



Season 3 | Episode 31

## Designed to Heal

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](https://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

I'm joined by scientist, teacher, and entrepreneur Dr. Cymbeline Culiat to talk about her book, *Designed to Heal: What the Body Shows Us About Healing Wounds, Repairing Relationships, and Restoring Community*. She recently released this book along with co-author, Dr. Jennie A. McLaurin who is a writer, pediatrician, and educator. In this conversation with Dr. Culiat, we'll take a look at how the healing processes of our physical bodies provide a model for healing the painful wounds of our relationships, including wounds within the church. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Culiat. It's such an honor to speak with you today.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

Thank you, Crystal. And I was really looking forward to this conversation because I have friends who have been with the Joni and Friends ministry, and really know your community very well. And friends in Knoxville, Tennessee, who are also serving with you in this ministry. So I'm really delighted to be here today.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, good. Well, I'm glad to hear that and we are delighted to have you. And so before we dive into this intriguing topic of how God has designed our bodies to heal, I'd love to hear a bit about you. What's your educational background and what compelled you to write on this topic of relational healing?

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

So it actually is quite a long story. So I'm a scientist and I was born and raised in the Philippines with a background in cell biology and genetics, and came to the United States here in Oak Ridge, Tennessee to a federal lab called Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and started working on biomedical sciences, and so shifted more to science that was really related to medicine. So this book actually started when I first met Jennie in Knoxville, Tennessee. I had just retired from my job at ORNL because I made discoveries about how tissue can heal properly. So I left in order to start a biotech company called NellOne Therapeutics, which is in Knoxville, Tennessee. And we were going to use some of my discoveries during the human genome project in order to heal tissue that has been severely injured.



Crystal Keating:

Oh wow.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

And I took an early retirement in order to start this company. I am now the Chief Science Officer of this company, and we've been doing this for nearly a decade in terms of doing research into tissue injury and healing. And I met Jennie, she was conducting a bioethics seminar for nurses and doctors, and we had a mutual friend who said, "Come and listen to Jennie. I think you will really hit it off well together." And so Jennie and I, we just connected. And most of all, I was very impressed. She talked about how Christians have contributed to science and medicine in just significant way. So she went through the history and I was so proud to be a Christian and to know how much Christians have been in the healing arts as a profession: doctors, nurses, scientists, and when she got a grant in Canada, in order to tell pastors that, "hey, science can be uplifting to faith and it could strengthen your churches as opposed to something that you should be fearful for." And so when Jennie told me, "Why don't you talk about what you're doing?"

And at that time I was working on wound healing because we were looking at how we can heal very difficult to heal wounds in the body. And so I took them through the science I was working with, showed them the beautiful orchestrated processes of when a tissue is injured, how does it heal? And I extracted then demonstrated insights in terms of see how this can really lift your faith. And later, many years later, Jennie... The project ended and then Jennie and I continued to be friends. And then she had a retreat of several women and she told me to do devotional and I did the same thing I did with the pastors. This time I told them we have learned that some wounds that are difficult to heal, it's because it's stuck somewhere in the process. And they said, "This needs to be in a book."

And basically six women kind of compelled, especially one, Lucy Shaw, who does the forward on the book, really helped Jennie and myself to just keep going and put this in a book. And that's pretty much a span of 10 years from when Jennie and I met to now that this book is out.

Crystal Keating:

Well, that's fascinating. And I especially appreciate you saying that science and the truth should actually strengthen our faith, should actually give us a deeper insight into who God is and how he's made us. I think that this conversation is going to really bring that to light. And you explained that the premise of *Designed to Heal* is that God has made our bodies to heal our physical injuries, especially as you're studying tissue and the illnesses through a series of intricate processes. And that these healing processes provide a model for how we can also heal our emotional and relational wounds. And we often see our physical bodies heal, yet it seems our emotional wounds too often destroy relationships without any healing or reconciliation. So then why do you think this is the case and what are some steps we as Christians can take to bring relational healing?

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

I'm so glad you mentioned the main premise of the book that our bodies are oriented physically towards healing, because having wounds and having wounds heal is universal. And at the same time, too, scientists like me who are working in tissue regeneration, whether we're looking into understanding how to heal a difficult wound or to repair and regenerate spinal cord or tendons and ligaments, we're going to the body to tell us how does it happen so that we can promote it



when there is injury. So physically there is no question our body has some restorative potential. The problem is that when we have the other wounds of our lives, the non-physical ones in particular, it seems like they don't just heal on their own. They need more. They need cooperation and collaboration from us. And I'd say 90% of our interviewers have asked, they say, "Why is it so difficult to heal that?"

And the reasons I would think is one is that it takes a long time and it's very painful. And it requires a lot of collaboration between us and God and yielding, and also yielding to one another in community so that we can be healed. The other reason too, and the reason why we wrote this book is I don't think we've been taught how necessarily. We grow up in childhood, we're wounded, we have ruptured relationships and you grow older and I don't think there's really a good model or a good system where you kind of have an understanding of, okay, something's ruptured, like my relationship, what do I do? In most cases, it's easier to dispose of a relationship or move to a new church or unfriend somebody in social media than sustain an argument. So those things, I think, add into all this. We don't know how, it's long and difficult and painful. It's easier just to give up on our relationships and our communities.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And that is a sad reality, but Jesus has a different way for us. And so that just affirms that if he was the creator of our bodies and that he's designed the church to be his body and reflect that, that there is a way that he's commanded and encouraged and instructed us for how to sustain relationships, to heal those wounds through forgiveness, through confession. And like you said, yielding even just that humility, how hard is it for so many of us to come and say, "I did wrong. I did this specifically." Or to confess things that actually begin the healing process, those wounds that we carry, you even talked about how the process becomes stunted, because something is stuck. It's like, what are the traumas in our life that prevent us from being healed relationally and even being able to make those steps towards a deeper connection with people? Well, what do you see as the primary challenge for counselors, pastors, and other leaders trying to create community and relational healing, especially in today's divisive culture?

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

I think the challenge is how do you get people to commit to a community? Because you choose to be in one. Jennie and I describe in detail that when the body is injured it goes through several processes, clotting is obviously... You need a clot to stop bleeding and to preserve life and so that the injury doesn't get any worse. Then there is inflammation where you have cells and molecules and they perform a defensive role in order to identify, clear out debris, bacteria, or viruses, and bring in a lot of factors so that there is no infection, and it recruits players for the next stage. And the next stage, which is really when there is true formation, you're rebuilding new tissues to replace damaged ones. And you need a big cast of characters to form new tissue. And there needs to be coordination, cooperation in order to make new muscle or skin or nerves or blood vessels.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

And we talk about there is community there. We use the healing matrix which is a very complex mixture of molecules that hold cells together in a particular structure. And so that there's also communication so that new tissue can be built and mature. And then the last stage being when there is remodel maturation, when the wounds need to close and there is scarring and functions to preserve as much as possible. So for many, many ruptures in relationships that I at least have



experienced or seen in the context of particularly a church or an organization, I would see that inflammation is one of the challenges that counselors and teachers have where something happens and it just got stuck there. It gets worse and worse from what originally happened. And in many cases, there is anger; there is gossip; there is unforgiving spirit. There are forces that divide rather than unite.

And recently there is a challenge at the stage where there's injury, there is crisis. It just keeps getting stuck there. And one that I have identified particularly in the pandemic is falsehood, misinformation. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, "Therefore having put away falsehood-

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

"Let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor. For we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil." And that's just a powerful verse for me.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

The Bible acknowledges that we can be angry, but it is not an emotion just like inflammation, it cannot linger for a long time or it will damage more. So I think there are two areas of challenges. One is controlling that inflammation, that there is no chronic situation of just negative factors that keep woundedness from being there.

And then the second aspect is how do you get people to just stay and work out and build new tissue and repair damaged tissue, clear out things that need to be cleared out. Because the tissue formation actually involves clearing out of things, whether it's pathogen or dead tissue, there is a lot of tissue dying. There's a lot of new tissue being built. So there's a lot of things that happen there. And I said, how do you get people, how do leaders get people to invest their time, their emotions, their resources in order to heal rather than just walk away?

Crystal Keating:

Joni and I were actually talking about this very thing a couple of weeks ago, about how commitment and remaining in relationships that are difficult are one of God's ways to transform us. And we were specifically talking about marriage and how when you have two spirit-filled Christians, marriage is still a challenge, and how God uses those vows that we've made to God and to our spouse to remain. And you have to work things out and you have to communicate and you have to go through it. And I use Joni as an example because everyone's familiar with her, but her and Ken, they've been married for almost 40 years and they've gone through some very difficult times, but it's that resolve to stay with each other, that God has used to beautify their own souls and their relationships. And so even with churches, we've talked about this to remain in a church for many years, even when it gets hard.



I mean, obviously there's various situations where maybe God is leading you somewhere else, but actually is God's way of perfecting and transforming us. It's actually a healing because when we're in pain, we want the pain to stop.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

When we're wounded... What do you do when you're wounded? You want to isolate; you don't want to move. You want to be protected, it's so natural.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

Yes. And it's interesting Crystal, you mentioned that because we talk about spiritual discipline in the book also in terms of what helps you get through some of the trauma and challenges. And I mentioned about prayer that used to be that when I was younger, my prayers are submitting plans of action to God. It's like, God, if you can just work on his or her attitude, if you would just do this, we can really get this over with. They're usually oriented towards getting things very quickly, very fast, and as painlessly as possible. But the deepest transformations in our lives actually happen from some of our deepest woundings. And some of the things that God asks us to persevere because he's birthing something new in our hearts in our lives. And so I'm so glad you mentioned that and having a healing matrix, that's very transformative.

Before the wound closes and scars, that third phase which Jennie and I really invest a lot of descriptions and stories about community and healing in community. Good healing happens in community that is nurturing and promoting flourishing. So I'm really glad that you mentioned that, that there is transformation and can only happen when you're staying there and letting all of this complex players advance and processes for God to work through them all. Even if it's not very pleasant.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Well, let's take it deeper. I mean, in a nutshell, what would you say is the role of collaboration and community in the healing process and specifically for the church? I mean, especially in this day and age where so many of us, we have gone away from meeting in person. I mean, many of us are coming back, but there's this connection I would say that's been lost because we've been doing church remotely. Maybe we haven't been meeting together. What does that look like? I'd really be interested to hear more about the depth of what you and Dr. McLaurin have studied.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

So for me, community and collaboration are really three. In my perspective, that's really important and they're getting less and less. I emphasize. So one is that there are diverse voices. Very often when we are in crisis or we have a community we all like to be with people who think alike.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.



Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

With us. We don't want to hear things that challenges our theology or our perspective, our protocols, our programs. So community, and the more diverse that community, brings in different voices. And I think those are necessary. The other one, which the Bible was very clear about is that we have different functions and different gifts. And so community brings that. I had an interview with rock musicians on this book. And I said that a long time ago, there was this movie Rambo, with Sylvester Stallone, he would get injured, and he would sew up his own wounds.

And one time he, I think, burned some gunpowder into his wound to heal himself. It was very macho, and he was very, "I'm going to save myself." And I just said, there is just no such thing in the body. There is no like macho cell or macho molecule that goes in, clots the wound, does the inflammation, brings it down, makes new tissue, and forms a scar. The amazing complexity and the amazing number of players and some players are there for a minute. They're there for some time, they go away. And then there are some-

Crystal Keating:

That's interesting.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

That linger the whole time, it's kind of like this orchestration and choreography of things that happen in our life. And you need those gifts, you need those gifts. And then the final one that we need so much after still dealing with this pandemic is mutual encouragement. And you get that in community. I mean, you can encourage and kind of self-talk yourself with positive things. But for me, the most encouraging things have been people that see that was, "Oh, I didn't see that." Encouraging words, diverse voices, functions and gifts, and mutual encouragement.

And I wanted to take this time, because I think Joni and Friends is one of the most remarkable healing matrix and community that I have seen. And so I wanted to share with you that, so my Pastor Lee and his wife, Christie, had a niece, Abby, who was born with very significant problems and she needed a lot of care. And so Abby's family went to [Joni and Friends camp](#) and Lee, my pastor, actually got to lead worship and experience. And I told Lee, "Lee, I'm having an interview with Crystal, Joni and Friends, and we're going to talk about the book."

And we talked about community and healing matrix because this is what you're talking about. Community and collaboration. I wanted to read what Lee wrote me, he said "[Joni and Friends Family Retreat](#) is simply beautiful care for the families of special needs individuals. Spa days for moms, clay shooting for dads, crafts, sports, and games for siblings, one on one care for kids with special needs, worship, preaching, small groups. It's precious, the healing matrix at work." That's what he wrote me.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, that's awesome.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiati:

Isn't that awesome?



Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

They have beautiful community, you already have. And my pastor is just one example. I know of many stories like that, where they come to your Retreats and families are refreshed, they're strengthened. They can regroup as a team and continue to care for one another. So it's like, I have no lessons for you, you already are a great community, you just need to be bigger and do more. And I wanted to make sure that I said that. I feel like I am the one who should be schooled here in community, instead of me telling you and your ministry how to be one. You have done such remarkable, remarkable work among people who truly needed community.

Crystal Keating:

We love hearing that, just affirms what God has put in our heart to do. And the beautiful thing about Family Retreat is that they have this week where you're around families who understand, you are around people who get it. You get a time of respite and worship and refocusing on the Lord. And our hearts are that we take that passion that happens at Family Retreat and takes it to the church. How can we live this out in our community on the other weeks where families are feeling weary and alone and misunderstood and disconnected? Because that's where it really, really matters.

And so just as the body can be an example for how we are relationally, we would love that our ministry is an example of how we can be in the church every day of the week in community with one another. That's where the deep healing I think really takes place. So God bless your Pastor Lee. I'm so glad that you shared that, that's awesome.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

Yes, it's so...

Crystal Keating:

What a blessing. Well, as we close our time together, Dr. Culiat, what are some of the things you've learned about the nature of God through studying the complex process of physical healing in the body?

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

There are two. First is that I see God's power. I studied DNA and proteins, genes and complex biological pathways, and they are intricate and exquisite, breathtaking beauty and complexity and interdependence. And I only use wounding as one example, but I look at other processes too. And invariably, I am moved into wonder and awe of God's power. And for me, that is comforting that I worship a powerful God.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.



Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

And the other is what I wish readers would take away from the book is just God's grace. And that God ultimately desires healing in our souls, in our hearts, and minds as well. And our corporate bodies are so wounded these days; that there is hope there. And that God has grace for us to have healing in the places of our... Whether it's our marriage, our relationship with our children, our communities at the workplace, that there is grace for healing to happen. And so I hope that this book promotes that and that helps people heal in some personal woundedness but also they know, and they will become factors that promote healing where they are in church particularly.

Crystal Keating:

Well and I know that's your heart's cry and your prayer for our listeners today. That is just so good. And for our podcast listeners, we actually have a special gift for you today. When you visit [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast) this week, you can download chapter one of Dr. Culiat's new book for free. And the best part is that when you download chapter one, you'll also be entered to win a free copy of the book. What a gift! And you can find all of the details at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast). Again, that's [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

Dr. Culiat, thank you for taking the time to share about *Designed to Heal* and the practical ways we can begin to address the immense need for reconciliation, wholeness, and function in our relationships with God, with one another, and within our communities.

Dr. Cymbeline Culiat:

Thank you, Crystal. This was really very special for me.

Crystal Keating:

God bless you. Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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