



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 119 – Healing Racial Trauma with Sheila Wise Rowe

Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy with Sheila Wise Rowe

[Music]

Sheila: Pay attention. Ask the questions. Listen to the stories. And I think that's just... that's the starting point. And right now, I feel like what's happening is that that's been just cut off. It's like I... We're not gonna... we're not listening to anybody's stories. We just, you know, we have our narrative, our perspective, in ... in often it's based politically, and so therefore, we're not going to entertain the notion somebody else is having an alternative experience. And what does that mean? Like, I don't have the answers to, except for pointing people to the Lord.

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Voice: You're listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His. Find out how these realities free you today on *God Hears Her*.

Elisa: Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I'm Elisa Morgan.

Eryn: And I'm Eryn Eddy. Have you ever experienced moments or words that have personally hurt you? Do you feel traumatized by anything in your life right now?

Elisa: Well, today we want to talk with licensed counselor Sheila Wise Rowe about trauma and about how we can work to heal in the aftermath of experiencing it. We want to specifically focus on racial trauma and how we can work to be better as a community of believers.

Eryn: Unfortunately, I couldn't make it for this conversation, but Sheila is incredible. She has been counseling people for over twenty-five years, and she has written many books, including *Healing Racial Trauma*.



Elisa: So, let's jump into this powerful conversation with Sheila. Can you just tell everybody who... who is Sheila, you know? Where are you from, who are you, how'd you get to be you, what else is happening in your life... just give us a little... a little bio here.

Sheila: I was born in Boston, raised in Boston, and thought I'd never leave Boston. However, things... shifted, and I'll go into that a little bit more, but, so, my upbringing... I was the second oldest of nine kids, raised with both of my parents. My parents separated, then it was my mom, and during the civil rights period, and also... being a part of bussing. So, court-mandated bussing in Boston, this was in the... seventies, and...

Elisa: So, how old were you in that bussing season that you experienced?

Sheila: Yeah. So, bussing started in '74, so I was middle school by then? So, I think maybe sixth grade... no, seventh grade. There was a program called Operation Exodus, and I was a part of that program, and that pre-dated court mandating bussing. So, there was a small group of black students who were basically bussed to white schools. Operation Exodus was an... an attempt to try... to try to get better education for black students who really were experiencing lots of deprivation in the public school system. So, I was one of those, and... I would say that... that early experience really did mark a lot of my perceptions of myself and... and others, cause I did not growing... grow up in a community that was, you know, it was mixed, it wasn't. It was predominantly black. By the time I reached school, the neighborhood had shifted and changed, so, it really felt like I was a fish out of water. I was in this whole new environment. And I think for everyone, including the teachers and the students, they had never really engaged with a black person before, and so, there was a lot of those experiences were deeply troubling and painful, and now in looking back, I can see, okay, where the origins of some of the racial trauma that I carried, where that came from.

Elisa: Sheila, were you the only black student in your school, or were there other black students?

Sheila: The bus probably had about maybe twenty kids, or twenty-five kids. I think there may have been, like, one other black kid in my class...

Elisa: Wow.

Sheila: ... but for the students, they really, this was totally new for them. And so, even some of the experiences... Some were innocent in terms of curiosity, and then others were pretty vicious. And that came from students as well as teachers. And so... Yeah, so I went through that, then went through



bussing, official bussing, and that was a really horrible, turbulent time in Boston. And so, I and my siblings were, some of us were in the same school, others went to other schools where it was even worse, so, I went from that to, okay, preparing to go to college... Out of high school and having to deal with guidance counselors saying, *oh, don't apply to this school, you know, you're not going to get in*. I did get in... so I got into Tufts, and I graduated from Tufts with a... a B.A., and... and then went on to get my master's. I was not a believer, actually. Like, I knew God existed, I did believe that, and I did have experiences of Sunday school, predominantly at my aunt's church, but not a whole... real sense of well... what does it look like to actually be a believer and walk that out in my life. And so, my college years, even high school, I was not... I mean, it wasn't until I graduated from college, and then a couple of years after that of really come to... to Christ.

Elisa: How did Jesus grab you?

Sheila: I was working as a social worker, and I burnt out at a certain point, and... and part of that was just trying to reconcile, like, my heart's desire was to really empower the community I came from, and the parents, and hopefully reuniting parents and kids, and that was, like, you know, a kind of a save-the-world mentality...

Elisa: Yeah.

Sheila: ... that wasn't based on faith, it was just *I'm going to do this*. And yeah, that never works out. So, I... burnt out, and at that point I just thought, *well, what do I... I like?* Vintage clothing, and I was doing a little side hustle of selling vintage clothing, *I'm going to open a vintage clothing store*. So that's what I did.

Elisa: Yeah, why not? There you go. Yeah.

Sheila: Right, exactly. Exactly. So, I did that... And so, during that whole period as I was healing, I still thought, in some ways, like... like I can be in control of my life. Like, you know, I'm... I'm wanting... if I just put my all into this it's gonna work. And... and then I just started hanging out with the wrong people, and just... and particularly, just a really crazy relationship with a guy who was this cocaine dealer, it was just a mess. And so, I... I went from wanting to save the world to this. And like, how... like I know how that happens for people...

Elisa: Yeah. You do.



Sheila: ... It's a... it's a... it's a slippery slope, you know. It doesn't all happen at once and it's not intentional, but then you just suddenly discover, like how did I get to this place. And it was at that point that I realized, you know what, I'm not in control. And if I'm not in control, then who's in control? There has to be somebody who's in control here. So, that was the point at which I surrendered. I was watching, like, a show or something on tv and I can't even think of who it was on tv... But it was like... it was like an altar call, and then I can... shortly after that, yeah, I was like oh, okay. And I had conversations with my mom, cause she had... she had become a believer a couple of years before that, like a real strong believer. And we would have conversations about faith matters, yeah, so that was the point. And that was 1984.

Elisa: And I'm hearing a lot just in this little snapshot that you've shared and thank you for going into it. Just so much grit and also so much grist that God would both use and... and develop you and shape you. You use the term *racial trauma*, and I know what that is sort of in my head as I make it up. You know, I lived... I was pretty young during those... those years, but I remember them, and I know as a white person my experience is completely different. And I also grew up in Texas, which is very expression of the whole crisis that we were all going through. Can you describe what you mean by *racial trauma* and even trauma to begin with...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... and my heart is trying to already put little bubble wrap around it as I'm listening to you talk about middle school. That is such a traumatic time anyway...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... but to go through Operation Exodus and the bussing experience, and then the mandatory bussing experience, and then being the only, pretty much, black student in your classes. Help us understand trauma and then racial trauma if you could.

Sheila: Yeah. I think it's important to know, and I think this is where people get things kind of confused. The reality is that most of us have... have experienced trauma in some form or another, and whether it's a minor... they, you know, it's... it's termed little-T trauma, where it's something that's... it's, you know, troubling and disturbing, but it's not catastrophic. And that versus big-T trauma, which can be something like a... a... like a major car accident, or a... a death of a really significant person in your life, and... or some horrific types of abuse. And... and this is not to gradate things, like, *this is worse than the other*, but many of us have experienced that. And so, when we come in looking at racial trauma, it's easy to kind of



think, *well, okay, that's... so what, someone called you an N-word, you know, what's the big deal.* Or, you know, you didn't get served in a restaurant or whatever. Well, one of the things that they've shown just in research is that multiple little-T traumas have more of an impact, and can have more of an impact, than a... one big-T trauma event.

Elisa: Really?

Sheila: Yeah. And so, what you're seeing is that for many people, in not just the black community, but in... in my book, *Healing Racial Trauma*, I deal with different racial groups and ethnic groups, and so, what happens is that we experience big-T traumas often, but it's those little ones on top of that, and it's just this compounding of it. And the weight of that has really dramatic and long-term effects, and it's not just in the present, but it's also historical. So, when I talk about my own history, like, that contributed to who I am, but I also have to include the experiences of my parents. You know, what they experienced. My father's... the death of his mother and father and younger brother in Virginia during a TB epidemic, where there were no hospitals for black people...

Elisa: Wow.

Sheila: ... so then he was raised by his grandfather. And so, he's coming with that baggage, and his grandfather's coming with his own baggage of the past, and so, all of us are affected by what has happened in the past if it's not resolved. And so, we're dealing, when we're talking about racial trauma, we're talking about the present as well as the past. We're also talking about vicarious trauma. So, vicarious in that, when we see things on tv and it's pretty horrifying, I think, to everybody, when we saw what happened with George Floyd, horrific. It has a special meaning and a deeper meaning for a black mother, who's watching this man be killed before her eyes, and h... having him cry out, "Mama," it's gut wrenching, because it... we have thoughts about our own family members. And that's traumatizing. There are ways in which racial trauma happens when... and it may seem like, *well that's just a statue, what's the big deal?* But that statue, a statue of a confederate... statue, possibly? Has meaning, and it may have meaning to certain people and it's one of *well, this is part of the culture, the heritage*, or whatever, and for... for black folk, the meaning of that statue is very different. The meaning is enslavement, the meaning is who's in charge and who's superior. So, all of those things contribute towards racial trauma, and more. There's more as well.

Elisa: That is so helpful. You've heard the phrase, I'm sure, a million times, that in order to be a counselor you have to receive counseling, you know...



Sheila: Absolutely.

Elisa: ... in order to help others, you have to be helped. You know, because...

Sheila: Yup.

Elisa: ... hurt people end up hurting people... that whole thing...

Sheila: Absolutely.

Elisa: ... So, what was your own journey like in terms of the trauma, racial and otherwise, that you experienced growing up and, I'm sure you still do at times. What was your journey like in terms of the process of healing?

Sheila: So, I recognized very early on that... and part of the process of getting, like, you know, registered and licensed and all that was doing your own work. And so, I did enter into counseling with someone, I was part of support groups, it was in those places that I really felt... and in the group work, it was connected... to, not just counseling, but more inner-healing, and so really, like, listening, *what is the Holy Spirit saying? What is the Holy Spirit doing?* And so, that's the part that I've recognized even in my own practice, like, there's One who actually knows me, knows the person that I'm working with better than they know themselves. And so, you know, *God, what is the issue here?* And have seen how we can go right into what the core issue is. And not that you can't do that in secular counseling, cause you can, but it's, can be, more protracted, and long... take a longer time...

Elisa: And do you mean, like, that you pray that...

Sheila: Oh yeah.

Elisa: ... or you ask the person that? So... so you have the counselor counseling you...

Sheila: Yes.

Elisa: ... as you're counseling another.

Sheila: So, I... for me, it was individual counseling with someone as well as being in a group, but the individual part was really powerful, because in individual counseling it was... there was a safe space, and



it was, ironically, you know, a lot of the conversation right now is trying to get people who are like you, and so, there aren't a lot of black therapists out there...

Elisa: True.

Sheila: ... Back in the day there was even fewer...

Elisa: Yeah.

Sheila: ... So, my therapist was this Greek woman who was amazing, that was really important for me to work through my own stuff, cause you're right, if... without that it ends up spilling out, and that's what I saw early on...

Elisa: Yeah.

Sheila: ... with this *I want to save the world*. I... I hadn't dealt with anything really. Not my stuff. So...

Elisa: You know, I can relate to that too, cause I... I went in to become a counselor in the earlier part of my career, and I had the... hardest time figuring out my motivations, and I... it was through counseling that I finally realized I was really just trying to help myself, you know? And I think...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... I think most counselors have that a... a bone of that, if you will...

Sheila: Yeah. Yes. Yes.

Elisa: ... and... and it... and it's legit. It's cool, you know, we're not... none of us is done, you know, but, you know, we have to face that, you know, and get our own help.

Sheila: Absolutely.

Elisa: Let's go a little bit deeper into the... the world of racial trauma. You know, I'm a... I'm an old white woman who grew up in a pretty segregated world. What can we learn? What would you share with our audience about both being on the receiving end and, dear Jesus, on the giving end of traumas with our racial challenges and realities in our world?



Sheila: Yeah. But, you know what, I think one of the key things when you're dealing with trauma, and this is really dealing with racial trauma, I certainly saw a lot of this with counseling diverse women, white as well, around sexual abuse survivors and that kind of trauma. It's often the thing about our stories. It's *will you give space, actually listen to our stories? To... Listen to our journeys?* And rather than cherry picking or judging whether that was a big deal or not or finding somebody who's gonna basically agree with your perspective about the fact that that trauma is not big enough or a big of a deal. The first step, really, is, are we able to listen to one another and to validate one another's stories. And if you look at Scripture, this whole notion of grieving with those who are grieving, meeting people exactly where they're... they are. Looking at Scriptures around the parts of the body and the importance of all the different parts of the body. So, if we're talking about believers, you know, if the foot is in pain, you better pay attention to the foot. You can't ignore it, don't pretend it's not there. Pay attention. Ask the questions. Listen to the stories. And I think that's just... that's the starting point. And right now, I feel like what's happening is that that's been just cut off. It's like I... We're not gonna... we're not listening to anybody's stories. We're just, you know, we have our narrative, our perspective in... in often it's based politically, and so therefore, we're not going to entertain the notion somebody else is having an alternative experience. And what does that mean? Like, I don't have the answers to, except for pointing people to the Lord. I'm not going to go out there and demand that someone agree with everything that I'm thinking or saying. But I want to be able to share *this is what has happened for... for me*, and I want to be able to listen. I want to listen to people who are totally different from me. Who have a different faith perspective, who are struggling on multiple layers, and it's hard sometimes. I think the hardest thing for me is that when there's abusive behavior that's happening, then I... I tend to... I struggle with my hair being on fire, and just...

Elisa: Yeah.

Sheila: ... I'm like, *Ahhhh....*

Elisa: Right.

Sheila: ... You know, so, I don't have a high tolerance for seeing someone abused. God is dealing with what's real. Not what's imagined, not what we want it to be, our fantasy, or, you know, whatever, we can label it under culture, but, *this is what really happened, Lord, we need Your help. We need You to heal the real, we can't sweep it under the rug.*

Elisa: There's true evidence that trauma resides in our bodies...

Sheila: Yeah.



Elisa: ... and you talked about multi-generational trauma residing as well, and, okay. You were raised by a single mom. Your...

Sheila: Yeah. Yeah.

Elisa: ... Your parents split up somehow, you have nine kids in your family. Okay, that experience of having one caregiver, a matriarch, be responsible for the whole home, and everything that's going on in it, in a lower income kind of... That shapes her, that shapes you...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... That shapes how you parent, who you choose to marry... These traumatic things, for me it was watching my mom struggle with alcohol, it was trying to be a really big girl when my dad came to pick us up to go to a restaurant, you know, to eat our steaks while we were five and six years old, and saw at them, and, you know, tried to stuff everything down deep. These things... these... these memories that are so tangible, they go under the very fiber of who we are...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... How do we address them? How do we heal? How do we respectfully understand...

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... What do you say about helping us wrestle through to a place of better health?

Sheila: Yeah. The whole notion of the, you know, trauma being held in the body is then really looking at what are the ways to expel that? And I believe it's not just the body, it's also in our mind...

Elisa: Yes.

Sheila: ... so, it... you know, our emotions are all tied up in this. And so, it's... it's really addressing all of those different layers, like all of... spiritually, emotionally, physically, relationally, the whole thing. And what are the pieces? And so, when we look at the body, how to expel that? And... and that means moving. That means movement. That is one way of releasing that trauma from our bodies...

Elisa: Moving.



Sheila: Another... Yeah, moving, and...

Elisa: Like exercise.

Sheila: ... Exercising, walking, etcetera. But also, you know, I believe that, you know, even in terms of prayer, in terms of worship, like being worshipful, particularly in really exuberant worship, there's a physicality to that...

Elisa: That's awesome.

Sheila: ... in which there is a release. And so, if you... you may notice that sometimes you go to service and you're feeling kind of down or whatever, and... and just think about the Scripture that says, "God inhabits the praises of His people," like in that... that release of... in worship, and just... and you come away, and you feel like, *okay, wow*. That you've offloaded something. Something has happened. And there was an exchange that occurred. And so, it's looking for those things. And it's different for different ones of us. Some people it's not that. Some people it's jogging, some people it's biking.

Elisa: And do you, like, intentionally bring the trauma... or is it just the physicality releases it?

Sheila: Well, the physicality does release it to a certain degree, but I think that if there's an in... intentionality about it in terms of, particularly if something is recently has occurred. And some of that work has come from their kind of looking at animals in nature. And just how they can encounter, like, being pursued like a... a zebra being pursued by a leopard or something. And then they... there's a way in which they totally, like, *oh my gosh*, you know, they either freeze or they try to run, but then they... they need to shake it off. And... and that... that process of shaking it off, and just releasing it. And so, we can do that. We can do that literally, physically, but we can just pray and just release that. Like, *I'm not going to carry this. I... I'm refusing to carry this in my body*, acknowledging the realness of what happened, and that's so important. Cause we can also tell ourselves a story about it. Like, *oh, that wasn't that bad*. And sometimes we do that...

Elisa: It's called survival. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Sheila: ... Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly. Exactly. You know, and sometimes we're not ready to face something, and, you know, and you can't torpedo somebody out of denial. But it just means they're not ready. But when you're ready, I'm gonna let this go. I'm gonna release it to the Lord. And I'm going to ask



for healing. In South Africa, ones of the things that there some folk will... do when someone has experienced a trauma, is actually... it's like a baptism, going under water...

Elisa: Oh my.

Sheila: ... immersion, and coming back. And so, I had a reader, this wonderful woman, she took that, and she literally called friends together, etcetera, and she... she had a very traumatic... it was a... an adoptee... international adoption, just a lot of pain from the past. And so, they had this whole thing, it was a... pastor was there... I mean it was just an amazing, beautiful thing, where she went under the water and she literally felt that, like, symbolic, it's not... there's no magic in the water or anything like that, but symbolically that sense of rising to new life. Like, she had... you know, she had risen to new life in Christ, but just this washing that past away. And so, there are symbolic ways of doing that. And often times I'll have people, you know, if they're experiencing something, and they're feeling a sense of release, just to wash their hands, or wash, you know, if it's washing their minds, because if... there's something tangible in the symbolism of it that really helps to... remind us, as we... you know, in the future and look back and go, *okay, that was a moment where I really let... let this go, or I really received... something new.* Because that's, you know, coming out of that war, or washing your hands, and then receiving, *well, what is the new thing that You want to say about me?*

Elisa: It's a marker. Uh-huh.

Sheila: Yeah! Yeah, exactly.

Elisa: And a renaming, and a re-understanding.

Sheila: Yes. Absolutely. Yeah.

Elisa: So many rich elements, you know, as I'm processing with you... listening to stories, asking stories, you know, of... of those that you care about, so... and sharing your story, if that... if you have experienced trauma, movement... release... imaging and symbolism are so important, worship and prayer... marking it... claiming the newness that God gives us, it- such powerful elements. A... As we turn it around a little bit, how can we be more aware of how we might be causing trauma in another? And help us understand how we can catch ourselves... become more educated, become more wise and prepared, so that we hopefully...

Sheila: Yeah.



Elisa: ... change some of our... our habits or our ignorances for racial trauma.

Sheila: Yeah. I think that the other piece is that, you know, a lot of what we've been talking about really is about on an individual level. It's about an individual's trauma, but having this understand that that trauma doesn't happen in isolation, that yes, it's often interpersonal racism that causes racial trauma, but that they're... that there are systems that are in place, and that is the reality, and whether you believe that or not, it's true. So, it's... if you actually want to do the research, you will discover there are many ways in which there are blocks that are set up. And so, just being aware, like, is this possibly an issue in this particular situation, whatever that situation might be. That there is something systemic that is going on here that needs to be addressed. And particularly if you're looking at, okay, how... how is the church functioning, your particular church? How is your community functioning? How do you relate to those outside of your community? What are the differences that you see? You know, is there a difference between the services that you see in your community, and it's... it's mostly white, and yet, when you look at the inner-city communities and you see, you know, trash isn't being picked up, schools are horrible, you know, it's just, like... and under-resourced, it's not even just about bad teachers, it's bad buildings, bad school supplies... When you look at those two and you can say, *okay, it's a tax issue*, but it's not just that. Because both of these are public schools. So why do we have this disparity? So just, thinking through and asking yourselves that question. And on a really basic level, if you're looking at a church community, who's centered in that community? Because the reality is, we all have something to share. We... all have something to contribute, and for... many instances, it's the... the BIAPoC folk, the black, indigenous, Asian, Latin... they... they're kind of off to the side, and then... we've got to, basically, figure out, like how do we fit in... how do we fit into the church? What is it that... Can we come with our whole selves? And so, to... to ask yourself, the people that are around you, that are in leadership positions, are they coming as their whole selves, or is there a way in which there's a level of code switching...

Elisa: That's good. Yeah.

Sheila: ... And by that, you know, I mean, you know, that they basically are something else, somewhere else, where they, you know... maybe it's they speak their language, they have certain kinds of foods, there's... the way in which they engage, etcetera. And yet, when they come into your space, they have to shift and change. And then they... they put... have to put on a mask, as it were, and... and unfortunately, that means that there's a whole world that that white institution, church, or whatever, is not having access to. And there's a richness and there's a beauty there that is missing. And... and just throws back to that Scripture about the whole body, like, all the pieces of the body are important.



Elisa: So, maybe we have the courage to ask each other, *what more would you be able to bring here, to this relationship, what more might you bring to this responsibility, this job, what more might you bring to this gathering where we are, you know... and really listening...*

Sheila: Yeah.

Elisa: ... but then it's on all of us to be bridge-builders through conversation. If it's uncomfortable, yeah it's uncomfortable, but lets ask, lets listen, lets be patient, lets... lets hear down to our toes.

Sheila: And I think the other piece, too, just... there also needs to be, like, as a... as a person, as a black person, as a person of color, like I want brothers and sisters in Christ who are more than just allies. Like, they literally are sisters and brothers. And... and that are participating in... in... in bringing God's shalom, bringing God's justice into this world, and that requires some level of risk. It requires a tenacity and consistency, and it's not a once off. It's not about just doing a march and then it's like, *oh, I did the march*, you know, no. It's... it's an ongoing thing in terms of bringing that into your church, into your community, into this world. It takes perseverance. It's a long road, but we can't go, *oh, I don't want to do this anymore*. We don't have the option of that as Christians. Although it can be really hard and painful, and at times we're just like, *I'm done*, you know? But as believers we have to persevere. And so, it is so important having everyone persevering, and... and going in the same direction. And I acknowledge [Music] that at times it... it... it can be really hard. You know, do I want to have the conversation where what I know to be true is, like, constantly being challenged. That's... that's hard. I want to really empower those people who are asking questions, and are open to listening, not even... they don't even have to totally arrive. What I have a hard time with is those who are like, no, they are just adamant. They are stuck where they are in terms of their opinions about racism and systemic oppression, and there's a lot of gaslighting going on, that's hard. Because as a therapist, I... I see all of those... the pain that's out there. And those that are suffering. And... so there's a part of me that is like, *I want to focus on that*. Those who are in pain, and I want to focus on the allies, the white folk, the sisters and brothers in Christ who are saying, *I... I want to join in and help, but I don't know how, but I'm willing to learn*.

[Music]

Eryn: Oh, I have goosebumps. That conversation was amazing. Be willing to learn, that's my biggest take away.



Elisa: Yep. Sheila is just incredible. Before we go, we want to remind you that the show notes are available in the podcast description. You can find the link for Sheila's books and her website when you visit godhearsher.org. That's godhearsher.org.

Eryn: Thank you for joining us, and don't forget, God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

[Music]

Elisa: Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens, and produced by Jade Gustman and Mary Jo Clark. We also want to thank Krista and Nicole for all their help and support. Thanks everyone!

[Music]

Eryn: *God Hears Her* is a production of Our Daily Bread Ministries.