

EXCERPT



Hurting Yet Whole

Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness

December 8, 2020 | \$17, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4807-2

As Liuan Huska went through years of chronic pain, she questioned how the Christian story speaks to our experiences of pain and illness. Countering a gnosticism that pits body against spirit, Huska helps us redefine what it means to find healing and wholeness, even in the midst of ongoing pain.

What Does Healing Really Look Like?

It has been nine years now since the pain first started. Since then I have finished a master's degree, started freelance writing, and become a mother to three little boys. The Pain is still around, though it's not nearly as much of a presence as it used to be. It comes and goes, though it never fully leaves. Certain positions, such as sleeping frequently on my left side, and certain sustained activities, such as walking in flat shoes without support, bring it all back. When I get too physically ambitious, the Pain is like an old friend who calls to say, "I know where you come from—dust and ashes. Ha! You can't fool me!" I've learned to accept what my body is. Sometimes, even, such as when I pushed out a ten-and-a-half pound firstborn child, I marvel at what my body is.

I have wondered if the ways that we talk about and understand healing might not have contributed to my falling apart. What is healing when one has a chronic illness? Can a person still be whole (not just spiritually whole, as we tend to understand it, but wholly whole, that is, living with integrity between body, mind, and spirit) when her body is not functioning properly and she is suffering on many levels? I believe so, though it takes some unlearning of what we have assumed is the good, successful life and of what we have long thought healing looks like.

I have sketched a new vision of healing, one seared by the unrelenting reality of brokenness, pain, and disease. To heal, as I understand it, is to become whole.

Author and educator Parker Palmer writes, "Wholeness doesn't mean perfection: It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life." When Palmer speaks of wholeness, he doesn't have in mind a perfectly functioning body or even a well-thought-out worldview where all the pieces fit together. What he has in mind is closer to the idea of integrity. He uses Douglas Wood's meditation on a jack pine to illustrate:

Jack pines . . . are not lumber trees [and they] won't win many beauty contests either. But to me this valiant old tree, solitary on its own rocky point, is as beautiful as a living thing can be. . . . In the calligraphy of its shape against the sky is written strength of character and perseverance, survival of wind, drought, cold, heat, disease. . . . In its silence it speaks of . . . wholeness . . . an integrity that comes from being what you are.

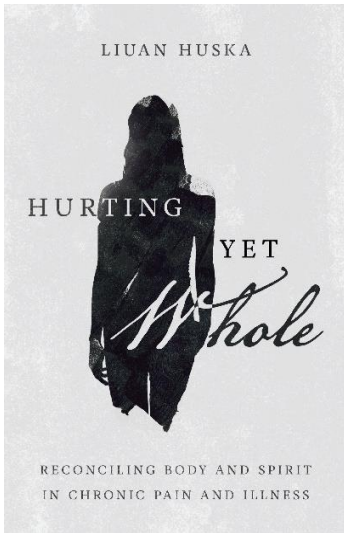


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“*Hurting Yet Whole* is a welcome addition to the literature about living with chronic illness. Liuan Huska weaves her personal experience with theological insight in an accessible and compelling way. This would be a deeply helpful resource for people just beginning to grapple with the reality of chronic illness in their own lives, and anyone desiring to respond to the limits, pains, and contingencies of their own physical body with less enmity and more tenderness.” **Bethany McKinney Fox**, director of student success and adjunct professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, author of *Disability and the Way of Jesus*

Being who you are. For many, the experience of chronic illness pulls the rug out from under our old identities, interests, and life pursuits. We no longer know who we are, or who God is. We have to find a new way to be. In these moments, it is tempting to wish ourselves back to a previous state of being, that “normal” life we used to have when good health was assumed, our bodies were reliable, and God could be found. Too many of us cling to this flimsy ideal when we desperately seek treatment and healing. For me, as my disillusionment with God and the church got deeper, and as I realized that pain and suffering are unavoidable parts of life, I knew I couldn’t go back to the old normal. I had experienced too much darkness, too much loss, that I couldn’t un-experience.

It’s hard to imagine any other way to be whole than of having this certainty of a good life ahead—good health, moderate success in career, family, finances, you know—all those things people tell you are your birthright (well, if you are a middle-class white American). Yet, even as I have let go of these things as givens in life and stared at the broken pieces straight on, I sense there has to be another way to be whole.

If wholeness, as Parker Palmer hints at, is this ability to be who you are, then I want to be who I am now as fully as I can be. I want to integrate these experiences of suffering and brokenness into my being—how I see the world and God and myself in it. I want to take my experiences of bodily pain, this truth that I now know in my tendons and ligaments and flesh, and hold them up against the gospel of Jesus Christ: his incarnation, death, resurrection, and promise of second coming. Will there be resonance, connection, unity . . . wholeness? Will the gospel illuminate my experiences? Will my experiences illuminate the gospel?

In fact, the Christian story has a lot to say about our experiences of chronic pain and illness. While some may think of faith as victory over pain and suffering (which it is, ultimately), what we see in Jesus’ life is not an escape from the everyday drag of having a body that is falling apart, but an embrace of the body and all the discomforts, inconveniences, and embarrassments that come with it. God became a human body. And what’s more, God still is a human body even now in the resurrected Christ.

We are souls in bodies, but we are also bodies with souls. We will never not be bodies, even though the implicit messages we have heard in the church may have misled us to believe we will one day shrug off all physical encumbrances.

We must learn to be fully human, not superhuman, by living within our embodied limits, not transcending them. We must make peace with our tenuous existence, susceptible at any moment to devastating illnesses, cancer, and even death. We must realize that our vulnerability is exactly what opens us up to relying on others, and, through these relationships, becoming whole.

—Adapted from the introduction

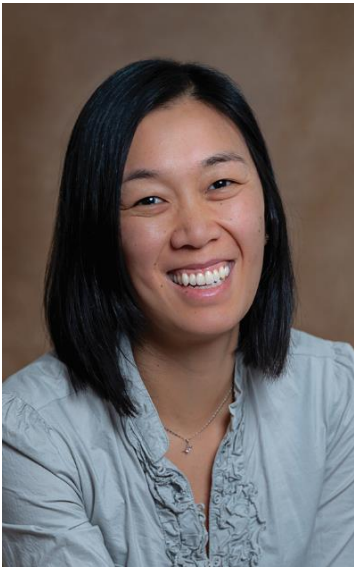


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"We have another theologian on our hands! Here you have a wise, studied, and informative look at living as an embodied human being. While reflecting on her own story, Liuan Huska thinks carefully and writes well about the meaning of wholeness given our illnesses or chronic illnesses. This book is powerful because it is a lived theology, a practical theology of the body in narrative form, not detached speculation. Incarnational. May we sit at her feet and learn." **Marlena Graves**, author of *The Way Up Is Down: Finding Yourself by Forgetting Yourself and A Beautiful Disaster*

Reframing Wholeness

"Hurting Yet Whole speaks to an issue every Christian—every person—faces: How do we live well in bodies that don't always work 'right'? Every human on the planet has, or will, experience the 'malfunctioning' of our own bodies. But is this only about loss? Can we only think of this in terms of what is wrong? How have those who have gone before us, and members of diverse cultures, thought about and experienced these same phenomena? In the vein of Malcolm Gladwell or Andy Crouch, Liuan Huska has made accessible sophisticated research from areas such as anthropology, biology, psychology, and theology, together with narratives of her own and others, to offer this gift of a book. If you have a body or know someone who does, this book is for you."

Brian M. Howell, professor of anthropology at Wheaton College

Liuan Huska is a freelance writer and speaker focusing on topics of embodiment and spirituality. She has written for publications such as *Church Health Reader*, *In Touch Magazine*, *CT Women*, *Sojourners*, and *Hyphen Magazine*. She lives in West Chicago, Illinois, with her husband, Matthew, and their children.

Liuan brings an anthropologist's lens to her writing, having studied at Wheaton College (BA in Anthropology) and the University of Chicago (MA in Social Sciences). How do people make meaning of their world? What kind of cultural tools (stories, metaphors, core values) do they use to interpret their lives?

Chronic pain has been a part of Liuan's life for about a decade. Unwilling to ignore the struggle, transcend pain, or accept the message that, "You're fine, as long as you're spiritually well," Liuan set out to know God through her pain, vulnerability, and limits. This book is the result of that exploration. In *Hurting Yet Whole*, Liuan desires to reframe wholeness not just as physical wellness or spiritual wellness but as integrating both the physical and spiritual.



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