

An abstract painting of a face, rendered with vibrant, swirling colors like blue, red, yellow, and green. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, giving the face a textured, almost sculptural quality. The background is a complex, multi-colored swirl of paint.

# **FOR LOVE OF THE BROKEN BODY**

**DISCUSSION & REFLECTION GUIDE**

*For Love of the Broken Body*, Julia Walsh’s memoir about discerning her life’s path, invites us to consider our own lives, work, and communities. This guide offers questions related to the memoir’s themes, prompting further reflection on personal challenges, direction, and potential.

Any quotes, if not otherwise attributed, are from *For Love of the Broken Body* by Julia Walsh (Monkfish, 2024; page numbers given).

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## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This reflection guide can be used individually, in a book club, or to invite conversation in a faith sharing group. A simple group discussion might involve ten minutes of silent reflection on a question, then inviting people to share as they feel moved – either as the start of a group discussion or as a chance to listen to each person in turn.

Questions and reflection prompts are grouped thematically. You may feel that one theme speaks to your particular needs now – follow that feeling. You may also skim through and find individual questions that you find compelling. Sometimes, you may feel an urge to skip past a particular question because it feels like too much work to consider. This is often a sign that spending time reflecting on that topic would actually be fruitful – we can shy away from hard introspective work, but at the cost of keeping our own psyche or soul at a distance.

Many of the questions are designed for deep personal reflection. Some are followed by a “question for discussion” that addresses the topic more broadly and is designed to start a group conversation. Use all the questions however you like!

This guide does not presuppose any religious belief. A few Bible passages are included as narratives to consider, and quotes feature a few Catholic thinkers, but in the same spirit as *For Love of the Broken Body*: as an offering which you can take and consider as you find helpful. If you are someone who finds value and truth in Christian prayer and scripture, there are some faith-based resources and additional questions beginning on page 10. We hope that people of all religious and spiritual traditions will find value in reflecting on the themes found in *For Love of the Broken Body*.

...

*“My voice wails, everything in me awake. I’m crying because I hurt. I’m crying because I’m alive. I’m crying because I hear another human voice, because now another human can know what happened to me: I’m broken and alone.”*

(p. 6)

...

## LIFE PURPOSE

Julia refers to joining a religious order as “a destiny I want to avoid” (p. 33). Sometimes a calling, whether explicitly religious or not, can surface as a nagging pull that we try to resist. A sense of purpose in life is a deep human need, but a need we often avoid or bypass by filling our lives with ease or busyness.

*“I know this message has bubbled up from a quiet corner inside my heart, the shy space where Christ provides plans.”*  
(p. 34)

Take a few minutes to sit in silence and listen for any impressions from God/the divine or your own quiet inner voice. Is there a calling – a sense of responsibility, opportunity, or rightness around a role, job, community, etc. – that you’ve been resisting? If so, what hesitations or fears are keeping you from pursuing it?

*“If God saved my life because God has “big plans” for me, am I capable of living up to them?”* (p. 118)

It’s often said in talks on Christian vocation that no one is quite big or important enough to ruin God’s plan for them. Do you feel uncertainty about your ability to fulfill your potential, follow through on your calling, or to live up to what you imagine to be God’s expectations for your life?

**Question for discussion:** How would society be different if we all felt more of a sense of accountability and calling? Is this different from feeling duty or obligation?

Read the story of Moses' calling by God in **Exodus 3:1-4:9**.

What are the uncertainties and excuses Moses expresses, and how does God reassure him?

How does this passage speak to the fears or uncertainties you wrote down below the previous two questions?

**Question for discussion:** What can we learn about humans and God from this Bible passage?

“Love [God] and do what you will.” - St. Augustine

This quote attributed to St. Augustine, shared with Julia by Mike (p. 86), implies that if love is central to our decisions and actions, it’s hard to go wrong. Think about a decision you’re facing, perhaps related to the sense of responsibility or calling you’ve written about above. What would a decision motivated by love (rather than motivated by pride, fear, revenge, jealousy, or pursuit of money) look like in this situation?

When Julia was recovering from her injuries, she had a dream in which a sister told her “It’s time, Julia” (p. 130).

When you pause and listen to any deep promptings in your heart or mind, what are you sensing it’s time for? An action, a reconciliation, a step toward your future?

**Question for discussion:** Looking at the world around us, both locally and globally, what is it time to start doing as a community?



## CHANGE AND TRANSITION

As Julia deepens her connections into religious community, Sister Anita tells her to “find a way to ritualize the change within you” (p. 61). Julia takes this to heart, and we see her ritualize transitions, goodbyes, and internal growth through trips, ceremonies, and even a tattoo. Our lives are full of change, and the way we make meaning and honor those changes can be important.

“All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you.” – Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

What changes or transitions are you experiencing right now, reflecting on, or anticipating soon? If it's helpful, you can list these changes under three categories:

1. **Internal** (changes of belief, preference, habit, personality, mental health, etc.),
2. **Voluntary** (changing jobs, going back to school, starting or ending a relationship, leaving or joining a church, moving to a new home or city, etc.), and
3. **Forced** (loss of a loved one, layoffs, closing or demolition/renovation of a favorite place, friends moving away, new politicians or policies, etc.).

*“I want to return to the farm one last time, to try and make peace with the changes, with the feeling that something sacred is being ripped from my life. Where is my home now?”* (p. 80)

Choose the one or two changes that feel the most significant to you. Are you celebrating, mourning, or feeling mixed about them? Spend a few minutes writing or thinking about these feelings, and, if it feels appropriate, design a ritual for yourself to integrate the change into your life.

*“... everything is under a fog of never-will-be-the-same, it-is-all-going-to-die-some-day. I know that my entire life is in transition. Who am I becoming?”* (p. 90)

As you reflect on your changing life, who do you sense you are becoming?

**Question for discussion:** What do you think our culture’s attitude toward change is?



## COMMUNITY

A sense of belonging and the richness of living in community are two strong attractors that Julia returns to as she decides whether to join the Franciscan Sisters. Belonging and community are deeply human needs that help us become more whole. Consider the ways community, belonging, and friendship shape and fill your life.

“Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.” – bell hooks

Most people are members of several communities – families, faith congregations, neighborhood groups, friend groups, sports teams, clubs, school communities, etc. In which communities do you feel a sense of belonging? How do you find your identities affirmed or challenged in each?

**Question for discussion:** What does community mean to you?

*“My culture is obsessed with independence— ‘do what feels right’ or ‘do what you want.’ For me to turn to community—and God—for guidance and direction is a better way.” (p. 179)*

Living in community brings the freedom of mutual support, but requires us to give up some of the freedom of making independent decisions. Think of a time you asked for friends’ or loved ones’ input on a decision. How did their opinions or needs affect the outcome? Or, if you’re not in the habit of asking for guidance, what might happen if you did?

**Question for discussion:** What might it look like to live in a more communal society?

*“Sure, we’re good to begin with, but if we’re going to be living in community with others, we have to leave some of our old stuff behind.” (Mike, p. 58)*

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” –  
Philippians 2:3-4

This is a moment for honest self-reflection. What are the strengths you bring to your community, and what are some points that cause tension? Spend a few minutes reflecting, and consider how you might move forward thoughtfully.

**Question for discussion:** How do we take good care of one another in community?



## BROKENNESS

Julia writes about brokenness – physical and spiritual – as a painful tool and a humble gift. It’s also a universal part of being human.

*“When she speaks of Jesus breaking me and sharing me with others, I feel tense, uncomfortable. It sounds painful and violent to be broken by God. Why would God want me to be broken?” (p. 61)*

What connotations do you have with the words “broken” and “vulnerable”? Who or what do you turn to for security and reassurance when you feel vulnerable or fragile?

**Question for discussion:** How is brokenness part of the human experience? Why do we tend to hide these parts of our lives?

“Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it’s having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome.” – Brené Brown

Brené Brown’s [TEDx talk on vulnerability](#) has over 63 million views – she certainly has experience in being seen. How does this quote land? What feels exciting or frightening about others perceiving, seeing, or listening to you, just the way you are?

**Question for discussion:** Why is vulnerability connected to courage, and how does it lead to growth?

There are a lot of metaphors about the value of spiritual brokenness. A fractured bone that has healed wrong needs to be re-broken to be whole again. The Japanese art of kintsugi, repairing ceramics with gold, has gained popularity in the US recently as both [a craft](#) and a [philosophy of brokenness and repair](#).

What images come to mind when you think about being broken, vulnerable, or humble in healthy ways? Spend a few minutes drawing, writing, or making other art around these images. Or, host a collage evening with your book discussion group!

## PRAYERS AND ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE

There are faith-based resources here for each of the four previous sections.

### Change and Transition

You might find the below prayer of “gratitude in times of transition” to be a helpful starting place as you think about rituals for marking change. You can pray “I” instead of “we.” It may also be helpful to annotate or mark up the text, noting specific gifts, experiences, people, etc. who have brought you to this opportunity or time of transition.

God of Love,

You are with us in every transition and change.

As we enter into this new era with excitement and even some anxiety,

we recall your deep compassion, presence, and abounding love.

We thank you for the gifts, talents and skills with which you have blessed us.

We thank you for the experiences that have brought us to this moment.

We thank you for the work of others that gives breadth and depth to our own work.

Be with us as we move forward, rejoicing with you and supporting one another.

We ask this in your Holy Name.

*Joseph P. Shadle*

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” – Isaiah 40:8

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” – Matthew 24:35

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” – Hebrews 13:8

Spend a few minutes meditating on the verses above. What does it mean that God and scripture will remain constant while everything else changes? What does it mean to *you*, in whatever changes you’re experiencing or anticipating?

### **Community and Belonging**

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”

– Ephesians 4:1-7

Consider Paul’s words to the Ephesians above. Spend a few minutes reading slowly and meditating on each line. What do these ideas about unity in community mean to you, here, today?

## Brokenness

If you listened to Christian music in the early 2010s, you probably heard the 2007 worship hit “Sweetly Broken” by Jeremy Riddle. [Give it a listen on YouTube](#) or wherever you listen to music. The chorus goes:

At the cross, You beckon me  
You draw me gently to my knees  
And I am lost for words, so lost in love  
I'm sweetly broken, wholly surrendered.

How does this imagery sit with you? What emotions does it stir up? Feel free to journal or pray through your reflections.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Dear Friends,

Since I fell off a cliff and realized I had an interesting story to tell, I began to wonder if I was called to write a book. After much discernment, I realized that I was called to share the truth of my brokenness and vulnerability in a way that could serve others.

So now I am delighted to offer my spiritual memoir, *For Love of the Broken Body*, to you! I hope that my story compels you to reflect on the sacredness of your own story, your journey. May you come to know a steady life purpose for yourself, no matter what changes you experience. May you come to know belonging in a community that accepts you wholeheartedly, where your brokenness is embraced and becomes a blessing unto others. I pray that reflecting on the mystery of transformation with me and others helps you deeply know that you belong and you are beloved.

Peace be with you,  
S. Julia Walsh FSPA

**“WHY WOULD GOD WANT ME TO BE BROKEN?”**

**COMING IN  
APRIL 2024**

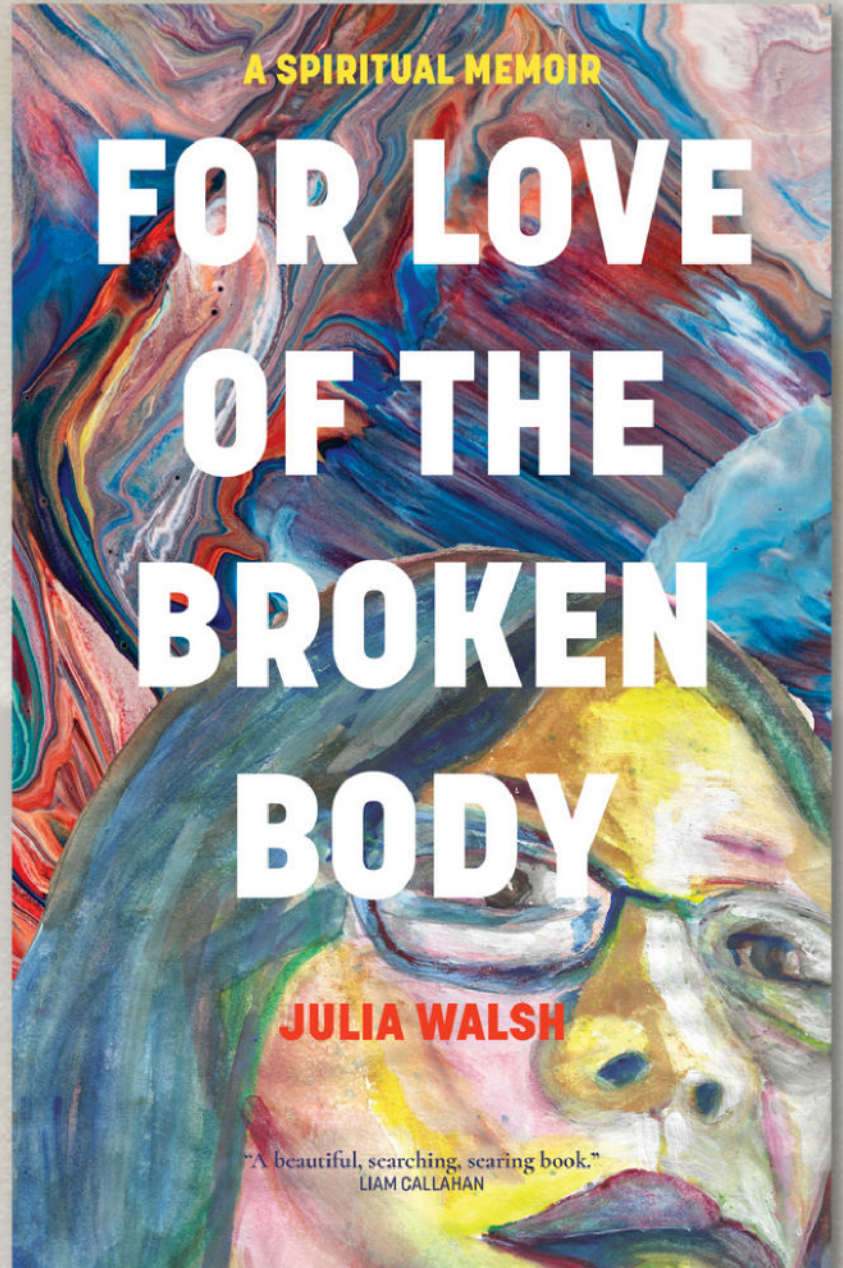
At the age of 25, just a month into her novitiate as a Franciscan Sister, Julia Walsh fell from a cliff and became disfigured. While working toward healing, she felt pulled to religious community life, but also toward unresolved feelings regarding her own sexuality, identity, and injustice. *For Love of the Broken Body* is a story of pain, questioning, recovery, and discovery. What does it mean to exist as a broken body? Why would a young woman dedicate herself to the Catholic Church—to a life as a Franciscan Sister—while others are leaving churches in droves?

In this memoir, Walsh writes honestly about what it means, in this age of self-discovery and hook-ups, for a young woman—physically broken and still very much attracted to the world—to join a celibate, religious community.

“Bursting with wisdom. [This book] helps us turn toward our weaknesses, self-doubt, and anxiety and walk through these, with Love, into self-acceptance, self-kindness, and concrete love for others....

Julia brings us into the brightest hope. Highly recommended!”

—Carmen Acevedo Butcher,  
poet & translator



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