Marriage” (Ep. 168-169)
- Bengt Washburn “Mormon Comedian” (Ep. 135-136)
- Lisa Butterworth “Feminist Mormon Housewives Founder” (Ep. 129-131)
- Peter and Mary Danzig “Faith Transition Story of a Musical Couple” (Ep. 119-122)
- Joanna Brooks (Ep. 112-113)
- Linda King Newell “A Gift Given, A Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick Among Mormon Women” (Ep. 67)
- Margaret Merrill Toscano (Ep. 62-65)
- Richard Bushman “Experiences of a Mormon Historian” (Ep. 47-51)
- Grant Palmer “An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins” (Ep. 30-33)
- Darron Smith “Black and Mormon” (Ep. 22-24)
- Todd Compton “An Introduction to Mormon Polygamy” (Ep. 12-14)

A Thoughtful Faith by Gina Colvin

- Gina Colvin “For New Beginnings” (Ep. 300)
- Lesley Butterfield “Women’s Abuse, Oppression, Trauma in the Patriarchy” (Ep. 297)
- Gina Colvin “Section 132 Read in Plain English” (Ep. 289)
- Tim Kosnoff “Taking Mormons to Court: Defending Sexual Abuse Victims Against the LDS Church” (Ep. 258) “Boy Scouts, the LDS Church, and Sexual Predators” (Ep. 288)
- Sara Hughes-Zabawa “Revisiting Fowler’s Stages from 0-6: Stages 0-1” (Ep. 231) “Revisiting Fowler’s Stages from 0-6: Stage 2: Myths and Symbols” (Ep. 241) “Revisiting Fowler’s Stages of Faith: Stage Three—A Synthetic-Conventional Faith” (Ep. 253) “Fowler’s Stages of

Faith: Developing a Healthy Individuative-Reflective Faith” (Ep. 266a); “Fowler’s Stage 5: A Complex Spirituality” (Ep. 274); “Fowler’s Stage 6: A Universalizing Faith” (Ep. 285)

- Joanna Brooks and Kalani Tonga “We Hold Your Name” (Ep. 283)
- Craig Vernon “To Win at All Costs: The Church and Its Heartless Legal Machine” (Ep. 278)
- Newell Bringhurst “Uncovering a Doctrine of Black Priesthood Denial” (Ep. 244)
- Thomas McConkie “Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis” (Ep. 124) “A Compassionate Response” (Ep. 151) “Mormons and Meditation” (Ep. 228)
- John Bonner “Dancing Like No One’s Watching” (Ep. 194)
- Bryndis Roberts “Awakening the Mother God” (Ep. 158)
- Joanna Brooks “Mormon Feminist Writings and Other Stuff” (Ep. 128)
- Jana Riess “Roots of a Vibrant Faith Life” (Ep. 117)
- Kate Kelly “A Conversation with Kate Kelly: Feminist and Optimist” (Ep. 63)

As I said, these resources showed me what went wrong. They taught me to identify and challenge the systems, thoughts, and beliefs that fed my illness. They gave me the tools to deconstruct the false-self. However, try as I might, they could not give me the language to explore, let alone experience, what was inside me, though they did clear the way.

Part 2: Dis-Covering and Building a Relationship with the True-Self

Irish poet John O’Donohue talks about how psychology is so powerful for untying illness, but that we need poets and mystics for language that speaks to the mystic of who we are. These books/podcasts helped me with that.

Anam Cara by John O’Donohue

Beauty by John O’Donohue

On *Being* podcast with Krista Tippets

- [John O’Donohue, *The Inner Landscape of Beauty*](#)
- [Marilynne Robinson and Marcelo Gleiser, *The Mystery We Are*](#)
- [Gregory Orr, *Shaping Grief with Language*](#)
- [Michael Longley, *The Vitality of Ordinary Things*](#)
- [Mary Oliver, *Listening to the World*](#)
- [Yo-Yo Ma, *Music Happens Between the Notes*](#)
- [Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn, *Truth, Beauty, Banjo*](#)
- [Bobby McFerrin, *Catching Song*](#)

Blue Horses by Mary Oliver

Why I Wake Early by Mary Oliver

The Essential Rumi translated by Coleman Barks

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman

Divinity School Address by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Living Buddha, Living Christ by Thich Nhat Hanh

Is Nothing Something?: Kids' Questions and Zen Answers About Life, Death, Family, Friendship, and Everything in Between by Thich Nhat Hanh
Inside the Now: Meditations on Time by Thich Nhat Hanh
The Places that Scare You by Pema Chodron
Harriet Tubman (a.k.a. Moses) by Samuel Allen
The Power of Myth by Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell
The Last Love Poem I Will Ever Write by Gregory Orr
[And Still I Rise, documentary about Maya Angelou](#)
Bossypants by Tina Fey
The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo by Amy Schumer
Thank God for Jokes by Mike Birbiglia (Netflix)
Paddle Your Own Canoe by Nick Offerman
Hell Bengt by Bengt Washburn
Poking a Grizzly by Bengt Washburn (Amazon Prime)

Mary Oliver showed me how to find beauty and trust in the day to day; she pointed me to the “new voice,” “which [I] slowly recognized as my own.” She also showed me the source of song-life: “Song being born of quest he knows this: he must turn silent were he suddenly assaulted with answers.”

Rumi showed me that “Having the idea is not living the reality.” He helped me loosen the death grip of thought.

Walt Whitman pointed me to the infinite within. “These immense meadows, these interminable rivers, you are immense and interminable as they.” And he urged me on. “Whatever you are! Claim your own at any hazard!”

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Divinity School Address* coaxed me away from imitation; challenged me to be true to what was inside me. “Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone The imitator cannot go above his model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The imitator bereaves himself of his own beauty to come short of another man’s.”

Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ* clarified the suffering caused by believing that my church was the only source of Truth; pointed out the “deliciousness” of exploring truth in every tradition; taught me to keep the touchstones of the faith of my upbringing, to make peace with them; showed me I could touch the kingdom of heaven right now.

Pema Chodron’s *The Places That Scare You* pointed me to a basic choice in life: hardness or softness. “The problem isn’t the beliefs themselves but with how we use them to get ground under our feet, how we use them to feel right and to make someone else wrong, how we use them to avoid feeling the uneasiness of not knowing what is going on.”

Samuel Allen's *Harriet Tubman (a.k.a. Moses)* taught me to move. "Moses pulled out her revolver and she quietly said: | Move or die. | You ain't stoppin now | You can't stop now | You gonna move | Move or die."

Bill Moyers' interviews with Joseph Campbell, found in *The Power of Myth*, offered new ways to consider my relationship with intuition and taught me to reconsider symbol. I reclaimed the symbols of my faith, removed them from the stain of abuse. Perhaps most importantly, Joseph Campbell helped me regain my ability to trust my intuition again.

Tina Fey, Amy Schumer, Mike Birbiglia, Nick Offerman, and Bengt Washburn helped me laugh. And I needed to laugh! Seriously, I can't overstate how important these brilliant comic minds were to my well-being.

Music

For me, music remains so important to my spiritual life. I recognize that my taste in music is far from mainstream. Several of these are projects that I was involved in. So much of my music came out of the trauma and rebirth of my faith transition.

[Divine Colors by Justin Nielsen](#)

A portrait of the divine by my brother. The final movement, Peace, moves me to my core every time I hear it. A musical theophany that features cello quartet, voices, and jazz sextet.

[Weeds in the Wall by Sister and Brothers](#)

An album produced by my siblings and I in the folk/bluegrass/Americana genre. Most of the songs were written by my sister, Nicole Upchurch, and arranged by my brother, Justin Nielsen. "At the Veil" uses the imagery of the temple veil as a spiritual threshold. "Quiet Times" explores belonging and loss. "Wild Sorrel and Strawberry" finds hope in a simple garden. "Requiem" is a song I co-wrote with my sister, and uses the imagery of a tree as a metaphor for faith transitions and loss. "Perennials" gives us something to believe in "I believe in perennials; I believe in the spring." Love my sister's writing!

[Sky Blue by Maria Schneider](#)

A spirit journey by one of today's most remarkable composers, I would listen to this whenever Rexburg felt just a little too hard ☺

[Season of Changes by Brian Blade](#)

Hope in loss, rebirth through change.

[Gift of Breath by Ryan Nielsen and Ra Kalam Bob Moses](#)

Many of the pieces on this album came out of the challenges of finding wholeness within my faith transition. *Matsevah* is inspired by a poem by Robert Brown, and explores the idea of a cairn being both a sanctuary and a marker of grief. *The Lioness* is part of my longing for the divine feminine. *Already Gong* is a blessing of sorts. I was super excited when this album was named a 2017 Recommended New Release by the New York City Jazz Record.

[Movement by the Kobie Watkins Grouptet](#)

Creating with these brothers of mine continues to be a soul-enlivening experience, and has been critical to finding my own resilience. It's always about spirit, dance, and truth-telling with these guys. I especially love the title track, [Movement](#), and [Falling Upward](#), which, to me, is a musical portrait of a spirit journey. We were thrilled at the international critical acclaim this project garnered, which received a 4.5 star rating on All About Jazz, and was named one of the 10 best albums of 2018 by the Chicago Tribune.

[The Preacher's Wife by Whitney Houston and the Georgia Mass Choir](#)

My favorites are "I Love the Lord," "Joy," "Hold On, Help Is on the Way," and "Joy to the World." A mega-dose of hope and resilience. Love it!

[Prayer for Peace by Justin Nielsen, featuring the Kobie Watkins Grouptet](#)

As close to prayer as I have been able to get . . . pleading for peace as we move through challenging thresholds.

I hope these resources feel helpful as you continue your journey. I know that they have been tremendously helpful to me.