



Q & A with Ann Swindell

Author of *Still Waiting*



Ann Swindell is an author, speaker, and teacher of writing who is passionate about seeing people set free by the love of Christ. She writes regularly for publications such as *CT Woman*, *RELEVANT*, *Deeply Rooted*, and *Darling Magazine* and her own site, www.annswindell.com. Ann holds an MA in Writing and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing and is passionate about helping other writers tell their stories powerfully. She teaches online writing courses at writingwithgrace.com. She makes her home in Bloomington, IL with her husband and daughter.

1. Why did you decide to write this book *Still Waiting* at this time?

This is a book I've been working on for nearly six years—but I wasn't sure that I ever wanted to share it, because of the subject matter. Still Waiting is a book about my struggle with the condition of trichotillomania, which is something that I have kept private up until now.

As with most things in my life, I write about them to try and understand them, and I started writing this story when I was in graduate school, as part of my MFA thesis. What I found, when I started writing about my journey with trichotillomania, was that this medical condition was tied to so much more in my life than I realized—it was connected to my trust in God, my understanding of his sovereignty, my belief in his ability to heal and his goodness even when he doesn't...there was a lot at stake, for me, bound up in my experience of having trichotillomania for 20 years. The more I wrote about it, the more I realized I had to keep writing. So I did, long past my MFA program, and this book was born.

The gift in writing my story was in how the Lord met me in the writing process. I still had a lot of pain and shame in my life related to trichotillomania when I started the book. But as I wrote and researched and read the Word, God met me in that place. He met me in my story and started to re-frame my story by showing me his presence in the pain and his goodness in the struggle. When I finally decided to start sending the book proposal out to publishing houses, I did it out of a sense of hope—hope that others might be able to experience God's kindness and goodness in the midst of their own waiting journeys through mine. I still am nervous, in some ways, to share this tender part of my life with others, but I'm praying that readers will encounter the truth of God's character through my story and that they will be drawn to Christ because of it.

2. In this book, you write about your journey with the condition of trichotillomania. What is trichotillomania, and how did you discover that you had it?

Trichotillomania is a hair pulling condition in which a person compulsively pulls out his or her hair, even when they want to stop. People can pull out hair from every place on their body; for me, I started pulling out my eyelashes and eyebrows when I was eleven years old. My parents and I just thought it was a bad habit—like nail biting—until I was doing it so much and so often that I ended up with bare patches in my hairline. I wanted to stop, and I tried very hard to stop, but I couldn't. It was then that my father, a physician, did some research and learned that my "habit" was a medical disorder known as



trichotillomania, and there's no clear cure. Doctors know what trichotillomania is, but they don't have any way of stopping or "fixing" it; treatment options are limited and often inconclusive.

3. How difficult was it for you growing up with trichotillomania, and why do you feel that although this is a common condition, it is a condition that is still mostly unknown to the general public?

Trichotillomania, or "trich," as it's often called, was very challenging for me growing up. I wanted so badly to be free with the disorder, to not constantly have odd-looking eyelashes and eyebrows, to not constantly feel defeated and frustrated by my own brain and hands. I wrestled with a lot of shame and confusion over having trich—why couldn't I "just stop"? Why, when I was able to do so many other hard things in life—compete on athletic teams, get good grades, graduate from college—why couldn't I control this? That emotion of feeling out of control in my own body was overwhelming at times and led me to feeling defeated and anxious about this part of my life.

Trichotillomania is a common disorder: it's estimated that anywhere from 2-10 million Americans have the condition and many people struggle with it for all of their lives, in varying degrees of intensity. Although the condition is fairly common—you probably know one or two people who have trich, even if they've never told you about it—people rarely talked about, in large part because people who struggle with trich—myself included—often feel shameful about not being able to stop pulling out their own hair. It's difficult to explain to others, and we often feel overwhelmed by this seemingly "little" thing that dominates our emotions, our sense of self-esteem, and our appearance. How do you explain to someone that you cannot stop pulling out your own hair? It's strange and hard to talk about.

4. How did you cover up your condition when you were younger?

I tried to cover up the damage I had done to my eyelashes and eyebrows in so many ways in my younger years. In high school, I got very good at using makeup to draw in eyebrows and mascara to try to make my lashes look thicker than they were. I also wore false eyelashes most days of the week. To try to avoid pulling my lashes out at home, I would wear gloves in the house, play with modeling clay, wear goggles—anything I could think of to stop pulling. But it never helped for long.

5. Throughout *Still Waiting*, you compare your story to that of the "Bleeding Woman" in the Bible. Can you explain how you identify with her story?

I have always loved the story of the Bleeding Woman in the Bible, and the longer I had trichotillomania, the more I became drawn to her story. She had been bleeding for over a decade before Christ healed her; she had seen a lot of doctors, and no one had been able to heal her. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that she had only gotten worse. Christ alone was the only one who could make her well.

By the time I was in college, I had struggled with trich for a decade, and I didn't see an end in sight; I had gone to therapists and talked with doctors and tried supplements and behavior modification therapy; nothing worked, and I was only getting worse. In some ways, our stories seemed similar—we both had conditions that doctors didn't fully understand and couldn't fix.

But in other ways, our stories are very different; the Bleeding Woman was a social outcast because she was religiously "unclean" according to the Law—she would have been unable to participate in community



life because of her condition and she had “spent all that she had” trying to find a cure. I am not a social outcast, and trichotillomania hasn’t rendered me destitute. Still, I found emotional and spiritual connections with this woman in Scripture, and that is what has drawn me to her story most of all. Because, although she was at the end of her proverbial rope, with no earthly hope of healing and no way to change her circumstances, she clung to hope. When Jesus walked by, there was still a spark of faith and tenderness left inside of her; she had not shut her heart down or walked away from God. Instead, she was willing to reach out and try again—and that is why I love her story. I want to be like her in this way: I want to keep my heart tender toward Christ and full of faith even when my circumstances aren’t changing. I want to reach out to the Lord and trust him, again and again. This is how I want to identify with the Bleeding Woman most of all—as a woman of internal faith and hope, regardless of external circumstance.

6. We all struggle with something that needs God’s help or healing touch. How did you see God in your struggle with trichotillomania?

Honestly, a lot of my journey with the Lord connected to trichotillomania has been a journey that I didn’t want and would never have chosen for myself. All struggle is like that, I think—we never want to feel pain or sorrow or heartache, and we never choose painful pathways for ourselves. But, in the midst of this decades-long struggle, I have encountered God in deep ways. I have experienced him as the one who not only hears me but who is with me in my struggle, and his presence has become more precious to me than any healing.

Through having trichotillomania, God has also increased my hope in him. That might seem backwards, since I still haven’t been healed, and it would seem that healing is what I would want most of all. And while I still do want to be healed from trich—I ask the Lord almost every day for healing from this condition—the Lord has increased my hope in him, because I know that one day, I will be healed. As I have learned to put my hope in his character and in the coming Kingdom, rather than in my current circumstance, I have become more hopeful about who he is and I have grown in my desire for the coming of Christ, when every tear will be wiped away and when everything will be made right.

7. Have you ever been angry at God because he wouldn’t give you what you wanted (healing and wholeness)?

Of course! I’d be lying if I said otherwise. This has not been an easy journey, and I have had so many days and weeks and months of feeling hurt—of asking God why I have this condition, and of questioning why he won’t just heal me, when I know it would be easy for him. There have been times when I have teetered on the edge of offense with God. When I focus on my limited perspective of what I think is good for me, rather than trusting that God sees what is ultimately good and is working that out in my life—that is when I have felt the angriest. But, by God’s grace, I haven’t stayed in that place. It has taken years of coming back to the Word every day, years of choosing to pray when I didn’t feel like it, and years of choosing to trust in his goodness even when it didn’t seem like goodness to be able to confidently say that I know the Lord is kind to me. He is good to me. I don’t understand what he does and doesn’t do in my life most of the time, but I know his heart through the Scriptures and through his presence, and it is in that place of experiencing his love that the anger has melted away.

8. You still have trichotillomania, and yet you say that waiting for God to heal you has actually brought you closer to him. How is that?



I have had to come to terms with my absolute inability to fix myself. Although I have tried for twenty years, I have never been able to heal myself of this condition. I'm a hard worker, a "good" person by worldly standards, and a loving wife and mom. But I still haven't been able to free myself from trichotillomania.

In the same way, I cannot free myself from sin. No matter how strong or "good" or loving I am, I cannot fix myself. I cannot right my wrongs. Christ alone can do that, and the daily reminder that I am weak and unable to make things right—through continuing to pull out my eyelashes and eyebrows—is a reminder of my neediness before God. I need him desperately—his love, his forgiveness, his help, his mercy. In this way, trich is a gift to me, if I'm willing to see it that way, because it reminds me of my truest condition: a sinner in need of a savior. And the beautiful truth is that I am a sinner who has a wonderful savior who has already done everything for me because he loves me.

9. If you were to meet a version of your college self, what would you say to her now?

Be kind to yourself, because Christ is kind to you. You focus on the broken parts of yourself, which are real and hard and painful—but that's not truly who you are. Your truest self—your real, unshakeable identity—is hidden with Christ in God, and in him, you are whole and complete and completely loved.

10. Did you ever feel shame for pulling out your eyelashes and not being able to control it? How did you learn to silence your shame?

I definitely have felt—and sometimes still feel—shame about pulling out my lashes and brows. It's hard to fight against the emotions of feeling ugly or frustrated with myself most days of the week. But I also know that as a child of God, I do not have to live with shame; Christ defeated shame once and for all at the cross. I have learned to walk in this freedom and silence shame as I read the Word and discover my true identity there, as I pray and encounter the presence of Christ, and as I share my story with others. Surprisingly, the thing I was once the most afraid of—others finding out that I had this odd condition—has become a place of great grace and freedom in my life. As I've opened up and offered my story to others, I have found that instead of feeling more shame, I have been able to experience the grace of the Gospel afresh, because everyone else is waiting for something, too. Whether they're waiting for healing, or for wholeness, or for relational reconciliation, all of us have weak places in our lives that still need God's touch. And as I've shared my struggle with trich, I've found that others have been willing to share their stories with me, and instead of shame, we both walk away with more hope in the God we love—because we can see his presence in each other. We help one another put our hope not in our circumstances but in the God who is making us more like himself and has purchased our freedom through his blood on the cross.

11. How do you offer hope to others who are in waiting seasons of life—waiting for healing, or wholeness, or for God to do something for them that he hasn't yet done?

I would share with them the same thing that I tell myself: You are not being ignored. Every prayer is heard and will be answered, because this waiting won't last forever. There is a day coming when you will be free and whole and complete. I promise. Christ is going to return, and when he does, the waiting will end, once and for all.

The pain and the heartache and the sorrow that you're experiencing right now is very real, and it's incredibly hard. Do not diminish your pain or belittle yourself in your struggle, because Christ never



diminishes our pain or belittles us. He is present with us, choosing to weep with us and grieve with us over what is lost and difficult. But he is also pointing us toward a day when every prayer will be answered in its best and most wonderful expression. Some of us will experience the answer to those prayers in this lifetime, and there will be physical healing and relational mending and emotional wholeness now. But some of us will not experience the fullness of our prayers being answered until we meet Christ face-to-face.

While the waiting is hard, it is not the end of the story. Jesus has already written the end of your story, and it ends beautifully—with Him.

So come with me? Walk with me toward Jesus? Let us keep walking with him, trusting him and choosing to follow him. Because we will find, even as we wait, that being with him is the best gift we could ever experience—even better than any answer to our prayers.

12. How are you doing with trichotillomania today?

Badly. I wish I could answer this question differently, but the truth is that for me, trich is always the worst when I'm reading and writing—which is my entire career right now. Not much has really changed for me with trich in the last twenty years. It's my heart that's changed, and for that I'm grateful. I'm still asking the Lord to heal me; it's a prayer I pray nearly every day. I haven't given up hope for my healing, but I've repositioned my hope—it's no longer in how I'm doing with trich or if I'm healed earthside. My hope is set in who Christ is and in his love for me, regardless of the outcome of my day.

13. Ultimately, what message do you hope to share with your readers?

God is good, and he is for you, even if you're still waiting for him to change your circumstances. He is answering your prayer, although it may not be in the way that you want and in the timing that you want—it definitely hasn't been for me. But in the waiting that you are experiencing—right here, in the middle of the mess and the hurt—this is where Christ is with you, and this is where you can experience his love and goodness. Because one day, none of us will be waiting anymore, and until then, we don't have to wait alone. We wait with Christ, and we wait with one another—and these are beautiful gifts that can transform us and give us great hope and joy in the midst of our waiting journeys.



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