

[00:00:00] **Candice Schutter:** Welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and another episode in the 'cult'ure series.

I want to offer another quick shout out to patrons of The Deeper Pulse whose monthly contributions are keeping the main feed of this podcast alive.

This work continues to expand, and there are now a variety of bonus episode collections that are available over on Patreon. Resources for anti-cult education. 50-plus episodes of *Deconstructing Dogma*. And *Subject To Change*, a series of unscripted videos where I'm coming to you solo, responding to listener questions, sharing personal stories, and talking about whatever I'm feeling moved by in the moment.

You can check it all out over at [patreon.com/thedeeperpulse](https://patreon.com/thedeeperpulse).

Okay, let's dive into today's content.

Please be advised, today's episode makes reference to spiritual and religious abuse. And as always, the stories and opinions shared here are based on personal experience and are not intended to malign any individual, group, or organization.

Welcome back y'all. Today we're jumping right in.

Spiritual and religious abuse. It doesn't get nearly enough airtime. And I can say from firsthand experience, harm is still harm, even when it's all zhuzhed up in love and light.

And when we talk about the harm that happens in religious and spiritual communities, for some folks, the word *abuse* feels way too heavy-handed. And I just want to say, if that's true for you, it's a topic I really dive into way back in episode 59. So if you're getting hung up on that word, I really encourage you to circle back.

But don't go yet. Stick around. Because today's episode features another very important conversation that you won't wanna miss.

When we speak about spiritual and religious abuse, soft power coercion is very often at work. And here are a few ways that the subtleties of persuasion can show up in spiritual and religious communities.

First. The misuse of scripture, dogma, or spiritualese to manipulate and or exploit for the sake of personal gain or in collective sacrifice to an idealistic cause.

Also, reverential treatment of leaders, be they self anointed or chosen, whose purity is reflexively assumed, to whom superhuman authority is granted, and for whom relational accountability is virtually non-existent.

Another red flag. Excessive encouragement to regularly pay money and or to donate labor, time, and life force energy to a cause wherein the goal post is continually shifting and only a few folks at the top are profiting off of the freely-given efforts of the many.

And let's add one more to the list. Pressure to conform to a code of conduct that largely limits personal agency and self expression, often through the use of a shared language, thought-terminating cliches, and a culture that socially reinforces silence, secrecy, and obedience.

And all of this resulting in. Feelings of isolation from self and the outside world. Cognitive dissonance and dissociation when confronted with evidence that contradicts group theology. And understandable feelings of terror at the thought of leaving behind a community, a sense of belonging, and a spiritual, religious, or political identity.

Trauma can be a slow-burn experience. And abuse can show up in our so-called safe spaces when we least expect it.

January is Spiritual Abuse Awareness Month, and today's episode is dedicated to anyone who has experienced a spiritual wound.

What is a spiritual wound? It's the moral injury that results when the love we receive is loaded. When our trust and devotion to the good is somehow leveraged and used against us. When what brings our life a sense of meaning and purpose is misused to control, exploit, or overpower.

And it's a *spiritual* wound because it disconnects us from our sense of self and our place in the world. There's a resulting feeling of chronic self-doubt and an ongoing sense that our very humanness, our reflexive way of being is somehow leading us astray.

Now when we talk about cult dynamics, most of the time we think about it in terms of being in and getting out. Because of what Dr. Janja Lalich refers to as *bounded choice*, separating from a high demand individual or community, well, it ain't easy. Again, cognitive dissonance, all that we've invested, and an all in sense of belonging that's pretty hard to find elsewhere. Exiting can be arduous, painful, and difficult. I ought to know, I have plenty of first hand experience. And it is, as they say, a BFD.

But it's also just the first step on the road of cult recovery. And this week's guest is here to help us understand all of this a bit better.

Nikki G is a certified trauma recovery coach who helps survivors recover and thrive after religious trauma and cult involvement. She's the survivor of more than one narcissistic relationship, religious trauma, and multiple cultic communities. Nikki is the founder and CEO of Nikki G Speaks LLC, which provides survivors with individual coaching, online community, and psychoeducation related to religious trauma, narcissistic abuse, and cult involvement. Nikki is a co-host of the podcast *Surviving The Black Church*, where she and her co hosts delve into conversations regarding religious trauma in The Black Church. She's the co-founder of the *Black Religious Trauma Recovery Network*, which is a resource built to

educate, support, and empower Black religious trauma survivors. Nikki, also sits on the Board of Directors for *Tears of Eden*, a nonprofit organization that supports survivors who have experienced abuse in the evangelical community. She is also a member of the *International Association of Trauma Recovery Coaching* and is a member of *International Cultic Studies Association*, where she keeps abreast of the latest information regarding spiritual abuse, cults, and how trauma and abuse affects survivors.

I first discovered Nikki's work back in March of last year, when I tuned into the *Surviving The Black Church* podcast that she co-hosts with her colleagues, Jonathan Carrington and Hugh Kelly. Midway into the first season, I reached out to Nikki to forge a connection, and I'm so thrilled to finally be featuring her voice on the pod.

Keep in mind, the conversation you're about to hear, it's just the beginning. Nikki and I already have plans to record a very timely election-year follow up to this episode that we're both super eager to share with you.

Stay tuned to the end to hear more.

Now let's welcome Nikki G.

I'm so glad we're here together again. I had such a nice time chatting with you. Um, gosh, was it a week or two ago? We just had such a lovely talk. And I've been really looking forward to this. So.

[00:08:06] **Nikki G:** Me too. Me too.

[00:08:07] **Candice Schutter:** So you've been really busy this month. It's January, which is a big month for you. So tell us you've been up to.

[00:08:16] **Nikki G:** Well, for the listeners out there, January is considered Spiritual Abuse Awareness Month. It's also, ironically, Human Trafficking Month, and sometimes there's an intersectionality with that. But I have been helping to highlight survivors during this month. And I like to encourage people who have, you know, social media platforms to just, kind of, let's amplify what survivors have gone through with spiritual abuse and just the needs that that they have navigating all of that.

So I kind of preface say. Okay, January's coming on What's the beginning of the year and everybody gets excited and they have their to do list But my to do list is usually being very busy.

[00:08:57] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. Raising awareness. I love the work that you do. And, I would love for you to just introduce yourself to the listeners and tell us a little bit about your work and what you're doing specifically, raising awareness around spiritual and religious abuse.

[00:09:12] **Nikki G:** I'm Nikki G. I'm a certified trauma recovery coach. And I love to support survivors who have been through narcissistic abuse, religious trauma, and cult

involvement. I support survivors through one on one coaching, and, you know, resources from my social media accounts, to psychoeducation, to speaking engagements, and so on.

Um, I try to support survivors, because I remember when I was walking to what I call this long hallway of loneliness, confusion. I did not understand what was going on, what I had been through. And um, I don't think that's something I'll ever forget. So you know, my heart is, you know, to be able to support survivors. Because it, it is a very insidious abuse, spiritual abuse, and um, you know, it is important to empower survivors, to remind them that though a lot of this trauma and a lot of this abuse might've separated them from their selves. They may feel separated from others. They may even feel separated from God, their creator.

But recovery looks like being able to establish and reconnect some of those connections. And so coming back home to self, it's one of the signature things that I like to help walk survivors through. Because once you can come back here and be okay in your body, you know, the recovery journey just, it, it gets a little easier.

So that's a little bit about what I do.

[00:10:46] **Candice Schutter:** Mm hmm. Yeah. What a beautiful summary. And I feel like your description of, of what that hallway folks are walking, it makes so much sense why, you know, this January sense of community and connection, why it's so important to you. Like I I can hear that.

So you want to speak a little bit to the loss of connection and why it's so important that we find community in new ways.

[00:11:10] **Nikki G:** For those who have experienced spiritual abuse, religious trauma, we can talk about the terminology later but the loneliness, the level of loneliness is so paramount. I mean, I believe any abuse survivor can feel that. But for many, the church, the mosque, you know, the spiritual community, it was their whole lifeline.

And so to be disconnected from that. And oftentimes not by choice. Many leave because they don't feel safe in their bodies. Because the environment is no longer safe. Because there are too many instances of surmounting abuse that they cannot remain. And so they feel ostracized. They feel alone.

They even feel alone sometimes with their own loved ones. It could be their spouse, it could be, you know, their family of origin. It could be their best friends. They may love them, but they may not know how to love them after experiencing such horrific abuse. So the level of loneliness is, is very high for survivors when they exit these communities.

And so, during Spiritual Abuse Awareness Month, I try to highlight this part of the population to let them know you're not alone. We see you. We hear you. Right?

And even recent times, there's so many different organizations, churches, that are in the news. And a lot of people right now are experiencing a lot of, uh, religious trauma or spiritual trauma because they are finding out in a lot of the spaces that they congregated and

worshiped or connected spiritually, that it wasn't what they thought it was. And just the reality of this congregation, this leader, this community was not what I thought it was, can bring a lot of terror and shock to the system.

And so, you know, this, these are so many reasons why I like to highlight, not just extend resources during this month. But I like to describe what it's like for an a spiritual abuse survivor when they leave. It is not pretty.

But um, I will continue to do this as long as, you know, that this is the work that I feel called to do in this season.

And so yeah.

[00:13:26] **Candice Schutter:** Well, thank goodness. It's so important. And, you know, speaking of that, just for the listeners out there, you know, I, I met you. Met you, quote unquote, met you on Instagram.

[00:13:37] **Nikki G:** It's okay. I get it.

[00:13:37] **Candice Schutter:** That's how it works.

We connected on Instagram. I was following your work and just admiring what you did. And then I tuned into your podcast, which I really want to recommend to listeners, *Surviving The Black Church*. And I just immediately, just felt compelled to reach out to you. It was after I listened to an episode that I reached out to you directly. And I just really appreciate the work that you and your colleagues are doing on that podcast.

Do you want to tell the listeners a little bit about that podcast. And, you know, how it came be and what it is.

[00:14:08] **Nikki G:** So let me, I guess backtrack a little bit so I can tell you how we started the podcast.

I originated from a religious narcissistic family system. So I grew up in this environment where, you know, my own perspectives and my connection with my own reality was distorted. I was taught and almost, kind of, groomed to rely on authority figures perspective and their reality. I mean, as a young child, that's a normal thing that happens in the beginning. You know, you're five years old, you don't really know what reality is per se, so you do rely on your family and your caregivers and your parents.

However as you get older and you know, religious teachings and different things are implemented, after a while you start realizing, hmm, my views, my perspectives are not welcome. What I am perceiving is deemed as being too sensitive or too much. Or you're perceiving this wrong or maybe it's a wound you have. And so I grew up in this environment where I learned that my needs and my perspective and what reality was to me was not sufficient.

So I stuffed and I stuffed and I suppressed. And I learned that Nikki wasn't enough. Plus, in a narcissistic family system, roles are energetically given out whether you want them or not. And so, the role that I had, unfortunately, was the scapegoat. And, and that role is where a lot of the issues in the family, the wounds, the trauma, this dysfunction and the pain of carrying that is put on the scapegoat to carry. Because usually the scapegoat, they're the empathic ones. They feel. They may see, but they're blamed for everything.

And so, I didn't know this. I wasn't conscious of this when this was happening. But I'm speaking of this because this programmed and indoctrinated me to start to feel like this was normal. So as I moved into adolescence and moved into adulthood, I found myself connected to a lot of narcissistic relationships.

And because it was a religious, narcissistic family system, by the age of 19, I had given my life to Christ. I made the religion of my family mine. And I was excited. You know, I'm like, wow, this is amazing. And then I found myself in my first cult, probably around the age of 20. And, um, it was filled with young people. A lot of them loved to pray. They loved to worship.

The leader, the pastor, she called herself an apostle. It was a she. And her husband was the one who directed the worship. And, you know, I thought this was the best place for me to be. I'm home around my peers. We're on fire for God. And I did not realize it until later on that it was a cult.

This set me on a course to cult hop, which is a term in the cult world where you are constantly going in and out of different cults. Sometimes you repeat the same cult, because you feel like you cannot exist outside of that cult. And, I wasn't aware that I was doing this, because I was taught that outside of the cult is demonic. The devil's out there. You won't make it. You need to be inside this community. And if not this community, some house of worship. Some place where God is mentioned so you can be sustained. And so I continued to spiral and found myself in five different cults over the course of my life.

[00:17:56] **Candice Schutter:** What would you say the time period was that you were hopping. Age of 19 till?.

[00:18:02] **Nikki G:** Yeah, till, uh, my late thirties, maybe. Mid-thirties. I, I don't remember the timeframe. Um, I know the last cult that I was in, I left in 2015, the end of 2015. So, I have not been in a cult since then. Like, oh.

[00:18:20] **Candice Schutter:** Fingers crossed everybody.

[00:18:22] **Nikki G:** I know, I know, because you know what? People, there is such a stereotype when it comes to cults that people think like, oh, well you have to be unlearned. You have to be really a lot of trauma, a lot of wounds, you know. But anybody can become a part of a cult.

I mean, we look at this country now, I'm not gonna get political. But anybody can be swept into a cult. And people don't just join cults. You believe this mirage that's presented to you.

And sometimes our internal needs that we may not be aware of, that oftentimes were not met in childhood, we look for these communities to meet those needs.

You know, I wasn't aware that I was going into these communities looking to belong, looking for love, looking for guidance, looking to have a, a stronger relationship with God or higher power.

And somebody might say, Nikki, what's wrong with that? There's normalcy to that. But what happens is, you gravitate to these communities that pervert those basic needs, that pervert those normal longings that a human person has. And I wasn't aware of myself and my needs. And so it kept repeating, repeating until I said, wait a minute, we gotta do something about that.

We can talk about that later.

[00:19:41] **Candice Schutter:** So the cults that you were involved in, were they all religious or spiritual in nature, or were there different varieties?

[00:19:48] **Nikki G:** They were, different to some degree. Um, the first cult I was in was a predominantly Black cult. And I think they would fall under the non-denominational. This is a terminology they used. But the leader was considered what she said, an apostle. And there was a lot of gifts of the spirit, demonstration of the gifts of the spirit. A lot of the prophetic language, a lot of the apostolic, uh, language was used. Tongues laying on hands, deliverance. Um, you know, demonstrative worship, praying for Israel and all this stuff like that. Some political, uh, streams flew in there too. But, uh, that was how the first cult was wired.

And then the second one was when I moved to Kansas City, Missouri and became a part of the International House of Prayer in Kansas City.

So.

[00:20:39] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. Which is.

[00:20:39] **Nikki G:** Which is probably a whole other episode.

[00:20:40] **Candice Schutter:** A whole other episode.

[00:20:42] **Nikki G:** Yes, yes, yes, yes,

Um, but to kind of go back to your original question.

[00:20:48] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:20:49] **Nikki G:** So I, you know, after I left my last cult, I just kind of shut down. And I just said, Nikki, we gotta figure this out. Why does this keep happening? Yes, the reality is



there was a lot of abuse. There was a lot of manipulation, all that stuff. That's true. But why do you keep repeating this? What am, what am I not seeing?

And so I kind of went down a hallway, if you will. I don't know this hallway thing today, but I went down a .I went down this hallway of learning me, right?

And being in a place where I said, I'm going to be strong in the sense of I'm going to peer into how I got here. I'm gonna read the literature. I'm gonna listen to the videos. I'm gonna go to therapy. And I'm gonna face parts of myself that I probably was running from when I ran to these communities.

And when I said I was gonna be strong. I really mean that, 'cause for a lot of survivors, it's hard to get to that place. Because many often feel, if I start to see what's going on within, then that dismisses what the abusive leader did to me.

No, it doesn't. It can be both.

Right?

[00:22:04] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[00:22:05] **Nikki G:** It's not our fault. But I think it's important for us to see how we got here so we can stop the cycle. So I'm not in a sixth cult, you know what I mean? So I have to be strong and face some things about me. And actually pull on that thread that's sometimes hidden under the sand, that goes all the way back to childhood. Like what I'm talking to you about now, I didn't know that then.

But in time, I didn't do it all immediately. But over time, as I got strong enough to face parts of myself, with help, with a therapist, you know. Not just reading information, but with a therapist. I was able to see that connection.

But I still wasn't trying to share my story or even do the work I'm doing now. But 2020, COVID happened. An app called, Clubhouse was originated. And I got on the app, and I started, you know, going into different.

And for those who don't know, it's a social media app. But it's a, it's, it's an audio app only. So you go in and there's a series of different topics that are created with different houses or clubs. And, you know, if you like Marvel movies, you can go into that club. If you like, you know, Led Zeppelin, you can go into that club. If you want to go into the Prayer and Prophecy Club, you can go into that club.

And so I found myself going into various clubs. But I would frequent ones that were talking about narcissism and the narcissistic family system. And then I started sharing about my religious cult experiences. And one thing led to another, and I said, uh, ,I think I should be doing this a little bit more. And I kind of, had a little prodding.



But I started a club and for like two and a half years, I educated survivors. People came up on the stage. People were sharing their hearts. The club is still on clubhouse if anybody wants to go and listen to old rooms. I have ceased to do them now, but they're still archive.

But that is where I met my colleagues for the podcast we started last year called *Surviving The Black Church*. And we got together. We noticed a lot of people in the Black Community were coming up on stage. And they were sharing their stories and said, I have not found any place where I could do this. Where have you been?

We've had older people that have come on that platform in the Black Community and said, I wish my grandmother could hear you all sharing your stories and being such a safe place. And we I even remember someone that was a part of the Jim Jones cult. She was a child when, um, it happened. And somehow or another, her and a group of kids were not on the base when it occurred. Somehow they got away and they came back and realized what happened. But she's well into her maybe fifties or or sixties. She sounds so strong. She came up and spoke to us several times. That was such an honor.

So we realized we wanna move this beyond that platform. And, uh, we decided to start a podcast that speaks to Black religious trauma or spiritual abuse survivors. Now, we named it that, not to shut down the institution, not to bash the institution. But to highlight, hey, there are some people that are *surviving*, because of the abuse that they've experienced in The Black Church.

And so, you know, we're hopefully we should get into our second season, uh, in the springtime.

[00:25:38] **Candice Schutter**: Yeah. Yeah, I look forward to it. Definitely.

[00:25:41] **Nikki G**: Mm-Hmm.

[00:25:43] **Candice Schutter**: So, I wanna talk about some of what you speak to on the podcast in terms of supporting folks who've been marginalized and how they experience spiritual and religious trauma.

[00:25:51] **Nikki G**: Mm-Hmm.

[00:25:51] **Candice Schutter**: And the way intersectionality plays into all that.

Before we go there, though, I would love for you to help us define those terms. Spiritual and religious trauma and abuse. Do you differentiate between the two, or you wanna speak to that?

[00:26:05] **Nikki G**: Well, you know, the thing is, it's a new area that is being pioneered out. So I don't, from my knowledge at least, um, I don't know that there's one, uh, therapist, one mental health professional, one organization that have distinctly defined it and everybody goes by that. We're not there yet.

[00:26:27] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[00:26:27] **Nikki G:** So it's very nuanced. There's a lot of interchangeability about the terminology, right?

So spiritual abuse, what is it? It's the, and there's several definitions for that, too. Many people define it in different ways, but at the end of the day, the components should have the power and control dynamic, right? So it's the manipulation, the exploitation of an individual's faith, their beliefs, their spiritual practices. And it's often by someone in authority, someone that they trust. And the person is in a position of power, and they use that power, and they use the religious beliefs and the doctrine to exert power over you.

And so, when someone's going through this, fear is instilled by these leaders. You feel a lot of guilt, shame, unwavering compliance. Like I don't have my own autonomy, my own agency. I have to be at church. I have to go to this program. I have to serve on this committee. And you feel like you don't have choice.

So, that's kind of like the nuts and bolts of spiritual abuse. But as far as how it's defined and how it's used. Um, okay, so I've heard some people say when I use the term spiritual abuse, I like to refer to it where it's in the setting of a spiritual area. So yoga community, wellness community, new age community, psychedelics. You know, basically where they don't have an actual book or a text derived around a religion, you know.

You can go to a new age. Um, I don't wanna name drop, but there's like a documentary out about a lady named Teal Swan. So I'm

[00:28:16] **Candice Schutter:** Oh yeah. I'm familiar.

[00:28:18] **Nikki G:** Yeah.

[00:28:18] **Candice Schutter:** You can drop that name. It's been dropped here before.

[00:28:20] **Nikki G:** Okay, good. Yes.. like, okay.

Um, but she is, what I would, you know, people will refer to, that was spiritual abuse. There is not a text. She is the guru. She is the definer of all the education and the awareness that she's pushing out in her community.

Whereas religious abuse is more an organized religion. You know, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, they have a text, a staple text. And a lot of abuse takes that text and perverts it and manipulates it and, you know, exerts power over people.

So, but some people say, I'm still referring to it as spiritual abuse because the abuse has greatly impacted my human spirit.

[00:29:07] **Candice Schutter:** Absolutely. Yes.

[00:29:08] **Nikki G:** The entirety of who I am has been severely impacted down to the spiritual level. So yes, it was in a religious environment. Yes, it was in a church. Yes, it was in a mosque. But my spirit was greatly impacted. So some people use it that way, too.

So, but I'm leaning more on, let's be more, uh, intentional about defining the lanes. 'Cause either one, religious or spiritual abuse, it is impacting the human spirit.

So, but I like the distinction because you new age yoga.

[00:29:46] **Candice Schutter:** Yep.

[00:29:46] **Nikki G:** Wellness communities, it's harder to see the abuse, because there's no text, there's no, you know. You have people that said they've been on the mount, whatever, and they've come down with all of these, you know, ways you can align your chakra and ways you can do this. And they have the ancient mysteries to, you know. And so people just listen to that leader, um, versus, you know, a text.

And when you have organized religion, when you have a text, the leader can spiritually or religiously abuse while you are in their presence, while you guys are congregating. And that can continue to be perpetuated while you're home with that text. Because you've already been indoctrinated to see the text through the leader's eyes.

So, there are different dynamics about it. Yeah.

[00:30:37] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. Thank you for being so thorough with that. Because I think it's a really important distinction.

[00:30:42] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:30:43] **Candice Schutter:** For listeners of this podcast and the wellness arena. And something that's very common in those circles is, you know, *we're spiritual, not religious, we're spiritual, not religious.*

And sort of the undercurrent of that is these things, these abusive things that happen in religious spaces can't possibly happen here 'cause *we're spiritual, we're not religious.* Like, sort thrown around in that way. And so to really underscore what spiritual abuse is, and yes, people who experience religious abuse also experience spiritual abuse and you don't have to have religion

[00:31:16] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:31:17] **Candice Schutter:** in place to experience that, I think is just something that's super important for us to highlight and underscore. To validate a lot of the listeners out there who tune into this podcast, who wouldn't consider themselves religious, but have most certainly experienced exactly what you described.

So thank you for laying that out so clearly. I think it's, it's super important to normalize both of the terms.

[00:31:39] **Nikki G:** I think that's the word, normalize, you know. And a, a lot of documentaries, I'm grateful that they are doing ones to show the both-and. To show what it looks like in a more religious, organized setting, and then also a spiritual one so people can, can, see the difference and, and feel validated. And, and feel that their experience is being spoken to.

So, Yeah, I agree with you.

[00:32:03] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:32:04] **Candice Schutter:** So how would you say that marginalized folks experience spiritual and religious abuse differently given the systemic, um, I guess abuses that they live in every day. Like what, how does that show up differently and what are considerations around all that that we need to be talking about?

[00:32:32] **Nikki G:** Well, I guess that's where I can introduce, you know, what that looks like, particularly in the Black Community, because that's what I'm speaking to. But there are other minorities that I can't wait till they start sharing their stories. What it looks like in the Hispanic community, what it looks like in the Asian community, because it does look different. And it, there are similarities to their experience and our experience. But still the same, these experiences need to be spoken to, right.

So, you know, within the Black Community there is a lot of root system that we have to unpack before we even can get to what happened in our church, you know? And then before we can even get into what happened in our church, then sometimes you didn't have to look at what happened in your family of origin. Then you have to backtrack that and look at, you know, what happened to us as a people and our connection, I'm gonna talk about Christianity because that's what I'm mostly speaking to. And our connection to Christianity. You know, being enslaved, being brought over to America, being stripped of our cultural experiences, our customs, and then our forms of spirituality.

And I'm not saying that everybody that came over did not connect with Christianity. I mean, obviously I don't know that I wasn't there, but majority of us had different expressions of spirituality. And all of that was stripped and we were forced to adopt Christianity as our spiritual source.

But we were forced to adopt it under the guise that God or the Christian God was okay with us being enslaved, was okay with our oppressors oppressing us. There's even a Slave Bible that exists where portions of the Bible were removed in case slaves got their hands on it and was able to read, that they would not be able to see the portions where the God of Christianity freed the Israelites and Moses parted the Red Sea. And you know, he wanted freedom for us. And the scriptures around freedom, a lot of that was removed. And a lot that was kept was

scriptures around suffering and being subservient and obeying your masters because they have rule over you. That was kept.

And so the Bible was used as a weapon. And a, and a tool to enslave us and cause us to be subservient, to submit and to obey. That is how we cut our teeth on Christianity. And so, you know, it is.

And then a lot of people and, uh, a lot of enslaved during that time, when they started to learn how to read, a lot of them cut their teeth on reading the Bible. So can you imagine, that's in our DNA as a people. That our ancestors learned how to read by learning to read the Bible. It was called the Talking Book.

,And many of them would hear their slave masters reading it. They would listen in then and then some for those who were able to read. Some that came from the North, came down to the South. They brought some bibles and started to try to help the rest of the people, particularly the southerners, to learn how to read using the scriptures. So they would congregate in the church. The older would teach the younger. They even used worship and worship songs as a form of teaching how to read.

They had a style called call and response. So the worship singer or the leader, they would use small phrases. You know, I don't know, like, *look what the Lord has done*. And the congregants would have to repeat it. Then they would say it again and they would repeat it. And maybe they had it on something where they could see the letters. And this is how they also taught them how to read.

So to this day in The Black Church, that call and response style is still used within The Black Church today. I mean, it's not used to teach people how to read and write, but that was the origins of that.

So that connection. And then, kind of stepping back. The Black Church was a place where my people got resourced and empowered and encouraged to endorse slavery and Jim Crow and the Reconstruction era. Uh, many singers, many musicians that you know now, secular singers and musicians, they cut their teeth being in The Black Church, finding out they can sing, finding out they can dance. And many politicians, you know, started in The Black Church. So it was almost like a, a womb that produced so many, uh, and so many lanes and spheres in society from The Black Church.

So you have that connection to the Bible. You have this, uh, religion being enforced on us. You have so many people found this as a place of respite and community and connection. Can you imagine for those who, that have that in their lineage now, 2024, experiencing high levels of religious abuse within The Black Church, how hard it is on a DNA level to leave.

[00:37:52] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[00:37:53] **Nikki G:** You know.

And if you leave, there's generational pressure to remain. It doesn't matter.

And again, let me preface this with this. This is not every Black Church. And I can't speak for every Black Church, right? But even the reason why we did the podcast is to highlight, many people in are experiencing verbal abuse within The Black Church. Where a pastor will be on the pulpit and if you didn't come to church the Sunday beforehand, he is berating you from the microphone. Sometimes it will get as bad as him asking you to stand up as if he's going to give a prophetic word to you. And this is public, in the midst of the, the service.

And so you have that person feeling abused and traumatized. And then you have secondary trauma from people that are witnessing this, and it's, and instilling fear.

And, you know, there are teachings on suffering, ironically. You would think, not to say that many would stay away from it, but it wouldn't be used as much as it is. Certain doctrines, doctrine of hell, the doctrine of suffering, a lot of these themes are used a lot within The Black Church. The unfortunate part is many leaders have learned how to abuse from their oppressor.

[00:39:19] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. Yeah. Mm-Hmm.

[00:39:21] **Nikki G:** And so just to come into awareness for a Black religious trauma survivor or Black, you know, spiritual abuse survivor, that this is what they've experienced. It takes a lot of psychoeducation. It takes lot of awareness. Because we have been trained that love and abuse go together.

[00:39:46] **Candice Schutter:** Right, right.

[00:39:48] **Nikki G:** And it's in our bodies, that this familiar. This is okay. And grandma always used to say, *Baby, a little church hurt, don't hurt nobody.*

So that's in ingrained in me. So if I'm in a, a service and there's abusive things happening, I am thinking that this is more of hurt. And, and that is something I wanted to discuss on here. Because the terminology that's used within The Black Church regarding all this is not spiritual abuse, religious abuse, religious trauma. It's often *church hurt* is the terminology that's used, a lot.

I'm grateful that the discussion is happening. So that's plus, right? But church hurt, you will hear mostly Black people. And I, and I'm not saying it's, it's relegated to just Black people, but we will say church hurt more than anything else.

And while the terminology is starting the conversation, it can be a grave disservice to those who are literally being sexually abused, emotionally abused, spiritually abused in these churches. And

[00:40:55] **Candice Schutter:** So when the term church heard is used, what is meant? Is it a way of sort of waving it away? Like, this is just something that is a part of process?

It's like a gaslighting term.

[00:41:05] **Nikki G:** Yeah. There you go. See you, you know what's up.

Like initially, I think, and I forget the name of the guy that, that used the terminology within a Black Church. He's a pastor. But initially it, it was supposed to intend to refer to pain, sometimes inflicted by religious leaders, institutions, and/or religious congregants.

I'll give you an example. So let's say I'm in the church and I can sing a house down. And the worship leader,

I can't though just FYI, I can't.

And the worship leader says to me, *Hey, Nikki, next Sunday I want you to lead out on the song we're gonna sing.*

Yeah. Okay, great. So I'm all excited. I'm home practicing everything like that.

I get to worship rehearsal Friday night. I walk in and there's somebody else rehearsing early before worship rehearsal starts, and they're singing the song. I'm coming in a little confused, like, okay, I was on time. What, you know, what's the problem? The leader says nothing to me. He starts the, the worship practice, rehearsal. The other person leads the song, the choir backs him up. And it's over and everybody just goes home. And he never acknowledges me. He doesn't say anything to me.

Now, that may hurt me a little bit, you know?

I'm like, what happened? He didn't even anything, you know? Right. And that may impact me a little bit. And you know, not to go into, that's another conversation like the impact of trauma. It's more about, not the event, but how somebody responds to it, right?

So.

[00:42:37] **Candice Schutter:** Right.

[00:42:38] **Nikki G:** I'm assuming that someone will respond to it feeling slighted, feeling a little rejected, you know? But they may have a conversation with the worship leader later, and he may say, you know what? I totally forgot I told you that. I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me? Sometimes it happens, sometime it doesn't.

But there was hurt and there was hurt and pain in that situation. Pain from the worship leader not letting me sing the song. But church hurt is putting everything in the same category.

You think about if you go to emergency room, if somebody, God forbid, had got, uh, shot a gun and they had to be rushed to the emergency room versus little old me that got a cut on my finger as I was cutting up tomatoes. I go in. The triage nurse is gonna assess what my injuries are, the my severity of pain, like where am I on that scale. And who needs to see who first, right?



Religious trauma is speaking to perhaps people who have experienced horrendous abuse within The Black Church by the hands of a lot of these leaders. You know, the prophetic manipulation being asked to come to the altar call, and they come and lay hands on you and start saying the most craziest things that you cannot get out of your system three years later.

This is where there is, there is a spectrum. And I think it just, it's a disservice and it is a form of bypassing.

And, and the reason why I say all this is this. Had I known what I was experiencing in these five different, these cults, was not church hurt, but actually abuse, and I was experiencing religious trauma. I would've potentially tried to get some help. But I was taught, when you go through things, you just suffer for Christ's sake. He's gonna reward you. You roll up your sleeves. You wipe your tears. You put your makeup on, and you go back to church on Sunday. You go back on Wednesday. And you shout through it, and you pray through it, and you fast through it and you gonna be okay. That's what the church mothers taught me. That's what their grandma and their grand grandfathers taught them.

So this thing of just suffer and endure like a good soldier when you experience church hurt. You'll be all right. God will make sure your emotions are okay.

But a lot of the young folks that's been in a Black Church have been coming out and saying, no ma'am, that's not what we've been dealing with.

I'm depressed.

[00:45:15] **Candice Schutter:** Good for them.

[00:45:16] **Nikki G:** feel like I don't have my agency anymore. I'm dealing depression, and I go to my mom and she tells me to just put on the whole armor of God. She tells me I have the mind of Christ, and I need to just shake off these depressive thoughts, and it's probably a demon.

And I'm, I, I hope I'm not, you know, triggering anybody when I say that. But this is the reality for a lot of those in, in The Black Church that when we try to get help, it is shut down, minimized, and invalidated.

[00:45:49] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

It tracks so much, even though. It, it's fascinating hearing these details because having never been in an organized religion like regularly, for me, I'm just like seeing these parallels in terms of the, the spiritual trauma and abuse. And how it's not *church hurt* in the, the new age wellness world, but it is *never be a victim*.

So that's the line that we're fed is like, well, you just never be a victim. Like about, you know, taking back your personal power. And no one can make you feel anything. Like all of that. It's the same mechanism of control, it's just spun in different language, right. It's the same thing.

[00:46:30] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm.

[00:46:31] **Candice Schutter:** And it's ignoring that spectrum that you talked about.

Like, yeah, there is a moment when you know, maybe I'm not gonna take that personally. It's like a small thing that. But then that lens gets applied to these extreme situations where a leader is, you know, berating or abusing power. And it's like, well, you're just being a victim. It's a similar thing, right.

[00:46:51] **Nikki G:** It's a similar thing. And it just invalidates the survivor. It makes you think, and I hate to use this term, but I wanna say it for the sake of, I know a lot of survivors probably feel this way or have heard this. It makes you feel like you're crazy. That you're, you know, are entertaining delusions, that it's you and not them.

And we start to rationalize it. We start to find scriptures or spiritual quotes that we can, you know, just spiritually bypass this to continue to exist in abusive systems.

And I, I just, I think on a societal level, I'm glad we talking about trauma. I'm glad there's information talking about trauma. But we really need to do more about abuse. Because the trauma, you know, the, it is, it's the impact. It is how we respond to what happened to us. But if we can't identify the actual event for what it is, we're gonna be stuck in this vortex of, I have these responses, but it's not abuse. But I can't sleep. But it's not abuse. But I'm feeling suicidal ideations. It's not abuse.

My church member told me that. The pastor said that. My mom said that, you know.

[00:48:07] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[00:48:07] **Nikki G:** I'm not victim. But I'm still going through depressive states. You know, like we have to start, really start to unroll and unpack what abuse is, 'cause many, whether you, black, green, yellow, Elmo, whatever. I like Elmo. Um, oh.

If you are a human being, nine times out of ten, either you or someone you know has experienced some form of abuse. And a lot of times we are unable to really detect it. It's so stealth, it's so cunning.

And I think if a lot of survivors knew, wait, I am in abusive relat, abusive relationship. I'm in an abusive community. I'm in abusive church or mosque. I need to get outta here. I don't know how I'm gonna get outta here, but at least I can call for help. But if I just think it's a nothing burger. It's just something, I have increase my faith. I have to forgive more. I need to fast more. I need to do more breath work. I need to get into this law of attraction and, you know, not attract us anymore.

All this stuff that excuses, that is just straight up abuse.

[00:49:17] **Candice Schutter:** Yes. Yes. I love so much that you're saying this. It's part of why I framed the series the way that I did, what puts cult in culture. Instead of it being this thing over here, it's like, it's, it's built in. It's baked into the cake. It's the water we swim in. All of the analogies

[00:49:33] **Nikki G:** Right, right, right, right.

[00:49:34] **Candice Schutter:** And the, this notion. I'm, I'm seeing another parallel, too, with what you're describing in The Black Church and, and the new age wellness world of it's an inside job.

[00:49:43] **Nikki G:** Right.

[00:49:44] **Candice Schutter:** It's an inside job. Like, the solution is always an inside job. And that's what we have to call, excuse me, bullshit on and say.

[00:49:52] **Nikki G:** It is. It is.

[00:49:54] **Candice Schutter:** No, because there's systemic forces. There's these power imbalances. There's these abuses going on, and I just love so much that you're emphasizing that.

I hadn't heard it frame that way though, just shifting, that helps me a lot. Like just shifting the awareness from even in, in the work that we're doing in the recovery world of like so much focus on the trauma, the trauma, the trauma. And like you said from the very beginning, like we do have to do our work figure out, you know, why we're stepping into these containers over and over again.

*And also, what are we gonna do about the fact that abuse happens? And how are we gonna help people to identify it so that they avoid the trauma that we're experiencing?*

[00:50:35] **Nikki G:** Yes. I mean, you think about narcissistic abuse in a family system. That is hard to detect. This is our first form of attachment, is our, our parents and our family and our caregivers. So that is so subtle. Then you think about narcissistic abuse and romantic dynamics, that is hard. And it looks different in different, you know, settings.

And so it is very hard to detect all the time. And so again, you know, not, not diminishing the need to talk about the trauma. But people won't come for help if they don't even realize that they've been abused.

[00:51:14] **Candice Schutter:** Yep.

[00:51:14] **Nikki G:** I mean, you know, and I think we talked about this before in our conversation, these abuses, particularly the ones you can't see that don't have marks, right.

For a, a, a domestic violence survivor; unfortunately, many of them bear marks, they bear scars, right? But for a spiritual abuse, religious abuse survivor, there oftentimes aren't any scars. So there's an assumption that I'm okay.

[00:51:41] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:51:42] **Nikki G:** I work in the medical field as well, so that's why I use a lot of medical analogies. But if someone broke their leg and the doctor gave 'em surgery. Say, okay, six months for rehab. Would people start to invalidate that person, because they're going to rehab?

You see what I'm saying? Like that makes no sense. You, okay, good. I hope you're doing good.

We would cheer them on. Because we can physically see the condition of their legs. We can physically know that they're going to their appointments. They're getting the therapy. Hopefully they are improving.

So there's not often a lack of community all the time around people who are trying to improve their physical situations. But with this, people act like you have spiritual leprosy.

You know, that lonely hallway I was talking about earlier, in the beginning when I was in it, I was very upset at people who I thought were my friends, who I thought, you know, I really had connections with. And they removed themselves. And I'm like, what happened? But I later realized, many of them don't have the capacity.

I still think that's a good excuse, but whatever.

Many of are are, are ignorant to what spiritual abuse or religious abuse is. Okay?

Many don't have the capacity to even research to understand it. They still love us. But they don't know how to touch us.

And then, many of them don't wanna come near lest they hear the things we are pondering and the things we're questioning, which will cause them to start to question. And they not ready to go to that place. And so.

[00:53:23] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[00:53:24] **Nikki G:** They have to back up. And they remove their presence. They remove their support. And many survivors find themselves walking through this alone, right?

But they need the rehab. The rehab is necessary. And you know, people think, oh well that was a year ago, you should be okay. Do you know how much internal injury happens?

[00:53:46] **Candice Schutter:** Oh God. Yeah.

[00:53:48] **Nikki G:** Do you know how much psychological injury happens? This in itself? Whew. To rewire your mind, your thinking, your perspective on how you see yourself, how you see others, how you see the world. It's a whole overhaul.

And so, that's why I said in the beginning, my heart, you know, to support survivors, 'cause I remember. Just 'cause it's been a while, I told myself, we're not gonna forget what it was like in that, in that hallway. So, yeah.

[00:54:22] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. And to just underscore what you just said, time doesn't heal all wounds. That adage is not, is not valid.

[00:54:31] **Nikki G:** It's not true.

[00:54:31] **Candice Schutter:** It's not true. And I say as someone who, in what, like, uh, almost two years ago, it'll be two years in July, really started my process of recovery. And I left, well, I cult hopped quite a bit.

But the space where I experienced the most injury I had left 16 years prior, Nikki. 16 years, like the, sort of dogma that then was carried on through in other spaces. It wasn't just this one organization. But I was drawn into other spaces that were reiterating the same things.

But I would say I had divorced the dogma and separated from it probably 10 years before I really through this recovery process. And I still needed to go through it and take every single step that I am walking now.

And I attempted to just let the time heal all the wounds. But like you're saying, I needed rehab.

[00:55:28] **Nikki G:** Yeah.

[00:55:29] **Candice Schutter:** I couldn't, I couldn't, um, just ignore it away. Um, time definitely made it a little bit easier in terms of the triggers, but it was still operating and owning me and actually more than anything else. I love that you speak to agency so much. 'cause more than anything else, it was inhibiting my expression.

[00:55:45] **Nikki G:** Yes. Yes. And you know, I, I wanna say this as well. Like, I know I use that analogy, you know, they had the surgery and then they go to rehab. But sometimes when we come out of these experiences and these communities, we can't do anything but just rest. Our bodies are so beat up.

And rehab may look like, the first six months you just sleep. You know, you watch a good show. You find something funny. You know, you go for a walk, you just breathe. You, you don't look at anything spiritual or religious for a while.

Like, giving survivors permission to just be. And it's their choice, right? That's why I like to do, when I coach, when I speak. Here is the buffet. You pick up your plate when you're ready to eat. And you pick out what you feel will be good for you at that moment.

[00:56:55] **Candice Schutter:** Nice.

[00:56:56] **Nikki G:** And if that means you rest. You don't educate, you don't. For some, all I can do is just, I just have to sit here and breathe.

And that is part of recovery. And there are times when you have the strength to start reading material and listening to podcasts. And then you say, I need to breathe again.

[00:57:15] **Candice Schutter:** I need a break. Yeah.

[00:57:17] **Nikki G:** And go watch Marvel movies or Game of Thrones, or you go to a basketball game, you know, you go to a zoo, you find something natural. You look at the sky and the sun, and you, you find a way to ground yourself. Which is so important in this.

So rehab doesn't always mean as soon as you come out, you, you jump into the, some people can't jump into therapy right away, because it's been demonized. I know in The Black Church, it is definitely demonized. You know,

[00:57:47] **Candice Schutter:** Hmm.

[00:57:47] **Nikki G:** It is, there is such a stigma with, with mental health. So many that come out, they're not initially ready to go to therapy. That is not an initial resource. They would probably fare well with a support group, so they can talk. Many survivors, they wanna talk.

And it's not so much, some wanna rage against the, the machine. And I ha, I like, hey, let, let me give you a microphone. Go ahead.

[00:58:12] **Candice Schutter:** Bring it.

[00:58:13] **Nikki G:** Get it out. Rage is a beautiful emotion. You know, we gotta know how to steward it. But I, I don't feel like that's something to hide and suppress. But, you know, some, they want to talk. Their body wants them to talk, 'cause many have held these stories in their bodies for years.

[00:58:32] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:58:32] **Nikki G:** And they've found a place where they can share. Even if they love people, it didn't feel safe enough without people possibly ridiculing them. Pulling out what are called scripture bombs and scripture guns. Where it's like, that happened to you? Let me pull this out. You're supposed to obey those in authority. Let me pull this out. You're supposed to, you know, pray and fast. You're supposed to forgive those who, you know, offend you. All that stuff.

And so they don't feel safe around those people. So they, they just rationalize and say, you know what? It's better to stay in my body. I mean, that's not conscious, but that's what happens.

And their body is like, can I come out? Can I get it out? right? I wanna have the freedom.

And so, I think survivors want to be heard. They wanna be validated. They wanna know that when they share that people to the best of their abilities can say, you know what? I might not have been through that, but my goodness, that sounds like abuse. That sounds like some heavy trauma. Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry that happened to you.

They wanna be believed. They wanna know that people are not gonna accuse them of trying to bring down the man or woman of God or the guru.

[00:59:45] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:59:46] **Nikki G:** They don't wanna worry about somebody's gonna accuse them of having agenda to take the whole community down. They wanna know that I can share this, and I'm gonna be believed. I'm gonna be supported. I'm gonna be strengthened. You know?

Um, so other people may have, you know, a different order, but I feel like let them talk. Let them share. Let them cry. Let them feel their emotions, sometimes for the first time in a long time. That they're come into their body and realize, this is not the enemy.

[01:00:21] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:00:21] **Nikki G:** But this houses some beautiful things in there. I was taught, indirectly, the inside of me was, you know, a sinful nature. And it was dirty and it was nasty. And it constantly had to be abased and constantly had to be adjusted. And it was broken.

[01:00:39] **Candice Schutter:** Mmm.

[01:00:40] **Nikki G:** Let me tell you, getting away from that perspective has been so freeing to me.

[01:00:45] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:00:45] **Nikki G:** 'Cause now I'm in a place where I'm coming into harmony with the voice of my body. That was a concept I never knew in my family of origin, all that I walked through. And it's still a work in progress, but it's like...

I shared a part of one of my story from 20 years ago to somebody the other day. And as I was sharing it, I started welling up. And I could feel my, and I said, hold on. And I said, body, oh my gosh, you've been carrying that still? I didn't know. And I just allowed myself to cry.



I couldn't have done this 10 years ago, because I was taught that emotions are bad and we're not supposed to feel anything. But if you were in a church, if you're in a Black church, you need to feel angry, because the devil is winning. You need to feel angry 'the word of the Lord is not spreading. You can't feel joy. You can't feel pleasure. That's, that's the, the demon stuff. That's the demon area. But now.

I want to feel pleasure. I want to feel joy. I wanna feel grief. When I need to grieve. I want to feel sadness when it comes up. And so, I didn't push it down. I, said, I, I, you're talking. Thank you.

Our body is not our enemy. It's our friend.

[01:02:05] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:02:05] **Nikki G:** It's our friend. And it sends us messages to help us heal. Not just the medicine, not just the surgeries. It wants to speak to us, but many of us, like a radio. We have it turned off. The signal is always going out, but we have it turned off.

And so recovery, even for me, looked like, wait a minute, there's a signal. I didn't know that. Let me turn it on. Ooh. I, I'm hearing, Hey, you put me through a lot of stuff here now, we need to slow down

But you know, these are some of the things I think survivors need to hear. In addition to this is what abuse looks like, this is what trauma, the terms, all that stuff. That's great. But the practical day by day, how do I do this? You know what I mean? Um.

[01:02:56] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:02:57] **Nikki G:** You know, and, and that's, and that's where coaches come in. Therapists and mental health professionals, they are needed. They diagnose a lot of disorders that people wind up developing, you know, coming out of all of this. And they treat and they diagnose. I do not do that as a coach.

I'm your champion in the corner. This is your book of life. That now the cult leader doesn't have the pen. Your mama, your daddy doesn't have the pen. That narcissistic relationship doesn't have the pen. You have the pen. And you can write your story now yourself.

I'm just here to cheer you on. That's what I do in my work.

[01:03:34] **Candice Schutter:** I love it.

A lot of the things you laid out really made me think of something that really helped me in my recovery when I learned, um, I was reading an article, it wasn't even in her book, it was in an article. Alexandra Stein, she used this term, uh, triple isolation. That cults create triple isolation.

And I think it's so important. I just wanna presence it here. So isolation from the outside world, right? So you have your contained community. Isolation from one another within the group. So you're not allowed to talk about certain things. There's parameters around how you need to show up.

[01:04:09] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:04:09] **Candice Schutter:** And then, isolation from self. And that inner voice you were just describing.

And you know what's so fascinating, Nikki? I just have to share this, 'cause you're talking about this separation from the body. And I just wanna presence this for all the people who were in the Org with me, which is the alias we use for the organization that a lot of listeners were a part of.

And one of the real moral injuries that so many of us faced was that we were in a space where the primary motive of the physical practice was to connect to sensation and get in touch with our bodies. So lot of us, yeah.

So a lot of us came in, I really want your, your take on this. A lot of us came in having experienced trauma. Many of us, I'm raising my hand, having experienced sexual trauma, physical trauma. So having sort of a dissociative history, right. Go into this space and have this miraculous experience of finding a connection to sensation and feeling our bodies for the first time. And I remember laying on the floor crying, just like, oh my God, this feels amazing.

And of course I'm attributing all of it to the practice, not to the fact I'm in my body.

[01:05:18] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm. .

[01:05:19] **Candice Schutter:** It's this practice is giving this to me. So I'm having this amazing experience. And I know a lot of my friends and colleagues we've talked about, we have this experience, right? So this is happening, this goodness.

And that's deepening. But as you progress through the levels, 'cause of course you know Nikki, there's levels. We had to go through all the levels. And as you progress though, it gets a little, in my opinion now, a little more dissociative and disembodied. Because it's all about all these ideas and dogmas. But the core of it is still connecting to sensation. And then you layer on top of that all these ways of behaving.

And so there's this inherent conflict going on, which is that I'm supposed to be listening to my body and seeking pleasure and comfort. But I'm also being told that I'm taking things too personally. I'm also being told that I should never be a victim. I'm also being told that my body isn't the right shape or, know.

So there's these two things running concurrently. And can you talk a little bit about, 'cause I know this happens in other spaces. Maybe not specifically around the body piece, but these

mixed messages, that sort of disorganized attachment that happens. Like you said, you said something about The Black Church and love and abuse.

[01:06:34] **Nikki G:** Yeah. They go together.

[01:06:35] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah, they go together.

[01:06:36] **Nikki G:** that's what we believe.

Mm-Hmm.

I mean, we're not conscious of that. But, yeah, it's, it's very hard. It, it is very dissociative for a lot of us to hold the two together. And again, I wasn't conscious of that. I don't know if you all were conscious when you were in it. Not until you came out.

[01:06:53] **Candice Schutter:** Oh heck no. I mean, I can only speak for myself, but no.

[01:06:56] **Nikki G:** Right, right. But it's never all deceptive. Right. It's never all abusive. There has to be something to bait us, right.

Little bit of truth. A little bit of science. A little bit of, you know, what have you, connecting with your needs that you have when you come into the community. Enough to bait you. And then the process starts where it starts to have those concurrents. And that's how they get over. It's not one of the other, it is both.

And that is where we were told, you know, the gray is wrong. And being in the middle is bad. And you know,

[01:07:34] **Candice Schutter:** Hmm.

[01:07:34] **Nikki G:** And ironically, you can either be hot or cold. Well, the Bible talks about that. You either need to be hot or cold, he's gonna spit you out your mouth. I mean, well that's, that's the Black version. I was taught that scripture. That's the way, that's way they broke that scripture down, right. So when those things are being taught together, it just really is so abusive. And it does damage on all fronts, right?

And so, I know that, for me, the power of reclaiming what is important to me has been very paramount in my recovery. Because there were a lot of things about me and what I touched and what touched me or whatever that I lost, or it was perverted in the cults I was in. So when I left, it was like. I was, you know, bare. My authentic self was shredded. You know, I had this, this cult personality that I had to, you know, work through.

But as I started to come out of all of that, I had to start asking myself, Nikki, what is, what did they take from you that you want back?

What do you want back?

You know, music was one of the first ones, you know. And I, I don't even remember how it happened. But it just happened. I remember running into a friend of mine, I'm originally from New Jersey. I went to go visit somebody and I ran into her. And, and I was like, Hey, have you heard this song? And I put it on and she just smiled. She's like, Nikki. The old Nikki is coming back. You know how much you love music and how for years you wasn't listening. 'Cause I was, we were so in the cult, we didn't do anything, you know?

So, it is more complex when people have an experience it where the sensations of your body. It's not like, you can change it out. You know what I mean? And it's more than just a decision that I want to reclaim. I mean, it would take someone on a therapeutic space to actually help someone to psychologically start to sift that out, right.

[01:09:39] **Candice Schutter:** That's right.

[01:09:39] **Nikki G:** Because your body is still speaking. That is a natural component. That's the physiological, and I, I, I get angry that a cult leader would go after that to get people to fulfill their needs and abuse people.

Because it's not something to say, okay, I like music. I don't like music. This is your body. Right. You know.

And so my heart goes out to you and people who have experienced trauma in that space. Because it's your body. But it may take longer to reclaim components of your body. You know, your emotions, your sensations, things of that nature.

[01:10:16] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah. I think for a lot of folks what I'm seeing, what I experience personally and what I'm seeing in terms of a commonality is, um, for many of us and, and for myself. Like my relationship with my body remained intimate. It was just that, there was this whole language of movement.

[01:10:36] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:10:37] **Candice Schutter:** That was connected to the practice. And so, I couldn't do certain dance movements. I couldn't listen to certain music for sure. That was definitely a thing.

Um, and, and I see a lot of people coming out now that they've been indoctrinated to believe that the movements, which Nikki, they're very basic dance movements that they teach in this practice. And they're in no way proprietary. But they're pitched as though they are.

So you have all these people who are like, well, if I leave, I can't do any of these movements.

[01:11:08] **Nikki G:** Mmm.

[01:11:11] **Candice Schutter:** They don't belong to me. They belong to the brand.

And it sounds like this capitalistic problem. But it's this core fundamental psychological crisis.

[01:11:21] **Nikki G:** Yeah.

[01:11:22] **Candice Schutter:** 'Cause I've been through it. And it's so rough because it's like, a lot of people like me, I had to stop dancing for a few years. Which is tragic, because it's one of the greatest joys in my life. And I'm for fortunately doing it again and facilitating again and all that's great. Yeah. It's, so there's hope! And it's very exciting.

But it took a long time. It took a really long time.

[01:11:45] **Nikki G:** Yeah. I, I, I can imagine, because it takes time.

That's, that's the other thing. I, I don't think people on the outside are aware of, you know, religious trauma, spiritual abuse, cult involvement. It takes time for survivors to rebuild their lives. They may look like they're not in rehab, because they don't have a brace on their knee or a scar on their arm. But many are in rehab.

And I don't like to put it like that. Like, it's so scary. Like, well, if it's gonna take all that time, then I don't want to do any of it. And I get you. I get you.

But I like to put it to people like this. Don't you want the rest of your life to be yours though? You know what I'm saying? Like, don't you want that back? Don't you want to erase this mark from what we've been through?

Like, yes, I talk about these things for my work, but this is not my whole life. You know, you and I were talking about watching some shows before

[01:12:43] **Candice Schutter:** Oh yeah.

[01:12:44] **Nikki G:** we started recording. And I, I enjoy it. I enjoy watching a dog roll over and get back. Like the simple things.

[01:12:53] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:12:53] **Nikki G:** I'm finding bring me joy and pleasure. And I am allowing that to happen organically. But I also have a resolve that they're not gonna take my remaining years on this planet away from me. They took so much time when I was in it and recovering when I didn't understand it. You know, rehabbing.

But I want to experience joy, pleasure, anger, grief, happiness, rage, all of the emotions. Because as a human being, that is part of my experience.

[01:13:29] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:13:30] **Nikki G:** So I, there's a resolve and a resilience in me not to get them back. And I don't even. That's not a problem if people want to, you know, they, they say the best revenge is living your life successfully. I don't really care about that. But some people do, and that's fine.

[01:13:46] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:13:47] **Nikki G:** But me coming into the freedom that I should have experienced years ago, it's very important to me. And there are layers to that. You know, I often refer to healing, that some people look at it like a watch. And they're constantly looking at their watch. I should be over this by now. I should be doing better with this. I should be feeling, you know, connected to my body. Or I should, you know, we will beat ourselves up a lot. Because we expect to be in this place as if we're healed. It's, it doesn't work that way.

You know? Healing is an evolution. And because I believe that, then I take that watch off and I throw it away. I'm not putting myself on it, that pressure feels like what I came out of.

[01:14:33] **Candice Schutter:** Yes, yes.

[01:14:35] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm. .

[01:14:35] **Candice Schutter:** you. Absolutely.

[01:14:36] **Nikki G:** That pressure feels like I have to be enough. I have to be this. No, I don't. I can just be. Whether I feel recovered or not. Whether I feel I have a laundry list of things I still need to tackle. It's life.

And there are different ways that I'm evolving in that. You learn to start identifying what you need in the moment in the present. That's the other thing.

And I was in a lot of cults that were very apocalyptic and end time. So we were constantly in the future. And because of my trauma and what I experienced, I was also in the past. So I was doing this all the time. I was never *here*.

So that's another thing I'm reclaiming. And, you know, there's normalcy to do that. Like I need to look a, a couple months ahead to plan. I'm not talking about those type of things. But when I'm constantly living in that and I'm not living here, I try to be aware. I'm not perfect with it. But that, that's, that's the healing journey for me. And, And, it can beautiful. It doesn't have to be hard all the time, you know?

[01:15:40] **Candice Schutter:** Right, right, right.

And that, you know, that perfection is the oppression at work. You know.

[01:15:47] **Nikki G:** Yes.

[01:15:47] **Candice Schutter:** That same force.

[01:15:49] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:15:49] **Candice Schutter:** Just pressing on us in a whole different way. It's like that, pendulum ride from like, are we gonna suffer and try and be broken? Or are we gonna be perfect? And it's like, no and no.

What if we get to be human? Somewhere in the

[01:16:03] **Nikki G:** Yes. Yes.

[01:16:06] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

[01:16:06] **Nikki G:** And that's more attractive than perfectionism. Because people that try to climb that perfectionist ladder, they don't realize it a lot of them, but that comes with a air of piety. And I've evolved. And I've arrived, and.

[01:16:23] **Candice Schutter:** Mm-Hmm. Girl, I've been there.

[01:16:24] **Nikki G:** I'm up here. That elite, you know, that elitism of look what I did.

[01:16:28] **Candice Schutter:** Yep.

[01:16:29] **Nikki G:** I'm enough. You're not.

And so you can have it. I'm human. I make mistakes. When I realize it, if somebody brings it to my attention, I'm sorry. I hold myself accountable. Right. And then I, I try to course correct and learn and move forward. You know, but being able to live in my humanity, which was, you know, frowned upon in all of these cults that I was in, it feels good.

And living in my humanity, I'm able to connect with a lot of humans that I would've never done if had teachings, you know.

Politically things have changed for me, you know. I've met some of the most beautiful people that did not represent what I thought was right or wrong in those communities I came out of. And I can't imagine not meeting them and knowing them now, because of beliefs.

You know, that's a whole conversation there. What do we do with beliefs? Do we even think, are these mine? Many beliefs we hold on this planet are not ours. We're not aware of them. They're grandma's. They are our husbands', our boyfriends', our wives', our partners'. They're our teachers'. They're the politicians'. There's people on the news station, on the movies we watch.



We ingest a lot of ideology, a lot of beliefs. And I don't think we're always aware of where they come from. And sometimes we're not conscious of taking the time to sift through 'em and say, oh, that's a crazy belief. I don't believe that.

But I have to be aware of it to say, um, that's not mine. Nope, that came from that. And nope. Mm-Mmm.

[01:18:09] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah.

I would love to leave a little bit of a cliffhanger here because for the.

[01:18:25] **Nikki G:** I know where you're going.

[01:18:25] **Candice Schutter:** The listeners.

Yeah. We're gonna leave cliffhanger for the listeners.

Because I would love on just kind of the heels of what you were just saying, I wanna have you back for a conversation that I am *so* looking forward to around what you were just describing in terms of how beliefs are fed to us, the ideologies, how that shapes political landscapes, power dynamics, and the mess that we're in right now.

[01:18:48] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:18:49] **Candice Schutter:** In this country, which goes so far back.

And of course we're not gonna unpack it all. But you have some really, really interesting things to share when it comes to how these religious abuses shape ideology and behavior and political landscapes and how the long game.

[01:19:08] **Nikki G:** Mm-Hmm.

[01:19:09] **Candice Schutter:** Of all of this. Um, anything you wanna say to, you know, the lay the foundation for where we're gonna go next time we get together.

[01:19:17] **Nikki G:** Well, I will say this. Um, you know, I talked about one of the cults that I came out of was predominantly Black. And then I talked about the next one that I was a part of was the International House of Prayer.

Um, subsequent cults that I was in, and even in, um, International House of Prayer, the political realm was merged into all of this. And so I have ingested a lot. I have been to marches. I have had the red tape on my mouth. I have prayed and fasted for overturning of, and I will not finish that sentence. That's for next time.

I have ingested a lot of material during that time, how a lot in these political communities that connect with the religious cult communities, what their strategy is. How we got where we are politically in this nation now.

A lot of it is funneled from these cults that I unfortunately have walked through. And they have a certain ideology. They have strategy that you would not believe. And it's been taking place over decades, and most people are unaware.

I spoke about this on Clubhouse. I did several rooms. But I haven't been on a podcast talking about it. So I'm really excited to do so. Because I think if we can see politically that merge.

I mean, I think people with the la our former president, Donald Trump, can see some things. And how, you know, people said, you know, the right was in bed with, uh, Trump. How could they coexist? Oh, there's a lot to talk about. How that, um, that relationship is. And from the Supreme Court level down to the court level, to the states, to all these different ideologies that are pushed. And now we as Americans are really feeling like we have no agency.

Um, there is actually a term called spiritual abuse on the state level. And that was coined by Dr. Jamie Merrick, I believe. And I went to a workshop, and she talked about it. And I cried because I said, oh my gosh, somebody is speaking to this.

To be a part of this in cults and be a part of this in abusive communities, and then to leave. And seeing the exact things you prayed for, was indoctrinated with, take place on the state level, on the national level, on the news. You feel like you cannot escape it. That is a form of abuse on a different kind of level.

So I'm excited to go into conversations with you about, you know, the intersectionality between the religious right, so to speak and, you know, the cults and the political realm and everything like that.

This is not about left or right, y'all. It's just about pulling back the curtain and explaining how they think, how they operate, and what's on their agenda from now going forward.

So, yeah.

[01:22:09] **Candice Schutter:** That's right. Yeah. 'cause it's not a, I mean, these dynamics aren't left or right, you know. They're, they can be used in any direction. And I'm really honored and thrilled to feature that conversation. I can't wait to have it.

[01:22:20] **Nikki G:** Yes. I'm excited. Mm-Hmm.

[01:22:22] **Candice Schutter:** Because it's an election year. Just a critical time to be presencing this conversation so that we can all, like you said, peek behind that curtain a little more before we go to voting booth, so we really understand what we're dealing with.

[01:22:35] **Track 1:** So

[01:22:36] **Candice Schutter:** Yeah, I'm so grateful. Yeah.

We'll see again soon, but just so people know how they can connect with you in the meantime, you have some meetups going on, and tell us. Tell us the things that we need to know about how to stay connected to Nikki G.

[01:22:51] **Nikki G:** Well, you can, first go on my website, And, uh, you can find more about my story. You can find resources and one-on-one coaching. So I am available for that.

I'm in process of launching my online membership soon. So it will be for survivors of religious trauma, spiritual abuse, cult involvement, narcissism as well, too. I know that sounds like a tall order, but they're all connected in way.

And so, I mean, in that space we're gonna have, uh, support groups twice a month. We're gonna have some skill building in there. There's gonna be a resource center. And it's off of social media. So for those that say, I don't like social media. We'll be having some guest speakers in there. We'll be having some coaching programs in there, some workshops. There's a whole lot that will be a part of this online community. But most importantly, it'll be a place where survivors can start to share their stories in a safe space, you know, with other survivors that will be trauma informed, trauma sensitive. So this is not a substitution for therapy. If someone feels like they really need that, I encourage people to do that. But this is something that's supplemental.

And I am the co-founder of Black Religious Trauma Recovery Network, which was started the end of last year with my colleague, Jonathan Carrington. And we are looking for that network to continue to grow and be a resource for those who are in the Black community who've experienced religious abuse, spiritual abuse, and find a place where they can share. They can be educated, supported, resourced. We got a whole lot of stuff in the tank that we're gonna do, but right now what we are doing is we are offering twice a month, every second and fourth Thursday, meetup events for free. And it is open to everyone. But it is preferring Black religious trauma survivors. So we have people that come in that are not Black, and we welcome them. You know, and we have discussions to kind of describe what it's like to go through this form of abuse in the Black community. So we have therapists, we have mental health professionals, we have coaches that want to learn how they can service their clients. So we do that twice a month on Thursdays.

And, um, second season of the podcast of *Surviving The Black Church*, hopefully will be in the spring. We're changing the format a little bit, so it will be more conversation driven. It will be with guests and everything like that.

And then, also, I'm on the board of directors for an organization called Tears of Eden, which I love. I've been on the board for two years. And Katherine Spearing is the founder. And she started this work three years ago. And it's for those who've been spiritually abused in the evangelical community. And, we host, uh, support groups sometimes two to three times a year. So I help facilitate that. I So we have that as a resource. And also the podcast for Tears of Eden, which is called Uncertain Podcast. Katherine runs that. And they can find out more

information about topics around spiritual abuse and lots of guests have been on that podcast. So I enjoy doing that as well. And I think that kind of summarizes most of the work that I'm doing for now. Mm-Hmm.

[01:26:15] **Candice Schutter:** You are busy, and I'm so grateful that you are working to provide these resources for folks that are so critically needed. And, um, you are just a wealth of knowledge and it's a total delight. And we will link to everything that you just mentioned in the show notes. So if you're listening, you'll be able to find Nikki that way.

So until next time, cliffhanger.

Thank you so much for being here, Nikki.

[01:26:43] **Nikki G:** Yes. Thank you for inviting me.

[01:26:44] **Candice Schutter:** Mmm, good stuff, right?

Nikki G will be back, likely sometime in March, when she and I will be diving headfirst into that doozy of a topic. If you'd like to connect with her in the meantime, please visit the show notes for links to Nikki G in all the places.

I'm taking another couple of weeks off to work behind the scenes on production, but in mid February, I will be returning here on the main feed with another guest, and a cautionary tale that is sure to hit very close to home with TDP listeners.

In the meantime, bonus extras will continue to drop over on Patreon. Later this week, Adi Goren joins Tracy and I once again this time for a deconstruction of healing. Healing is a word that's thrown around a lot in wellness spaces. But what is it really? And how, in light of 'cult'ure series content, might we refine our definitions of healing together?

Again, that drops on Friday. And then the following week I'll be sharing another episode in the *Subject To Change* series, where I'll be speaking off the cuff on a topic that I've been pretty fired up around for a good long while. Let's just call it spiritual capitalism. How and why things very often go sideways in our attempts to turn meaning into money.

All of that and more over at [patreon.com/thedeeperpulse](https://patreon.com/thedeeperpulse). A 7-day free trial is available.

Okay, lots to look forward to, folks. I'm going to get to work behind the scenes, and I'll see you next time.

Thanks for tuning in.

Bye for now.