

On forming clay and chipping marble

There's something amazing about holding your own book in your hands. Like magic, all of those stories and thoughts have moved from fleeting, drifting notions in your mind into the stark reality of paper and ink.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

January 8, 2018



The UPS man knocked on my door, and when I answered, I found a box of paperbacks from HarperOne. Upon opening it, I found a stack of orange books. Author copies.

There's something amazing about holding your own book in your hands. Like magic, all of those stories and thoughts have moved from fleeting, drifting notions in your mind into the stark reality of paper and ink. Flipping through the pages, the letters take on a concreteness, and there is a possibility that they will outlast you. When you're becoming dust, the words will still be bound. When all your digital media has been wiped away, the book will be in a library somewhere. Maybe it's your grandchild's library or maybe it's in every library. Either way would be amazing.

The book is a footprint, a reminder that you walked this planet and you didn't do it alone. Like [Derrida](#) reminds us about our signature, when we write our names down on a formal document, we are preparing for the day when we will not be there. The signature has a significance that standing above a desk and uttering our own name above a piece of paper does not have. I have told these stories a thousand times, but they are now bound and relatable for the moment when I cannot be present.

[*Healing Spiritual Wounds*](#) is a little different than my other books. I moved from the realm of church-how-to, to wrestling with my own demons. Since the book started out as a spiritual memoir, and I often meet people who want to write memoir, I wanted to reflect on the process a bit.

Clay versus marble

When I was writing *Tribal Church* and *Reframing Hope*, it was like working with clay. I needed to fill a certain number of pages, so I wrote an outline and kept adding that moist, pliable earth until I built it up. When I got to the word count, I was basically done. During the editing process, there would be small snippets, here and there, that we would trim off, so that things would be smoother.

As I was writing *Healing Spiritual Wounds*, it was like taking a giant block of marble, and then slowly chipping away at it. I had hundreds of pages—reams of life. Then I had to take that hammer and chisel and carve away each word until some sort of form and substance appeared before me. The chipping was painful, and I didn't have good perspective on what was important and what was not, so I was grateful for numerous editors along the way.

Memoir to self-help

As I worked on the project for years, it was embarrassing. When people would ask, “What are you writing?” I would tell them that I was writing a memoir, and then a thousand masked apologies would follow. I would demure because I knew that I wasn’t wise enough, accomplished enough, old enough, or just plain *enough* to be writing something so intimate.

Then I read something. I wish I could remember where I saw it. I think it was in Jonathan Safran Foer’s [Here I Am](#). Anyways, it said that memoir is typically thinly-veiled self-help. There are many people who would take issue with this. (Elisabeth Gilbert advises against this approach in [Big Magic](#).) But for me, there was something about the shift in thinking that helped me to move the uncomfortable spotlight off of myself to writing something that might help heal the world in some small way. I was able to stop thinking of the book as self-indulgent public therapy to include the reader more. In other words, I was able to move into the form I’m most comfortable with—the sermon. And I could try on the title I long for—a practical theologian.

Speaking of therapy...

I needed a lot of therapy before and during the time I wrote the book. People talk about writing as therapeutic, and it is. But, I have read many memoirs by deeply flawed people. And, I don’t mean “deeply flawed” in the past tense. I mean that it is clear that they really needed to get some help while they worked on their book. We don’t need to be perfect before we start writing, and we should never feign perfection at the cost of our authenticity. We all have our blind spots. Most of us write from our wounds, but we do need to be working on healing them as we sit down to write.