

## A Conversation with Mary Marantz, Author of *DIRT*

**Q. First of all, congratulations on this book. *DIRT* is moving and clear—but it’s also just beautifully written, like a novel. How long have you wanted to write a memoir like this?**

**A.** Well, I’d wanted to write a book since I was five. There is an author named Pearl Buck who grew up in West Virginia, not far from where I did. She’s a Pulitzer Prize winner and a Nobel Prize winner. She wrote *The Good Earth*.

When we would drive past the house where she was raised, there was a little sign out front that said “Birthplace of Pearl S. Buck.” I remember specifically thinking, *I feel like I’m supposed to write a book, too. I feel like I’m supposed to write a book that will bring honor to West Virginia.*

I didn’t know the word “memoir” at that point, but I did feel like it was going to be my story, and I did feel like it was going to be about growing up in the trailer. When you look at this trailer you see on the cover of *DIRT*, it’s romantic and wistful. You can hear the fiddle playing in the swelling score behind the movie of your life. But when you’re in it—when you actually live in the trailer, you need that moment described in the book: I felt like God was speaking to me, saying, “Listen. It doesn’t make sense right now, but I’m going to put words to this one day, and it will make sense. This is not for nothing. This is going to be the thing that shapes you.”

So somewhere between 35 years and the last 18 months is the short answer [laughs].

**Q. And then you shared those words in a memoir—in *DIRT*.**

**A.** I only recently got introduced to the genre of memoir, through this process. I always thought memoirs were things that presidents wrote [laughs]. Once I wrapped my head around what a spiritual growth memoir is, I saw it was a really natural fit.

**Q. That makes so much sense, especially given the form that it took. *DIRT* reads like a novel—not that it’s fiction, but more like an engrossing story than a diary. Who do you read?**

**A.** Going into all of this, my favorite modern writer was Shauna Niequist. I love her approach: *I’m going to tell you these scenes from my life, and you’ll get the faith meaning out of them.* It’s not always, *And now, I will quote scripture to you.*

You learn things about your truth and life just by reading hers. That resonated with me.

The first draft of this book was much more of what I thought a memoir was supposed to be. I call it an “and then” book. It’s a biography: “And then this happened, and then that happened.” But it was such an unnatural fit for me. Anytime I’ve ever blogged or written Instagram captions or

newsletters, it always took this form: Here's a glimpse at my life, and here's the bigger, universal truth out of it for you— "that felt reader need."

At first, I was really getting lost in the weeds of, "This is how you're supposed to write a memoir," like *Wild* or *Educated*. There are elements of that form that I love—getting lost in the characters, for example, like a novel. Donald Miller was the first person who gave me permission to have both: to have that bridge between scenes from my life plus characters you get to know, and bigger truths about what faith looks like. For example, there is just one scene in *Blue Like Jazz* about the SWAT team that changed my whole spiritual life.

I wanted to do similar things in my book—to provide moments to pause and plenty of wide open space to breathe in that truth for the reader's own story and faith.

**Q. You write, "It always started with dirt." When did dirt—all it represents and all it literally is—emerge for you as an anchor in your story? Can you talk about that realization a bit, I guess?**

**A.** God is really funny. God is a character, I'll tell you that. In 2015, I was speaking at the conference I talk about in the book. At that time, it was called the Pursuit Conference. It's changed names a couple of times. That was like my fourth or fifth time speaking there. God had already started showing up in those talks in crazy ways—connecting things. But that talk in particular, without me ever really understanding where it came from, was titled "It Always Started with Dirt." I don't know when that theme first entered my subconscious.

I feel like God has been writing this book since I was born. But in 2015, I feel like God gave me a big glimpse of what was coming. In that talk, my dad's story and mine became interwoven. At the same time, big chess pieces started moving in my life. My husband Justin and I were moving away from our photography business and that circle of people we'd always been in—including that circle of speaking we'd always been in. We were on our own, able to think, *What's next for us?*

That is when I got an email from an agent. One year earlier, I'd been looking at that agency, but I felt God saying, "Do not pursue an agent. Don't try to force this. At the right time, one will be provided." A year later, that agency emailed.

I didn't know at the time that dirt would be the title, the concept. I didn't understand the weight of it. But in hindsight, the hints were there, left by God. He's funny that way.

**Q. The way you describe God makes a lot of sense. You're funny, too. Throughout *DIRT*, you'll make a point that's profound or relive a detail that is gritty or even painful, then you'll punctuate the passage with some wit—wit that doesn't draw attention to itself or even just provide relief. Wit that describes or highlights something, from another angle. Was it easy—natural—for you to interweave humor and heaviness like this?**

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A. That's the biggest compliment. My closest friends tell me that the thing that surprises other people about me when they meet me in person is that I'm a lot funnier than anyone would expect, given how introspective and heavy so much of my writing is.

I was actually just talking about this with Knox McCoy, who is hilarious. We were doing a podcast episode together, and I said something about how parody and political humor have been such powerful forces for ages, reaching people in a way you can't, normally. I asked him why he thinks that is—like, if I can make you laugh, then you trust me to let you cry or something? He said somebody had told him humor is the doorway to truth—or something like that, put much more poetically.

Writing talks for conferences, I'd learned a long time ago that if I could make the audience laugh and make them cry, I'd have connected with them on a deeper root—a deeper nerve ending than just that surface connection.

The first draft of DIRT wasn't funny. It wasn't a bad book or a mean book or anything like that. But it felt like the thing missing was me—and the humor is part of that. So is that felt reader need, that ability to come down, step outside the story, and just talk to the reader.

Having the permission to be funny allowed me to go deeper into the hard stuff, because I knew there were breaks for the reader. It felt more like I was having a conversation with a friend, one-on-one, over coffee. So yes, it's pretty natural for me to go from a deep, heavy concept to a random pop culture reference [laughs]. It's natural for a lot of us once we get out of our own way, I think.

**Q. When we're writing about our experiences, the process can help us realize things about ourselves or others that we didn't before. Do you feel like you realized anything?**

A. The first wave of freedom and revelation was having empathy for myself as a little kid. I saved little me. I built a beautiful life for little me. I got little me out of there. But I'd never paused to go, *Hey. That stuff that happened to you? That was not okay. I'm really sorry that happened.*

I never made time for empathy because I was like, *Go, go, go! Run, run, run! What are you doing? We have to get out of here! You don't have time! There's no crying in building a beautiful life!*

So I had a moment of realizing, *Dang. In all of this running and building, I've never said, "Let's just pause and acknowledge that that wasn't right. That wasn't normal or what most people have to overcome. You did a really good job of dealing with that and not letting it define you."*

The next wave of revelation was also about being grounded in empathy, but not for me. After I found empathy for little me, I thought, *Well, hold on. Mom and Dad were little once too. And they went through even worse.* My mom didn't have running water. When they first started hearing about this book, they were genuinely shocked that I even viewed my childhood as hard.

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And I don't think they meant that in a gaslighting way. I think they were genuinely shocked because for them, there was such a leap forward. I had running water. I got shoes more than once a year.

So, I think empathy for the littlest versions of ourselves, and then the littlest versions of the people who came before us, has been the biggest surprise.

**Q. There is a short passage in the book I'd like to ask you about:**

*Growing up without a lot just does something to your brain. I can't explain it. Maybe it has something to do with the prefrontal cortex still developing. Or maybe it's negative neural pathways grown closer over time at the repetition and replaying of bad thoughts turned bad generational patterns. I don't know. Maybe it's just inhaling all the mildew.*

*But whatever it is, it makes you expect to fail before you've even tried.*

**How old were you when you realized this? And how did it change the way you view yourself?**

**A.** I want to make the joke, "I was today years old." [laughs] I have received hints and glimmers of it through mentoring sessions and workshops where we were teaching other people. Hard story people tend to gravitate toward other hard story people.

There are universal things—feelings—about hard stories. On my Instagram, I wrote a post that just said something like, "Hey, if you grew up with a hard story, what are some feelings you still deal with?" I had gut feeling it was going to be a lot of the same things, over and over. It was—but it was interesting how people put different spins on it and found personal ways to express it.

I thought it'd be amazing to have parts of the book use the language that other people used to describe how their hard stories impact them. I thought, when they read this book, they'll see those words and know this book is for them.

So putting language to it—like poverty mentality—was a pretty recent discovery while in the thick of writing this book and being intentional.

What has that done for me? I feel like the biggest thing it's done is shame work—and all the credit to Brené Brown for that framework, by the way. What that means is anytime I start operating out of a place of "this is never going to work. This never happens for people like me." I know there is power in naming those thoughts and patterns before you're in a spiral of them. Then, it's a lot easier to go, Okay, we've been here before. We recognize this. It's a loop. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It just means that it's not right.

I can diffuse that ticking time bomb of a shame spiral by just acknowledging and recognizing it—and then getting back to work.

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**Q. You've pointed to a "felt reader need" a few times in this conversation. Instead of exclusively exploring and sharing your journey, you urge others to do it for themselves, too. It's an important dimension of the book. When did that aspect of DIRT emerge?**

A. I think what you're picking up on there is a teacher's heart. The question I started to ask myself after the first draft was, "Do I want people to walk away from this impressed by my story? Or do I want them to walk away thinking, *Man, I learned a lot about myself.*"

Well, it's the second one. And that's the teacher's heart. I never want to share something for the sake of sharing. If somebody doesn't walk away better for having heard me, then I feel like I've failed.

So the second draft tapped more into what sets me on fire to write. Now, in DIRT, I will draw you in and connect with you. I'll take you on a journey. But we're going to pause along the way. We're going to take in the view, let it wash over us like water in waves, and just say, "Hey. Breathe that in. What is speaking to you where you are? Let's not move forward without thinking about what that sets you free from as well."

**Q. What aspect of DIRT makes you the most proud?**

A. When I turned in the first draft of DIRT, I loved it. I thought, "We're just going to change a few commas. We're done!"

Then I waited for my editor to write back, saying it was the best thing she'd ever seen. The longer I sat, waiting to hear back, the stronger the doubt and fear became. But something different was also happening—a gut pause is different than just regular doubt and fear. I realized that first draft was not what I wanted.

My editor got back to me and said, "Hey, I actually haven't even started reading the draft yet, but if you're feeling that way why don't you go read Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* while I'm working on my comments. I think it will help you focus on what you really want this book to stand for.." *Bird by Bird* was on the shelf next to *Blue Like Jazz* and reading those two books changed everything for me..

So, really, the biggest thing I'm proud of is that between draft one and the draft that you now hold, I had two months to gut it and write it from scratch. I wrote about 50,000 new words in two months. I would get up, have breakfast, start working at 7:30 a.m. and work until 8 or 9 p.m. at night. I would also Peloton, and they would say things like, "We didn't come out here to teeter on the edge of legendary! We're going to RUN up this mountain. We're going to RISE." And to me, they weren't talking about Peloton.

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Every single day during those two months, voices in my head were saying, “You’re never going to do this. This book is going to be on shelves, and you’re going to be embarrassed by it. You’re going to hate it.”

And every day, to fight them—to climb the mountain a little bit more. I think that’s one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. I’ve never worked so hard in such a constrained amount of time. I was already exhausted from writing draft one.

I have zero doubt in my mind that God was writing the book at that point. I am so proud of DIRT because I persevered, but it is also the most tangible experience of God I have ever had.

**Q. You know, there is a kind of vulnerability that is carefully constructed as a product. And that’s so not what this is—or what you’re encouraging others to do or be. How do people feel and know the difference for themselves?**

**A.** I know exactly what you’re talking about—vulnerability as a commodity. We all have a b.s. meter. I think the first thing to ask yourself is, “Hey, if I share this, is it going to feel like true authenticity or self-commodification?” Ask yourself what your b.s. meter is telling you. What are your intentions?

It’s great for all of us when somebody is willing to go first and lead by example. I mentioned a few people—Shauna, Donald Miller, Anne Lamott—who did that for me. I think DIRT can be a step in that too for other people. I think it will encourage a whole other crew of people to go tell their story from that authentic place, whether it’s one-on-one, via Instagram, or writing their own books.

**Q. If people walk away after DIRT with just one big idea, what do you hope it is?**

**A.** I think it’s going to be one of two—and they’re equally important to me. One of them is just this ah-ha moment that you do not have to be ashamed of your story. That sounds so straightforward and logical, but the truth is, most of us—myself included—are operating out of a position of, I have to hide all of these things about me in order to be accepted.

Actually, the second you start sharing your story, you connect with people in a way that the other surface stuff can never touch. The first time I tiptoed into saying, “I’m the girl in the trailer,” we were in a conference room that held about 1,500 people. We had had people come up after talks before, but this time, there was a line out the door, full of people coming up and saying to me, “I’m the girl in the trailer. I thought it was just me.”

All the capes and masks we wear—it’s icing on the cake to make us presentable. But really, people are like, “That’s too sweet! It gives me a headache. Give me the center—the crumbly parts.”

Your story is not a disqualification. It’s not an asterisk beside your record. It’s your biggest super hero strength. If you lean into it, it’s going to catapult you closer to the thing you’re being called to. Plus, it’s exhausting putting on that icing every morning.

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The second possibility is reconciliation. I was astounded while writing this book: I'd have three-hour calls with my dad and three-hour calls with my mom. If you would have told me how much healing could come from one three-hour call, let alone the others, I never would have believed you. I couldn't believe how much bitterness could unravel in just one conversation.

I think people will read this book or read interviews like this one and get inspired to have that phone call or conversation. There is going to be a lot of healing.

**Q. What advice do you have for how to reconnect with people—family—who have hurt you?**

**A.** When I started the calls with my parents, I'd already begun my podcast. For that, I have to act as an investigative reporter, do research ahead of time, read a book, ask hard questions. I honed an ability to ask out of a place of curiosity, then to pause and listen from a place that lacked judgment.

By the time I did the call with my mom—which was the one I was really scared about—we were able to hit topics and dig deeper to find places of release and healing that we wouldn't have, otherwise, because I was able to stay calm and to not lash out and demand an apology. I came from a place of pure curiosity: Let me find out more about your backstory that led to how you are now.

I feel like a good piece of advice for people who would like to open the door to these conversations is to get curious about the versions of your parents, siblings, or whoever it is, who existed before you knew them. Lean into their answers from a place of neutral curiosity as opposed to judgment and anger. It's a tough place to get to—but I think time can help with that. Give yourself time. When it comes to healing, when it comes to owning your muddy story that's what it comes down to. Give yourself time.

**About Mary Marantz**

Mary Marantz is a Yale Law School graduate and the first in her immediate family to go to college. She is the author of *DIRT*, a book about growing up in West Virginia, and the host of *The Mary Marantz Show*, which debuted in the iTunes top 200 podcast list. Before carving out her own space as a writer and go-to source for in-depth conversations about life and business, she shot to international renown as one-half of superstar wedding photography duo [Justin & Mary](#). Mary's writing has been featured by *Business Insider*, *Thrive Global*, *MSN*, *Bustle*, and *Brit+Co*. <https://marymarantz.com>

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