

LIUAN HUSKA

HURTING

YET

*Whole*

RECONCILING BODY AND SPIRIT  
IN CHRONIC PAIN AND ILLNESS

DISCUSSION GUIDE



## *A note from Liuan:*

Dear friend, I hope these questions help you start a lively and thoughtful conversation with your group. I wrote them as I was leading my book launch team through weekly book discussions, and, even as the author of this book, I found that discussing in community opened new avenues of learning and insight. I'm praying for you as you start these important conversations in your churches and communities. They are not easy, and everyone comes to the table at different points in their journey. Remember that the listening and questioning – the journey itself – is just as important, if not more important, as the destination – the conclusions we may or may not reach. May God show up in your conversations.

P.S. Do let me know if you're starting a book group! If the timing works out I'd love to join one of your sessions (most likely virtually) and answer questions.

---

### CHAPTER 1: A JOURNEY BEGINS

1. How would you describe your relationship with your body, and what experiences have shaped that relationship?
  2. Facing your own pain or illness, or witnessing others go through pain or illness, what big questions do you have?
  3. What parts of Liuan's story in Chapter 1 resonated with you most, and why?
  4. Liuan describes some of the responses from her faith community to her suffering (p. 8-9). How have your own churches and communities responded to your suffering, or the suffering of others? Is there anything you wish your Christian community would do differently?
  5. Liuan describes healing as "being who you are" (p. 11). How have your own bodily experiences shaped who you are? What does healing mean for you right now?
- 

### CHAPTER 2: SPLIT AT THE CORE

1. This chapter gets into some of the ways we make sense of physical pain and disease from a theological perspective. One common interpretation is to trace the problem to the fall: "Our bodies were perfect and in harmony with the rest of nature, the thinking goes, but after Adam and Eve ate the fruit, sin entered the world, and with it came pain, suffering, and death... Why do we hurt? Because we sinned" (p. 22). How does this interpretation compare with your own understanding of pain, death, and disease?
- 2 Liuan writes that stepping back from the idea that all diseases are rooted in the curse and finding different interpretations helped her make peace with her body (p. 23). How do you feel

about the idea that pain, death, and disease may have been around since the beginning? How would such an interpretation change how you relate to your own body and to pain and illness?

3. Our bodies can be “good” without being “perfect” (p. 25). Can you identify ways that your body is “good” or “purposeful” – even as you know its imperfections? Or, if it is hard to do so, what experiences or thoughts keep you from being able to see your body as good?

4. Liuan describes a tension Christians face between the wildness of our bodies, including our susceptibility to pain, and the reality of Jesus as healer (p. 29). How have you navigated this tension? Have you tended toward extremes, either disregarding or overemphasizing the body? How do you (or don’t you) live with the “wildness” of creation? How have you tried to “tame the mystery” (p. 32)?

5. Liuan writes about her own body story, growing up in a Chinese immigrant family and coming to faith in the Southern Baptist tradition in Southeast Texas (p. 33). Share your own “body story.” What have you been taught by your family of origin and faith communities about the body? How has your own perspective changed throughout the years?

6. Throughout the book Liuan describes some of the helpful and unhelpful ways people around her responded to her pain or others’. For example, a friend of Tish Harrison Warren told her “I believe that we get sick when we have negative thoughts. If we dwell on something, we make it happen” (p. 35-36). What are some of the most unhelpful responses you’ve heard people say in response to pain or illness? What are some of the most helpful?

---

## CHAPTER 3: ELUSIVE HEALING

1. Liuan describes her journey from thinking about healing as a “reset” and “erasure” of her pain to healing as a deeper, more ongoing journey, where relief of physical symptoms is only part of the picture. Share about your own journey. How did you understand healing when you first started having symptoms? How do you think of healing now? What were some key turning points in your journey?

2. Liuan describes how, early on in her pain, her relationship with God started to change. “For a while, I had just stopped talking to God, much less asking for healing, because it didn’t seem to make any difference. When I picked up again, I was a different person, and God, too, wasn’t the same. I wrote in my journal: “It’s odd to say ‘You,’ God, because it takes effort to acknowledge ‘You’ as this real person and here-and-now presence who cares and whom I perhaps don’t know that well...” (p. 42). How have your own experiences of pain and illness affected your relationship with God?

3. What do you make of biblical promises that those who follow God will prosper, such as those found in Proverbs (p. 53-54), considering the ongoing suffering you know or witness? What do you make of the stories of immediate before-after types of healings in the Bible (p. 55-57)?

4. We are called to partner with God in a deeper, ongoing healing (p. 58). What does partnering with God in healing mean for you, practically speaking?

## CHAPTER 4: THE MYTH OF MEDICAL MASTERY

1. If you work in the health care field, what is it like to take care of patients with chronic pain or illness? What challenges or barriers do you face to caring well for your patients with chronic conditions? In the provider-patient relationship, what do you feel like you need from patients to better support and treat them?
  2. Liuan describes that for many with chronic illnesses, going through the American medical system has been a “fragmenting, disenchanting, and often disempowering experience.” (p. 63). Can you relate? By contrast, can you share any stories of feeling empowered within the medical system? What or who made you feel empowered?
  3. Liuan writes that she had to take medicine off the pedestal and recalibrate her expectations of what medicine can do (p. 69). How have your perceptions of medicine changed throughout the years? How do you manage your expectations? What are practical ways that you have found to effectively navigate the medical system?
  4. In the section, “What is Enough?” (p. 71-75) Liuan addresses the guilt she has felt around having access to treatments and options that others don’t (such as alternative therapies that insurance doesn’t cover), as well as her wondering if she was being too aggressive about seeking treatment. How have you navigated actively seeking treatment and waiting?
  - 5 The last section, “My Health is Your Health,” connects our individual health to the health of our communities and even the health of the planet. “Health care, in the end, is about all of us understanding our connection to our families, our next-door neighbors, and our global neighbors, not to mention to the rainforests in Brazil and the penguins in Antarctica” (p. 78). How might this perspective change how you approach health care? What connections do you see between individual health and communal health?
- 

## CHAPTER 5: THE BURDEN WOMEN BEAR

1. Do you resonate with some of the experiences and statistics shared in this chapter? Or do you have experiences that challenge some of the claims made in this chapter?
2. Women’s bodies, and women’s unique ways of being in our bodies, has often been deemed inferior and a liability (p. 83). On the other hand, women’s ability to bear children (our reproductive capacities) has been interpreted by some Christian communities as what gives women value – intrinsically tied to our calling (p. 85). How have you seen these polar tendencies to either denigrate or deify women’s bodies (p. 89) working out in your own communities?
3. Liuan writes that how we treat women’s bodies (because they are different from men’s bodies, which have traditionally been seen as the “standard”) is related to how we treat other bodies that differ from the “norm” – disabled bodies, racial minorities, people with nonconforming sexual identities (p. 82). In the story of Shalon Irving (p. 86-87), she notes that when we live in a society not built with our well-being in mind we experience more stress, which harms our health. If you have a marginalized identity, how has that affected your health? Regardless of your identity, how has stress affected your health?

4. Have you ever, like Liuan, felt the desire to escape your body (p. 90)? How do you deal with that feeling? What practices have helped you stay grounded?

5. Liuan suggests that what we perceive as bodily liabilities can be redeemed by God and turned into our strengths. For example, our vulnerability and permeability as women – to illness, to others' needs – can open us up to a different way of leadership and open us up to God. "But the way to redemption and wholeness is not to escape; rather, it's to turn these very vulnerabilities into strengths, to stay present to the pain, to see what new growth the wounds might bring forth (p. 91). What might that look like, to turn toward your body and let God turn your vulnerabilities into strengths?

---

## CHAPTER 6: VULNERABLE BODIES

1. In the opening story (p. 99-101), Liuan experienced emotions of anger, frustration, fear, and a desire to flee when she encountered the vulnerability of her child. What emotions does vulnerability evoke in you? (No wrong answers.) Can you share a story of a time when you encountered bodily vulnerability that shaped you?

2. Do you think it is possible to move from fight-or-flight response to rest-and-digest – a more peaceful state – in our bodies, even as we continue to experience pain and illness? Share from your own experiences.

3. For those of you who have been on "the receiving end" of help (p. 102) and don't fit cultural ideals of productivity and normalcy – how have these experiences shaped your identity? What have your experiences shown you about what society values?

4. How do you see the COVID-19 pandemic exposing our vulnerability, and what do our responses to the pandemic show about how we approach vulnerability? Could the pandemic help us better appreciate our shared vulnerability and honor it? Can you give any real-life examples of that happening?

5. Disability advocate Judith Snow offers the image of God as a paraplegic, being dependent on us, who are his hands and feet in the world (p. 113). What do you think about the idea of God being vulnerable, as he became in Jesus's incarnation, or even God being dependent on us?

6. "Pain and illness are socially isolating because we don't know how to be sick and hurting in front of others" (p. 118). Have you had to be sick and hurting in front of someone else? How did that change your relationship?

7. How has embracing your own vulnerability, or just accepting it, transformed you? What does it look like for you to live interdependently with, instead of independently from, others? What are ways you can "show up" – either to others in their pain or in your own pain in front of others? How can we "bring our bodies to the table" (p. 118)?

## CHAPTER 7: OUR HUMAN LIMITS

1. In the opening story (p. 120-123), Liuan shares how her ongoing pain and frustration with limits were a challenge in her marriage. How has pain or illness challenged your closest relationships (whether marriage/partnership, friendship, or parent-child)? What lessons have you learned as you navigate these challenges?
  2. Liuan states that limits are neutral, unsurprising, and intrinsic to our humanity (p. 123). What do you think of this idea – that limits are part of who we are as human beings? What limits do you have trouble accepting? What limits have you learned to honor better?
  3. In the section “Limits and the Resurrection” Liuan challenges some of the ways we’ve commonly thought out our resurrected bodies and life. How did this section challenge your understanding of the resurrection? What questions do you still have?
  4. “When we push the override button one too many times – eventually our bodies say ‘no.’” (p. 128). How do you see this truth manifesting in your own life or in society? Liuan suggests that the rise in chronic illness in our world today might be saying something about how we live – that we’re pushing ourselves beyond our limits (p. 130). What do you think? Is there a connection?
  5. How has living within your own limits changed you – your identity, your life vision, your priorities?
  6. Some limits are physical, but some of the limits we experience result from how our society is structured. For example, we don’t give people very much time to rest and recover in American society (e.g., two weeks of sick time annually, six weeks of maternity leave). Do you think it’s possible to change some of the ways society is set up and what our culture values, so that we are able to honor our human limits better? What ideas do you have – large or small?
- 

## CHAPTER 8: THE CRAFT OF SUFFERING

1. Childbirth for Liuan was an experience of letting go of control and allowing pain and suffering to work on her, instead of resisting it (see p. 141: “Having experienced it, though, I can see a poetic parallel between childbirth and the rest of life...”). How does the story of Liuan’s childbirth experience speak to you?
2. When do you think it is appropriate to resist pain, and when is it appropriate to accept pain?
3. “What is most comforting to me as I read the Gospels is not that Jesus explains the meaning of our suffering or that my pain ‘makes sense’ in God’s cosmic economy. It’s that Jesus knows my suffering intimately and is here with me in it” (p. 146). For Liuan, knowing that God is present through Jesus in her pain is enough, and more helpful than any kind of explanation of the “why” behind suffering. What about you – what questions do you have about suffering? Is the knowledge of God’s presence enough?
4. Liuan had to walk through the stages of grief as she reckoned with her chronic pain (p. 148). Where are you along the stages of grief: anger, denial, bargaining, depression, acceptance (and we often go back and forth)?

5. Liuan learned to move from “why” questions to “who” and “how” questions. Discuss these questions: “How will I live now? Who is God for me now? Who am I becoming?”
  6. Liuan learned to say, “Everything’s gonna be all right” because she found a deeper sense of “okay” – an “okay” “born not of knowing but of unknowing (p. 152). Are you able to say, “It’s going to be okay” at this point? What does it mean for you to say, “It’s going to be okay”?
- 

## CHAPTER 9: A DIFFERENT WHOLENESS

1. Liuan’s response to her chronic pain, which was “an ongoing trauma” (p. 155) was to dissociate – to separate herself from her body. Can you relate? How do you respond to your own physical symptoms? If you’ve dissociated, what do you think you’ve lost from doing so? Or, if you’ve learned to come back to your body after a period of dissociation, what have you regained?
  2. What could it look like for you to “fully inhabit this fragile flesh and bone” (p. 150)?
  3. This chapter addresses our responses to trauma and how we heal from trauma. Answer as you feel comfortable: how has trauma (either trauma from having pain or illness or other kinds of trauma) affected your own relationship with your body? For those of you who have helped people through trauma or are recovering from your own traumas, how does this chapter resonate with your own experiences?
  4. Liuan quotes from a trauma therapist who says, “Instead of managing what comes up from the body, we work with it, trusting its purpose and direction” (p. 157). What do you think is the difference between “managing symptoms” and “working with” the body? What might it look like for you to “trust” your body in the discomforts and symptoms you are experiencing? Can you, or are there thoughts and hesitations holding you back?
  5. What does it mean for you that Jesus meets you in the body that you are (p. 160-161)? How do you know God in your body, or how might you start to tune in to God in your body?
  6. In the section “Mosaic-Making” (p. 165-168), Liuan writes that she had to trust the pieces into God’s hands, and trust that she could partner with him in making a new, equally meaningful and beautiful picture out of the life that she felt had shattered. Talk about the pieces of your life, your plans. How do you see them coming together in a new way and forming something beautiful? (It’s okay if you’re not that far along in the process to see things re-forming.)
  7. We are not separate individuals, but interdependent on others – part of a whole (p. 169). How has the pandemic been shaping your understandings of vulnerability, dependence, and being part of a human community?
- 

## CHAPTER 10: A COMMUNITY OF WOUNDED HEALERS

1. Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone “listening without an agenda” (p. 181)? How did it compare to other kinds of listening you’ve received? Share about your experiences

as a listener – do you feel the need to put a “positive cap” (p. 182) on the situation? What does it feel like to listen to someone’s story of suffering and not say or do something “helpful” at the end?

2. Would you add anything to the “Practical Service” suggestions (p. 184-187)? What has been most helpful to you from others in your journey with pain or illness?

3. Liuan appreciates the seasons of Advent and Lent (p. 187). What do those seasons mean for you? What could it look like for you to “deepen the pain to a shared level” (p. 189) – whether you are in pain or are walking alongside another person in pain?

4. What could it look like in our churches to bring people who are suffering or in pain and usually the ones being ministered to – away from the margins and into the center? How would it change our churches to listen to their stories and learn from them? How would it change the work of the church in the world?

---

## EPILOGUE

1. What are your biggest takeaways from this book? How has reading this book changed how you relate to your own body and affected your own human journey?

2. What are some practical, embodied steps you can take toward healing, toward wholeness?