

Introduction

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“Knots!” she exasperatedly cried, screwing up her tiny nose. Throwing her tangled, beaded necklace in my general direction, she groaned in resignation. “Mommy! I need *you* to fix it!” Brushing her honey-colored curls off her sweaty face, she sighed, “I just keep making it worse.”

“Let me see what I can do,” I offered, as I picked up the knotted necklace from the cluttered floor.

When I eventually placed the finished work in her outstretched hand, she delightedly squealed, “Oh, fank you, Mommy. You did it!”

As I tended to the overflowing pot on the stove and her curious baby brother, whose fat foot was lodged in the crevice of the couch, out of the corner of my eye I saw her contentedly patter down the hall, clutching her restored prize.

My *little* girl is pattering off to college this year. While she still brings me her tangled teenage treasures, it is rare that I can help her loosen them. There are very few things more heart-wrenching than looking into your child’s teary eyes and having no clue how to help.

Mercifully, we have a mother who is always capable of untying the tangles in our troubled hearts. *Our Lady Undoer of Knots* is a title bestowed upon Mary because she is foremost a mama. With the fierceness of a mother’s love and a complete openness to grace, she deeply desires our restoration. Working on behalf of her children, she loosens the knots in our broken lives where sin and

shame have twisted our desires, making our hearts a tangled mess. These knots, originating from Eve's control and grasping, have been passed from one generation to the next. Not one of us is exempt. Every daughter, sister, wife, and mother has inherited the effects of Eve's deception by the evil one.

Our feminine nature didn't begin this way. The very name *Eve* means "mother of all the living" (Gn 3:20). Before the first woman became a mother, she was Adam's sister (in humanity) and bride, and the beloved daughter of the Father. From the beginning, her relationship with God and with Adam was blissful and free. Adam and Eve were "naked, yet they felt no shame" (Gn 2:25).

Without shame, the first couple experienced the grace of full communion. Like a hose without kinks, intimacy surged. They knew and accepted each other in the fullness of their identity as man and woman. While their sin was the source of the fracture, their shame kept them separated from God and each other. God did not cover them with loincloths. Adam did not cover Eve, nor did Eve cover Adam. They each covered themselves because of their shame (Gn 3:7).

THE SHAME CYCLE

Like Eve, we often respond to our own sin and brokenness in relationship by hiding. Working hard to conceal and protect the undesirable parts of our story, we tend to take cover. Because relationships are hard and people are broken, our feminine experiences as daughters, sisters, brides, and mothers are often marred by pain, sin, and separation. Relationships are at the core of our security and wholeness, so when they are fragmented, parts of our identity are damaged and broken. Instead of feeling deeply connected to those we are in relationship with, we feel alone. In our isolation, we long for communion with others and the opportunity to feel known. Yet there is a pain-filled part of ourselves we do not want anyone to know.

To protect this wounded place, we fortify and separate it from the rest of ourselves, carving a boundary through the center of our heart. Standing guard outside of this fortress is the strategic expert, shame. Shame works as a detour, insidiously preventing us from discovering and acknowledging the true source of our ache and inhibiting us from being ourselves, simply by keeping us partially, if not wholly, concealed from others.

I have experienced this reality in many seasons of my life. When I was a young mother, with three children aged three and under, I longed for relationship and connection. My husband was working long hours learning the ropes of his new career in a new town. Lonely, I jumped at any prospect of friendship that came my way. However, nearly every time I visited the cleaner, well-decorated homes where other moms served healthier food and spoke incessantly about their perfect lives (and the marathons they ran in their spare time—when I couldn't even find time for a shower!), I would leave with my rowdy group of toddlers feeling more isolated and alone than before.

The record that played in my head was, *These women have it all together and you are a mess. I truly believed, I am the only mom who wrestles with the many demands of motherhood. I am the only mom who has so many children born so close together. I am the only one who does not seem to belong.* These isolating experiences reinforced the pain that I had endured as a young girl (more on this in my story later in this book). My *grown-up* response, to protect my aching heart, was to hide the real me. Believing the lie that I was alone in this shame, I coped by holding back my heart and pretending.

What does it look like to constantly pretend? It is inviting others only into the presentable rooms of our hearts, the places that are warm and well ordered, acting as though the rest of us is just as tidy. It is putting up a facade so others cannot see the pain hidden in our deep, interior spaces. It is deceiving others and ourselves with the lie that these rooms of our hearts, like the disordered closets in our homes, simply do not exist. The truth is we will never be intimate with an ideal. We were made to be real.

THE BEAUTY OF VULNERABILITY

Authenticity is hard to find, but it does exist. By the grace of God, a handful of authentic women came into my life during this messy season. These women allowed me past the front rooms of their proverbial houses. They invited me deeper into their stories, sin, and pain. Their honesty, vulnerability, and transparency penetrated my own fortress of shame. The witness of these precious women offered me hope and invited me to acknowledge the pain and sin I had spent a lifetime trying to hide. I saw in each of them what Pope John Paul II coined the “feminine genius.” In his apostolic letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, His Holiness wrote, “In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 11). I realized Mary was shaping each of these daughters of Eve who were surrounding me in community.

With these insights and the prompting of a cherished friend, I helped form an intimate group of women who began to meet, pray, and reflect specifically on the identity of women. Many of us embraced a new understanding and appreciation of our complex feminine identities. While the world encouraged women to grasp and control, we were diving into the redeeming truth of Mary’s *yes* and learning the beauty of surrender and the gift of her radical receptivity. Mary’s refrain became our refrain: *fiat—let it be done*. The more we spoke and lived this reality, the more the knots in our lives came untied.

To say this was an easy season would be disingenuous. Each of us journeying together as close friends found that the process of untying the knots made us feel *undone*. As the walls came crashing down, the pain behind the shame came into view. The deep places of our identity were laid bare. We were awaiting a new season of redemption.

Incredibly, the Holy Spirit redeemed each of us in different yet profound ways. Each encounter was so intimate and unique. The only common thread in each story of restoration was a willingness, like Mary's, to *let it be done*.

In embracing Mary's posture of surrender, we were not simply tossing her our tangled lives and asking her to make the hard things easier. We were asking that we might become more like her in every way. We were imploring her assistance in opening the closed and hardened places of our hearts that were tormented by fear, torn by isolation, overcome by control, and ravaged by pride. We were begging her to fly to our rescue with the feminine virtues of receptivity, trust, and humility. We were asking her to uncover our deepest identity in and through her authenticity.

AN INVITATION

This precious time spent steeping in my true feminine identity stirred in me a deep desire to bring the gift of authenticity and freedom to other women. Surrounded by a sisterhood of Marian hearts, I now present women's conferences under the mantle of the John Paul II Healing Center. *Undone: Freedom for the Feminine Heart* is a weekend of hope, healing, and worship. Through this healing ministry, our team has had the privilege of witnessing the knots of fear and shame in the hearts of women beautifully undone.

The raw and real testimonies included in this book are *your* invitation to discover the nature of your true feminine identity. Through the authenticity of these testimonies, you are invited to encounter greater truth and freedom in the comfort of your own home.

The women who tell these stories have waded deeply into the redemptive reality of Mary's fiat. With openness and vulnerability, they tackle topics such as fear, purity, marriage, identity, divorce, pornography, adoption, infertility, loss, rejection, abortion, single

life, motherhood, miscarriage, illness, virginity, betrayal, body image, and beauty. In sharing these stories, they wish to proclaim the truth revealed to their once-broken hearts. Authenticity is possible. Redemption is possible. Freedom is possible. Simply hand Mary your knots, embrace her surrender, and uncover your true feminine identity.

MOVING THROUGH THIS BOOK

This book is divided into four parts based on the four feminine identities outlined in Pope John Paul II's 1995 *Letter to Women*. An excerpt of this letter is included after the introduction. Each part begins with a brief overview of a specific feminine identity and then offers several stories highlighting the season where this primary identity was tangled and eventually untied. Each story concludes with a scriptural or spiritual reflection and study questions.

Each part of the book ends with a specific prayer for inner healing in that precise identity stage. The prayer was developed by Bob Schuchts (my dad), founder of the John Paul II Healing Center, for the Undone women's conferences. The healing prayer is meditative in nature, inviting us into an experience of grace in which we join Mary in relationship to the Holy Family and the Holy Trinity (CCC 533). Never wounded by sin, our pure Mother teaches us how to live in the freedom and fullness of our feminine identity.

This book offers many opportunities to press in deeper to your own feminine identity. The journaling exercises and prayer experiences facilitate areas of your own healing. This book opens new paradigms of truth. It also offers you the perspective that you are not alone in your fear and shame. Appendix III will direct you to other valuable resources as you embark on your journey to living undone.