

THE SEVEN DEADLY
Friendships

MARY DEMUTH



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The relational stories in this book originate from the author's experience and interviews. The names, identities, and circumstances have been altered and sometimes composited to protect privacy. Resemblance to actual individuals is coincidental and unintended.

The Seven Deadly Friendships

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WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK



When I look back over my life, I recount it in stories, and those stories always involve relational snapshots. I've had the privilege of encountering some amazing friends over the years; they outweigh the more difficult relationships I've walked through, thankfully. But it's in the sting of pain in the aftermath of those broken circles that I reel. I rethink. I grieve. I revisit. This past year has had its fill of devolving friendships, and I find myself introspecting to obsession, wondering how I could have prevented so much pain.

That journey informs every fiber of this book. As I've looked back, studied Scripture, prayed, and sought counsel, the Lord has graciously uncovered patterns—types of friends I've pursued who have not been good for me. And in that discovery, I realized you might appreciate these revelations too. I didn't create these categories, nor did I discern them over the years. It's taken decades for me to come to this place of settled “aha.” I pray I can prevent your foray into destructive relationships through the pages of this book.

You may be familiar with the seven deadly sins. In the fourth century, a monk named Evagrius Ponticus created a list of eight. Later, in AD 590, Pope Gregory combined a few, added envy, and the list stuck even to our modern day: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.¹ Although a solidly historical list, I wanted to explore the biblical list of sins found in Proverbs 6:16-19:

There are six things the LORD hates—
 no, seven things he detests:
 haughty eyes,
 a lying tongue,
 hands that kill the innocent,
 a heart that plots evil,
 feet that race to do wrong,
 a false witness who pours out lies,
 a person who sows discord in a family.

These seven traits correspond to the seven deadly friendships we sometimes find ourselves entangled in:

- One. “Haughty eyes” relates to our narcissistic friends.
- Two. “A lying tongue” points to our unreliable friends.
- Three. “Hands that kill the innocent” embodies our predatory friends.
- Four. “A heart that plots evil” correlates to our conman/woman friends.
- Five. “Feet that race to do wrong” are our tempter friends.
- Six. “A false witness” corresponds to our faker friends.
- Seven. “A person who sows discord” resembles our dramatic friends.

Chances are you've encountered one of these deadly friends in your life, which is why you've picked up this book. You, like me, have wrestled with why you allowed someone like that into your life, or you don't have enough editorial distance, and you continually blame yourself for someone else's bad behavior. You may be living in the land of "if only."

If only my narcissist friend would take the focus off himself for a moment, or allow me to share my pain so I could feel the joy of being loved by a narcissist. (Of course, this is an impossibility, but we still seem to think a narcissist can love us.)

If only my unreliable friend could be depended upon when my life breaks.

If only my predator friend could empathize, seeing things from my perspective so I could prove I can befriend anyone, even those who seem beyond rehabilitation.

If only my conman friend would stop to see me as a person, not a commodity to steal from.

If only my tempter friend could love me for who I am, accepting my desire to stay close to Jesus despite the heartache, but he only accepts me when I join his rebellion.

If only my faker friend would finally be real and let me into her life, but she can't seem to do that, enslaved to her addiction to situational ethics.

If only my dramatic friend could stop seeing himself as the center of the world long enough to acknowledge my needs and fears.

The problem with the land of "if only" is rarely do we migrate to the future. Seldom do we reach the relational nirvana we long for. We may spend years in friendship reformation projects, bending over backward in the hopes of seeing new light, but instead we stumble in darkness. Why? Because of this simple truth we know,

but we forget: We cannot change people. We can only change ourselves—with God’s beautiful help.

Before I go further, let me say that we also can be these types of friends. So I’m not writing this with the assumption that every person who reads this book is innocent, and every person “out there” is deadly. We’re all an amalgamation of mess. Like you, I’ve experienced a number of broken friendships over the years, and often these painful breakups have harmed me, sucked dry my resolve to involve myself in other people’s lives, and pushed me closer to cynicism—particularly when I realized I tended to chase these unsafe people. The pattern, in retrospect, is stunning. But I’ve also *been* some of these friends. I’ve had to be the one to apologize, to look at my own life and see where I’ve been toxic to someone else.

What if we could discover together our own faulty patterns, the *why* behind our pursuit of the unsafe? What if we could discern who might be predatory? What if we could look honestly at our relationships and figure out which ones deeply bless us and which ones drain us? How can we discern our own relational stew to discover what ingredients poisoned it and why? I hope to answer these questions—to illuminate the whys behind problematic friendships while also offering a way to walk through and heal from them. Some will heal and be reconciled, some will gradually die a mutually desired death, and some will disintegrate. And through it all, we always have the opportunity to grow spiritually. Because relational discord isn’t always about our hurt—it’s about our journey toward spiritual health.

But there are times we have to sever. We have to learn from past relationships so we can move forward with the new ones God has for us. Yet many of us stay entrenched in broken friendships for years and years because we can’t see our patterns. We are terrified of

change, worried about hurting someone else's feelings, or somehow feel we deserve harsh treatment. We worship the status quo.

Yet growth comes in endings.

“When we fail to end things well, we are destined to repeat the mistakes that keep us from moving on. We choose the same kind of dysfunctional person or demoralizing job again,” author Henry Cloud writes. “Not learning our lessons and proactively dealing with them, we make the same business or personal mistakes over and over. Learning how to do an ending well and how to metabolize the experience allows us to move beyond patterns of behavior that may have tripped us up in the past. We do not have to keep repeating the same patterns.”² But so many of us do. We chase deadly friendships with a clinging tenacity, hoping beyond hope that this time will be different.

Except it never is.

These deep friendships wound us; it is a universal truth. David experienced it too, often in the form of long-term betrayal. “This isn't the neighborhood bully mocking me—I could take that. This isn't a foreign devil spitting invective—I could tune that out. It's you! We grew up together! *You!* My best friend! Those long hours of leisure as we walked arm in arm, God a third party to our conversation” (Psalm 55:12-14 MSG).

Can you sense the agony in David's cadence? The sting of dismissal? The bewilderment? I've been there, and I've listened to enough stories to know that you've been there too. Particularly when a deadly friend erupts in anger—via conflict, misunderstanding, or differences in perspective. Harmony and companionship you thought were givens suddenly morph overnight into discord and hostility. I still feel the whiplash of the swift U-turns some of my friendships have taken.

And one haunts me nearly every day of my life—a mixture of narcissistic, unreliable, and predatory. Only now do I see this. Only now do I discern the patterns.

“I thought about her again,” I tell my husband, Patrick, in the comfort of our living room.

He shakes his head. “Why do you do this to yourself?”

I shake my head too, mostly to loosen the memory of her, of the regrets and pain that remain quite alive between us. “What else could I have done?”

“You need to let it go, Mary. It’s over. She’s moved on. You need to too.” He pats the couch, asks me to sit.

I do. “But I can’t. I keep rehearsing what went wrong, what happened between us. We were supposed to be friends forever.” I say the last word and think of the song Michael W. Smith crooned right around the time I graduated high school about friends being friends forever, if they share the same Lord. Why couldn’t that be true?

I know Patrick wants to deliver me of this tenacious need to deconstruct every fallen relationship, but he remains blessedly silent. He reaches out and grabs my hand. And I sit there with a mind full of friendship memories that don’t seem to have a proper place to live and move. They’re floating untethered, no relationship to anchor them. They flash in and through me like flickering movies—bright splashes of laughter and shared motherhood, deep talks and tears of relief, bearing burdens and buying blouses, praying big kingdom prayers and recounting funny stories. But then other memories interrupt the flickering happiness—angry words and volatile misunderstandings, phone calls laced with pain and accusations of betrayal, final words and curt goodbyes.

Normally, I have words to describe how I feel. But in this moment, I have none. What’s left is undecorated grief—as long as the friendship was deep.

As a society we've come to recognize divorce as a terrible scar. We agonize with widows and widowers and the loss of a significant, compelling relationship. But seldom do we put words to the grief of a friendship gone south. Sure, we talk about it with our remaining friends (or a long-suffering spouse in my case), but we almost feel like we don't have the right to grieve what we've lost. We justify that it's no big deal, and that we should get over it, for crying out loud. (And we do cry out loud, don't we?)

I asked my Facebook friends how they felt about their own deadly friendships. Two things emerged. One: I realized I was not alone in this type of grief. And two: So many struggle with this.

Lana writes about the hole left behind. "When it's a friend you've been very close to, it's hard for lots of reasons. There's a hole in your life that they used to fill—time, conversations, laughter...all the things you used to share with that person. People are not fungible; one friend can't be replaced with another. In addition, if you've been close, you've made yourself vulnerable to that person. You've let them see the real you, even the ugly parts, and if the 'breakup' was an unpleasant one, you now have someone out there that you trusted enough to confide in, but whom you can no longer trust to have your back."

Martina addresses the questions that so many of us ask when a friendship ends. "The betrayal, the fear of more hurt, the emptiness left behind, all of that takes time to work through and move past. I sometimes feel shame too. Why did I cause this friend to suddenly hate me? How did I hurt *them* that they felt they needed to leave? Why couldn't I better communicate my love and commitment to them in a way they understood? When my friends leave me, I'm left with the love I still have for them. And it hurts that I can't give that love to them in a way they can accept. I feel like I'm throwing my heart at a brick wall."

Cyndi adds to Lana's perspective about the vulnerability we experience after a relationship ends. After all, that friend knew deep secrets and parts of us we never shared with anyone else. She writes, "The vulnerability is the hardest part. Because now there is a part of you that not only regrets opening up to that person and allowing them to really, deeply know you, but you also worry that sharing so deeply could have been the very thing, that made them not want you in their life."

Let me just say this: I hear you. Your pain is real, and it is valid. You are not alone. Like Lana, Martina, and Cyndi, we all walk a difficult path when a friendship is broken. We all feel the hole left behind—even when the friend was deadly to our soul. We banter back and forth in our minds about what went wrong, hoping that if we could just process it perfectly, we could figure out how to fix it. Instead, we're left with a vulnerability hangover, feeling raw, used, and very, very tired.

The Seven Deadly Friendships is the book I needed to read when I sifted through the broken pieces of friendships gone awry. I pray that it puts words to the grief, adds context to the mayhem, and provides you with the space you need to process a difficult relationship. But more than that, I hope to put words to why those relationships failed in the first place—why you pursued them, and why they might not have been healthy in the first place.

I am, unfortunately, not a relationship expert, nor am I credentialed in counseling. But I have walked some deep waters through broken friendships, and I have experienced God's nearness in the midst of that mess. I'm not writing a clinical book dissecting the minutiae of relationships and detailing the latest research on codependency (though I will cite sources that I find helpful). I'm writing a ripped-from-the-headlines companion guide—of my own life and the lives of those with whom I've had the pleasure of interacting

around this topic. This is an I've-been-there-and-survived-and-learned-a-few-things tome where my main objective is to help you feel seen and validated.

This book is based on the reality of your pain—you are not alone, and you are not crazy—and it's based on Scripture, namely the Proverbs verses above and the lives of two important biblical figures: Joseph and Jesus. The Proverbs verses unpack and define the deadly friends, while looking at Joseph and Jesus in the second half of the book will help us reconstruct a wisdom-based paradigm—a new way forward as we navigate new, healthy relationships.

For ease of discussion, I've decided to name these deadly friendships, each one with its own chapter. Apologies ahead of time if one of them is your name: Narcissist Nolan, Unreliable Uma, Predator Paige, Conman Connor, Tempter Trevor, Faker Fiona, and Dramatic Drake.

Some of our broken friendships are a combination of these types of friends, and some defy categorization. But I've walked this world long enough to know (at least in my own experience) that our world is full of broken people, and sometimes those broken people break us.

This book is my gift to you—full of hard-won grief work, a resettled perspective, and wisdom like my husband's about letting go. But it's more than just a manual about pursuing healthy relationships, learning from the hard ones, and moving on. It's a book about all relationships, including your friendship with the eternal God who loves you. Jesus said we are to love God and love others. But so often others and their faulty ways of loving us become the catalyst that pushes us away from God. In short, people injure us, and that injury causes us to doubt the goodness of God. So our injury becomes twofold: between others and between our Creator and us.

I believe that you'll not only close this book wiser and more discerning, but that the book will serve as an inauguration toward

personal revival. As you navigate your relationships and experience healing, it's my prayer that your affection for the Almighty—the relational God who initiates community—will increase.

Frederick Buechner confirms this correlation:

Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God becomes known to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.³

This book is the tracking of our relational stories. It's a place to evaluate, discern, and move on. And as we do, we begin to see the beauty of God materialize before us. It's his pursuit of us when we're bleeding and broken that helps us heal in the aftermath. It's his affection for us when we lick our wounds and hurt deeply that reminds us he understands.

After all, Jesus was betrayed by a friend—a close friend. He experienced every kind of deadly friend, and because he has walked painful friendship paths, he knows how to comfort us when we grieve, and he empowers us when we choose to move on. He is our best friend, the safest one, who knows our secret fears and doesn't betray them. He embodies Proverbs 27:9, "The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense."

I've often shared, "What wounds us is what heals us," meaning if we are wounded in bad community, the way back to health is good community. Jesus is the best community, capable of healing your tender heart. He will help you discern who to pursue, when to pull back, and when it's wise to move on. And through all that,

my prayer is that you will find him close by. After all, Psalm 34:18 reminds us: “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.”

I would be remiss if I didn't continue to mention that we can also be deadly friends. All of us have traits of these folks lurking in our heart, so at the end of every chapter, I ask some questions to help you discern if you are harming someone else in your friendships. It's also instructive to remember that the people you find the most fault in, the ones who drive you the craziest, are often those who struggle with the same relational sins you do. For instance, I tend to be pretty judgmental of the Dramatic Drakes of my life. That instant ire serves as a window to my soul because I struggle with giving in to drama. This realization and self-awareness helps me do two things: to be kind to Dramatic Drake, and to use my frustration not as a means to help him be better, but to turn the spotlight onto myself and consider how I can grow in this area.

That's why I don't want you to miss the last chapter of this book. It crystallizes all I've been learning about recovery and abundance in the midst of difficult relationships. It's the counteractive ingredient to seven deadly friendships—the seven life-giving practices you can implement today, regardless of the current state of your relationships. It's steeped in hard-won truth based on years of making relational mistakes, coaching others in difficult relationships, and reading a ton of books.

My hunch is that you picked up this book because of a crushed spirit. Someone you thought would be there forever, a friend who morphed from ally to adversary, has wounded you. You're living in the pain of that betrayal, and you want to make sense of it all, learn from it, and find healing. So before you turn the page to chapter 1, where we dive headlong into the first deadly friendship, do you mind if I pray for you?

SEVEN DEADLY FRIENDSHIPS

Jesus, I pray for my friend reading these words today. Would you shoulder the grief? Would you gently remind that you completely understand what it's like to walk through betrayal? Please comfort, heal, and establish. Bring a new perspective and a holy understanding of what it means to engage in a world that hurts you. Oh, how we all need you, Jesus. Without you, we are crushed. With you, we are loved. Holy Spirit, please illuminate the journey my friend will take to assess current and past friendships. Amen.



Part One

THE DEADLY FRIENDSHIPS



NARCISSIST NOLAN

"Haughty Eyes"



It was her eyes. How they narrowed when she said the words that confounded me.

"I don't understand why Jesus would die for me," she said, a smile playing on her lips. We sat in a restaurant while others lunched. I picked at a hangnail, wondering how this line of reasoning would play out.

"I know. It's hard to believe," I said. Jesus had forgiven me of so much, and I was well aware that the balance of my sins compared to a holy God didn't make sense, thanks to grace.

"No," she said. "I understand why Jesus died for you." Those eyes bored into my insecurity. The Mona Lisa smile remained. Then she lifted her chin and landed her gaze on an unsuspecting diner. "And that guy over there. I know why Jesus died for him. He sins."

I took a bite.

"You see, I don't really sin. So why would Jesus have to die for me?"

I didn't have a reaction for my friend in that moment, other than wanting to move my chair away from the possible lightning strike. Researchers tell us we have three typical responses when we

encounter something unexpected: fight, flee, or freeze. Me? I freeze. The words came a few hours later, but in that moment, silence. But her words sent me researching, and in that quest, I discovered something that would change my life.

Narcissists.

If you've been raised by one (or two), you'll spend your life trying to resolve a painful puzzle: performing all sorts of emotional gymnastics to make a narcissist love you. The problem is this: Narcissistic people are incapable of empathy, other-centered love, or healthy relationships. Yet, we chase. Just like I chased my friend who seemed to think she never sinned.

So who is Narcissist Nolan? What makes him tick? Why is he the way he is? Before we delve into folks like this, there's an important distinction to make. There's a difference between a person with narcissistic tendencies and someone who has Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The difference is in the degree of pain they inflict (from a molehill to a mountain) and their ability to change (from a little to none at all). Either way, there's a reason Narcissist Nolan is the way he is, typically because of a lack of personal attachment in childhood. And this lack has followed him into adulthood, manifesting itself in several different ways.

TRAITS

Narcissist Nolan behaves this way:

- Like Narcissus (whom this trait is named after), he must have constant attention, be told often of his positive attributes, and be heralded exclusively.
- He has a keen sense of grandiosity, as if he is uniquely special. He spends an inordinate amount of time

talking about himself, his unique characteristics, great accomplishments, and his heroic ability to take care of everyone.

- He is extremely jealous of anything that shows he is smaller, less important. And he is jealous of your time. He wants it all.
- He demands special treatment—from you, others, businesses, etc.
- Oddly, he is also extremely insecure, but he doesn't let on. Instead, he projects his insecurity onto others. He spends a lot of effort demeaning others, making them feel small and stupid.
- He cannot recount his childhood in vivid memories. Everything is vague.
- He completely lacks empathy. If you are hurting, it's your fault. He will not enter into your hurt. But he will go on and on about how you hurt him, or how the world has given him a raw deal.
- He takes credit for other people's accomplishments, including yours.
- He is an expert in gaslighting. In other words, he may say something that you know you heard, but when you bring that up, he looks at you like you're crazy. "I never said that" is the constant refrain of a narcissist. He does this to manipulate and control you, to make you unstable and crazy feeling. (The term comes from the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, where a husband systematically makes his wife think she's going crazy by altering the level of light in their home but telling her nothing has changed.)

- He cannot ever admit he's wrong. It's always someone else's fault, particularly yours.
- He cuts in line and doesn't care.
- He exaggerates.
- He can be passive-aggressive.
- He is overly sensitive and cannot take a joke.
- He is obsessed with himself. He is his own favorite subject. In order to have a long conversation, you have to steer the entire conversation to him. You sometimes grow exhausted trying to think up new questions to ask him.
- He must have the best of everything—the best opinion, the perfect car, the right kind of computer, and the most beautiful pet.
- He talks big, but his actions don't line up with his assertions.
- He changes the subject when emotions or feelings enter into a conversation.
- He is typically extremely intelligent, and he loves to let others know how sub-intelligent they are.
- He often contradicts himself, sometimes in the same breath. And he pretends the contradiction was your imagination.
- He is often envious of others and cannot stand to lose.
- He is easily cruel. Harsh words flow from him as if they'll carry no pain. Then he belittles you for being hurt. "You're overly sensitive," he'll say.

- He preys on those he perceives are his subordinates, but sucks up to anyone he sees as superior. He is well versed in flattery. He makes those “higher” than him an idol.
- He must be in control, and he must control you. Anytime you step outside of his wishes, you will be punished.
- He likes to dole out advice, even when it’s not solicited.
- He doesn’t like to hear about your preferences. And you’ve learned to never share what you want because the consequences of being honest this way are too severe.
- He gives contradictory gifts. He may ask you what you want but then give you the opposite gift and expect you to be ecstatic.
- He doesn’t have a normal conscience and is only concerned about his reputation. If something tarnishes his position in the world, then he’s more self-aware, but only in terms of damage control.
- He runs through relationships, demonizing the past ones, idealizing the present ones. As he gets to retirement age, he has typically cycled through all his relationships and faces being alone. (People have figured him out, and his circle shrinks.)
- He kicks you when you’re down and has no empathy as he does so.
- He has the emotional intelligence of a child. He cannot read social cues.
- He flat out cannot hear any sort of criticism. He will instead retaliate and demean anyone who brings up

an issue. In short, you will regret bringing up his shortcomings.

- He has manic swings—moving from wildly popular in public to condescending and demeaning in private.
- He loves to target codependent people.
- He is the master of triangulation, where he discloses bad parts of your relationship with others, even publicly on social media. He does this to keep control.
- He sees nothing wrong with interrupting you or others.
- He tells stories about himself where he is either the supreme hero or the extreme victim.
- He loves to use guilt to get you to comply.
- He often has “harems” of people surrounding him, so he has a constant source of affirmation.
- He lives entitled, as if everyone out there in the world owes him a perfect life, a perfect response, a perfect gift.
- Initially, he made you feel entirely amazing and wanted, only to shape-shift and turn on you. This is called idealization (or the “love-bombing” phase), the devaluation phase (where he undermines you constantly but throws in a few compliments, giving you hope that you’ll return to the idealization phase), followed by the discard phase, where he abandons, then demonizes you.¹
- He takes offense easily and tends to nurse grudges.
- If you walk away, you will become the “abuser,” in his eyes, and he will slander you mercilessly.
- He exaggerates his talents, accomplishments, and successes (even if he doesn’t have any of these things).

- He gets easily angered when he doesn't receive special treatment.
- He hates standing in line.
- He changes personalities to fit different situations.
- He makes excuses, but never owns his mistakes.
- He won't allow a bad picture of himself posted on social media.
- He has no idea he's a narcissist.
- He has the uncanny ability to get you to share your deepest thoughts, but he never returns the favor. This keeps him in power.
- He may confound you because although he's narcissistic, he actually might be introverted.
- He name-drops.
- He uses others to bolster his self-esteem—people (you!) are simply a projection of his ego.
- He is more interested in his perfect persona than being an authentic, vulnerable person.
- He hates your boundaries and violates them at will.
- He seems to be unconcerned that his actions have consequences.
- He is charming and flirtatious in public but an entirely different person behind closed doors. This is why it's hard to convince others of his dark side. Out in the world, he appears to be convivial and the life of the party.
- He constantly complains—particularly about you and your bad traits.

- He dehumanizes others and you.
- He blames you when he overreacts: “I wouldn’t have to yell if you weren’t so idiotic.”
- He typically does not initiate in a relationship. You are responsible for everything moving forward.
- He sees himself as an archetype, a hero for the hour, and in Christian realms, as the ideal Christian.
- He uses language like “I told you so.”
- He is (or perceives himself to be) very attractive.
- He doesn’t care if he makes you late.
- He dominates conversations and talks exclusively about himself.
- He is preoccupied with success and nice things.²

THE LYING PASTOR

Tyler and Elizabeth both befriended a narcissistic man who also happened to be their pastor. At first everything went smoothly. They had recently relocated to a new city and struggled with the transition. Their life bent toward upheaval and a feeling of being untethered, except for their church—an anchor in the chaos. Sure, their pastor dismissed people and said unkind things from the pulpit (like demeaning people with emotional struggles), but no one was perfect, right?

Later, it was discovered that the pastor had stolen every single sermon he preached from the Internet, and, of course, lied about it. Not one sermon had been the result of study, prayer, or preparation. All had been reenacted word for word from other pastors’ online

sermons. The fallout? It took some time to uncover everything that had happened, but eventually the church leaders asked the pastor to step down. In his vacancy, a congregation battled questions, anger, and bewilderment. The pastor had been so charismatic, so funny, so mesmerizing. He seemed so on fire. But soon folks realized it had all been a farce—the carefully constructed image of a narcissistic man.

Most of what Tyler has learned blossomed in retrospect. “Narcissists remind me of the devil,” he said. “He is smart enough to not manifest as all evil. He always adds sugar. Likewise, narcissists don’t punch you in the face. Instead, they put their arm around you. The problem is, you don’t realize that the other arm is stealing from you.”

As he looked back, he realized this man hadn’t actually been his friend. In fact, when the pastor talked to his closest friends after he was caught, he often said, “We didn’t really have a friendship.” Tyler admitted, “I was just a game piece. People turned out to be pawns in the chessboard of his life, and it was all about him winning.”

In my own interaction with a particular narcissist (not the one mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), I realize, too, that I was only in relationship as long as it served the narcissist. Once I was no longer needed, she discarded me. What confounded me was trying to share my dismissal and pain with people who knew the narcissistic person in public. They only knew the charismatic, fun person and had a hard time believing I told the truth. People with this tendency are smart. They know when to act appropriately and when they can get away with demeaning behavior. In short: In public, they shine; in private, they violate.

Tyler shares this same observation. “He seemed like such a great guy. He seemed normal. Just like an apple looks normal until you take a bite, and it’s rotten inside.”

He and Elizabeth both found it difficult to understand a narcissist. “It was hard to get into his head. *Certainly, he can’t be that*

sick, we thought. It was hard to empathize with his lack of empathy.” This is perhaps the hardest part for normal folks to understand. We try to empathize with someone who cannot seem to garner empathy. We invent stories of their past to try to justify or make sense of their lack of care for others.

Lily Hope Lucario wrote these highly instructive words: “Hurt people hurt people? Actually there are many traumatized and abused people who don’t hurt people. They have compassion, empathy, a conscience, and would never want to hurt someone intentionally because they never want to inflict pain on anyone else. Being hurt is not an excuse for hurting others. Hurting people is a choice.”³ The problem is this: Some people don’t have a reason or a why for their behavior. They simply cannot think of anyone other than themselves, and they spend their lives weaving stories that make them the hero or the victim.

Tyler likened the behavior of a narcissist to what grocery store managers call Quick Changers. They’ll ask for change for a fifty, and then continue to ask for different denominations until they end up flustering the clerk, and they receive far more than they gave initially. It’s supposed to be an even exchange, but it ends up not being one. Why? Because narcissistic people take more than they give, and they use flustering tactics to do so—usually making you feel crazy afterward, asking things like, “Did that just happen?” Tyler says the store management instructed its cashiers to stop immediately when they encountered a Quick Changer. “Don’t play the game; you will lose. They are professionals. Stop the exchange,” Tyler said. When he encountered yet another lie from the pastor, he employed this technique. He simply stopped him and said, “I don’t believe what you just said to me.”

Tyler now believes he stayed in the relationship (before terminating it permanently) because of his own savior complex. He thought he could fix the pastor. He now reflects, “Maybe Jesus can, but only

if he lets Jesus fix him. I'm not going to be the one who fixes him. I can pray for him. I sincerely want him to be healthy, but I cannot be in a relationship with him."

Elizabeth was surprised at how deep and wide the pain spread to her, how all-encompassing it felt. "Because the situation was so extreme, I feel like it was all consuming in my mind. I was surprised how psychologically damaging it was. I reeled trying to reconcile the man we knew with what had transpired. Now I know he was a calculating psychopath, and the emotional toll was shocking."

A few things she learned after the pastor's Internet sermon-stealing came to light began with something simple. "Don't excuse bad behavior or words. If there's a red flag, accept it. Don't overlook it." She also cautions people to realize when they're vulnerable. "Abusers prey on vulnerable people," she said. It is also important to ask yourself this question: "Am I putting up with this behavior because I'm in a lonely spot?"

She also cautions us to check our pride. Often narcissistic people thrive in positions of power, fame, or wealth. Because you might want to associate with such popular people, you may overlook some glaring problems. "You feel that pull toward their position. So you spend time with them, not necessarily because you like them, but because of their position. It's important to check your motives."

Tyler shares the cycle of grief he and Elizabeth walked through. "I started out sad. Sad for the pastor. Then confused. Then angry. Then I prayed for him—for repentance, to return to Jesus." But Tyler did not continue in a relationship with the pastor.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The Bible is chock full of character studies of people with narcissistic traits. When Satan tempted Adam and Eve, he appealed

to their pride and desire for control. The moment sin entered the world, this preoccupation with self flourished. While writing this book, I've been on a two-month quest to read the entire Bible in chronological order. What stood out to me was how many times narcissistic people got into trouble, hurt people, and continued to do so. Reading about the era of kings cemented hopelessness in this regard. Because of sin, we will battle self-centeredness our whole lives. But because of Jesus and his beautiful intersection in our lives (and the outrageous gift of the Holy Spirit within us), we no longer have to be enslaved to narcissism.

But what happens when we encounter an entrenched narcissist? Paul writes starkly of their traits in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Take special note of what he encourages our response to be at the end of the verses.

You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!

Like Tyler and Elizabeth decided to do, it's typically best to sever relationship with a narcissist—to stay away.

Why? We do this for the sake of potential reconciliation later. The truth is, narcissists can only love and worship themselves; therefore, they will continue to harm you as they elevate themselves. As

long as you continue to be harmed, your injury will continually grow worse. Their continued attacks will only cause it to seep and fester. Best to first let the wound heal without further damage before you even entertain jumping back in.

But here's the sad truth: Most narcissistic people do not reform. I recently recounted a relationship I had with a narcissist that I naively thought had improved. But as I unpacked my story, I realized that the narcissistic person only used me when she needed my emotional support during a difficult trial. The moment she was back on her feet emotionally, she dismissed me and continued to betray—even worse than before. I forgot to examine the fruit of her life. Like Elizabeth, I dismissed her narcissistic traits, hoping beyond hope that she had finally changed. Initially, she covered up her narcissism for a period of time, but it reared its selfish head soon enough.

Clarissa didn't realize she married a narcissist, but she said something telling regarding expectations, something we must learn to manage. "I was in love with his potential." She went on to say that she didn't love who he was in the moment, but she engaged in what psychologists call "magical thinking," hoping that she could reform him. Instead, he violated her trust, pursued another woman, and broke her heart. Her only recourse was to separate herself from him. If you're in love with a friend's potential, but that person never seems to realize it, consider that a red flag. Heed Paul's warning to stay away or move away.

The best way to think logically about someone enslaved to narcissism is to look at his or her fruit. Jesus said, "You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16). Even by looking at a narcissist and their fruit, we have to be cautious and discerning.

My friend Jimmy Hinton is an expert in sexual predators. He

had to turn in his pastor father for preying on dozens of young girls, and he has spent his life trying to understand the mind of a predatory person. One of the talks he gives is about fruit. He cautions that narcissistic, sociopathic, and psychopathic people are extremely adept at manufacturing fake fruit. They appear righteous, but underneath they are wolves seeking to devour. Boz Tchividjian, the founder of Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment (GRACE), advises that niceness is deceptive. It is not a character trait. Instead, it's learned behavior a predator uses to woo victims.

Perhaps the easiest way to discern a narcissistic friend is to watch them in public. Jesus gave us a perfect illustration:

When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the seat of honor. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? The host will come and say, "Give this person your seat." Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, "Friend, we have a better place for you!" Then you will be honored in front of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:8-11).

A narcissist thrives with honor and often seeks it out, demands it. He or she wants to be recognized in public. If you see this, be wary, because eventually that need for public recognition will morph into private requirements. In the context of relationship, a narcissistic person will demand constant heralding and unending (and unwarranted) praise in daily life. They constantly need ego stroking behind closed doors, and this can become exhausting.

And if you threaten to expose a narcissist, beware. Dr. Diane

Langberg shares an important truth: “When a narcissist is exposed, their horror is about the damage it will do *to them* to be accused and they believe that others are failing *them* by getting in the way of their ability to live out their specialness.”⁴ You will become a narcissist’s sworn enemy. When you were “loved” as long as you existed to stroke their ego, you’ll become hated when you don’t.

NOW WHAT?

What should you do if you find yourself in a relationship with a narcissist? As mentioned before, find a way to separate in order to heal. Pray for your loved one. But don’t engage for a period of time, perhaps forever. Much has been written about negotiating a relationship with narcissistic people, but it’s not easy and takes a level of sophistication and prowess to navigate it well.

The key, then, to interacting with someone you suspect is narcissistic is to break the vicious circle—to gently thwart their frantic efforts to control, distance, defend or blame in the relationship by sending the message that you’re more than willing to connect with *them*, but not on these terms; to invite them into a version of intimacy where they can be loved and admired, warts and all—if they only allow the experience to happen.⁵

In other words, change the rules of the game. Instead of being vulnerable and letting the narcissist live on a stage of admiration, be cautious and dare the narcissistic friend to share vulnerably. Most often this cannot work. Why? Because if the narcissistic person has been acting this way his or her whole life, change is nearly impossible. Picture it like a needle going into the groove of an overplayed record. The more it’s played, the deeper the groove, and the less likely the needle will skip out of that groove. Once self-serving

behavior becomes a minute-by-minute, deeply entrenched habit, it's very difficult to change. Of course, through Christ anything is possible, which is why it's always wise to separate, heal, pray, forgive, and be ready in case your narcissistic friend comes to her senses. But I wouldn't be honest if I said that it's likely to happen. More often than not, a narcissist likes living that way and will not change.

AM I NARCISSIST NOLAN?

As I bulleted Narcissist Nolan's traits, I worried, *What if I am this kind of friend?* Because I've encountered quite a few narcissists in my life, I wondered if perhaps someone was writing a book about me and my self-centeredness. One thing I've learned about narcissists is that they are not self-aware. They do not and cannot examine themselves. So if you read the list and started worrying, chances are you're not a narcissist. The simple fact that you fretted about it is an indication that you have an examined life.

Another way to determine if you're this kind of friend is to see how Jesus defines it. He cautions all of us not to live haughty, prideful lives when he details the outcome of a Pharisee's and a tax collector's prayers.

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.' But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed.

Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

Exalting oneself is a narcissist’s full-time job. Weakness must be avoided. She must never admit to wrongdoing. Repentance is only for show (when a narcissistic person has been caught), or to demean someone else (because it’s their fault), but never for personal contrition. So if you have apologized to a friend for hurting him, if you have wept before God admitting your sin, if you have examined your heart and asked for forgiveness, then chances are you’re not a narcissist. It’s not very likely that a person with narcissistic personality disorder will repent. But if you have repented and you can, consider yourself free.

The deeper question comes when you examine your life and see a pattern of chasing narcissists. This is my issue. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, if you were raised by narcissistic people (whether by parents, grandparents, or even by interacting with narcissistic siblings), you tend to pursue them later in life. You do this because you have an unfinished story, and you long to see it completed. In my case, I subconsciously hoped that if I could get a narcissist to love me, I would finally prove I’m lovable to a narcissist, particularly my family of origin. It was a story I would never complete, simply because narcissistic people cannot truly love you. So instead of chasing narcissists, it’s wiser to pursue healing—to let Jesus finish your broken love story with his love. We’ll talk about how to do this in the latter chapters.

But not all of you reading this book have my unique experience. Sometimes narcissistic people are simply attractive, life-of-the-party folks we long to be associated with. We want to be in the popular

crowd, and sometimes narcissists stand out attractively within those groups. I know I've chased after friends who fit this mold simply because they exuded confidence, fun, and liveliness. The frustrating truth is that narcissistic people are incredibly attractive in the short term. They perform well in short spurts. And those spurts attract us.

We will always have Narcissist Nolans in this world. They tend to thrive, particularly when their narcissism doesn't catch up with them. But we can be wise about how we choose to deal with them. And we don't have to be a game piece in their self-serving game. Like Tyler, we can uncover these Quick Changers and simply stop making transactions for them. And as we separate, we can always pray, process, and forgive.