

FULL CIRCLE

Coming Home to the Faithfulness of God

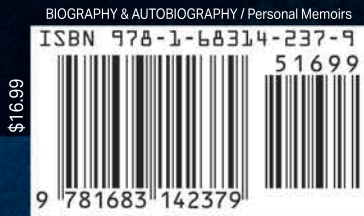
*In the aftermath of spiritual abuse and toxic leadership,
one woman's shattered life is restored by the faithfulness of God.*

Athena's driving desire for affirmation and attention pulled her away from her family, husband, and children into what she thought would bring happiness. Deceived by Scientology, forays into mysticism, and twelve years in a restrictive and legalistic cult, she lost everything—her marriage, relationships, home, business, money, and reputation. This is the candid and inspirational story of how her eyes were opened, how God restored what had been lost, and gave her the desires of her heart, including a new love.



Athena Dean Holtz has been at the forefront of Christian custom publishing for the last 28 years. The co-founder of WinePress Publishing, she now leads Redemption Press. Author of three previous books, and a highly-rated personal blog, she serves as president of the Northwest Christian Writer's Association, is a president's club member of the Christian Women in Media Association, and a member of Advanced Writer & Speaker Association. She serves as host and interviewer on "Always Faithful Radio," KCIS, Seattle. Married to Ross Holtz, pastor of The Summit, Athena enjoys her grandchildren and time spent sailing. The couple makes their home in Enumclaw, Wash.

Inger J. Logelin is a freelance writer, author, and senior editor of Redemption Press. Ministry experience includes pioneer church planting among the Inuit, and a wilderness camp for First Nations youth of Canada, as well as short-term missions around the world. She and her husband make their home on Whidbey Island, Wash.



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Endorsements

Full Circle is a story of one woman's struggle to understand her incomparable worth in Christ. Through rejection, rebellion, and fear—until she found herself in the clutches of a cult—author Athena Dean experienced true redemption, freedom and renewal as she surrendered to Jesus. An important story for anyone who has wandered lost, longing to be found.

—Mary E. DeMuth, author of *Worth Living: How God's Wild Love for You Makes You Worthy*

Throughout all the ups and downs Athena has experienced, the faithfulness of God shines through. Seeing the Lord's redemption in every area of her life will inspire and encourage you to yearn for the same divine touch for yourself and for everyone you hold dear.

—Dr. Dennis E. Hensley author of *Jesus in All Four Seasons*

Full Circle paints with vivid word pictures the lack we surely feel and the hunger we rarely face and almost never reveal to God, ourselves and others. Thank you, Athena for the hope you poured onto the pages that we might find the wholeness we all deserve to know, to be and to live. Bravo!

—Michele Pillar, three-time Grammy-nominated singer, speaker, and author of *Untangled: The Truth Will Set You Free*

Athena's story is incredible. She displays such courage as she opens her heart to share. I highly recommend *Full Circle*.

—Cynthia L Simmons, Heart of the Matter Radio,
author of *Pursuing Gold*

Acclaimed publisher, blogger, radio show host, and pastor's wife Athena Dean Holtz's memoir, *Full Circle*, absolutely shreds the mistaken concept that good can not possibly come out of evil; that abuse—from physical to, yes, even spiritual abuse—can not possibly beautifully birth strength, wisdom, discernment, peace and pure godly-grit that brings all of life wonderfully full circle.

—Ronna Snyder, award-winning freelance magazine writer;
former contributor, *Today's Christian Woman* magazine;
author of *Hot Flashes from Heaven*

Brave, honest, raw. Full of wisdom forged in the fires of experience. Every reader will be enriched by Athena's open and revealing account of her journey into wholeness.

—Jennifer Kennedy Dean, executive director of
The Praying Life Foundation, author of *Live a Praying Life*
and numerous other books

Full Circle by Athena Dean is a must-read for any woman who, like me, grew up struggling with the need for attention. I was a Christian and well into middle-age before I realized that need continued to influence me in my decisions. This book is well written and practical in its design, which enables readers to personally apply the life applications found there. Highly recommended!

—Kathi Macias, author and speaker

Athena's story is truly like no other. You can see God's hand on her life in every page of this book. The adventures she's been on with the Lord will leave you amazed and inspired by His faithfulness through it all.

—Anna Quesada, founder of Christian Women's
Small Business Association

A whirlwind story of love, deception, darkness and triumph, Athena's memoir is touching and full of hope. Her honesty and self-disclosure makes it easy to identify with her and see ourselves in her journey of self-discovery and healing.

—Michelle Hollomon, MA, LMHC, CPC,
Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Certified Professional Coach

I was drawn into the book immediately and there I stayed until the very end—all in one day. I didn't expect it to be quite that compelling, since I know Athena well, and already knew her story. But hearing it all again in more detail, I experienced incredulity and horror, then amazement and thankfulness, as well as everything in between. Only God could orchestrate such a transformation. Talk about beauty for ashes! And that transformation continues as Athena walks out the hills and valleys of her new life.

—Gay Lewis, author of *Bittersweet: The Restoration Continues*, host
and prayer facilitator at The Hill

Ever wonder how a person can become victim to religious brain washing? In her new book, Athena shares her story. From the time she was a young girl, her longing to feel significant and special took her to depths of sorrow. Believing those who told her that aborting her baby was best sent her searching for answers. With a lifelong yearning to find God,

Athena unwittingly allowed herself to be brainwashed by a number of cults, which continually brought her to the brink of destruction. But God, who is rich in mercy, redeemed Athena's brokenness through grace and truth. Her story will help you: discern your own vulnerability to false teaching; discover the One who will fill the void in your soul; realize the importance of studying and knowing God's Word; guard against religions that twist the true meaning of Scripture; and find comfort and hope as you pray for others who are being deceived

—Rhonda Stoppe, author, *Real Life Romance*

In *Full Circle*, Athena Dean Holtz gives a vulnerable account of the path we can travel down when we try to fill “God-shaped holes” with anything but Him. Yet, just as the title suggests, she reveals how despite our misguided decisions and the lure of the enemy, God is always at work wooing His children back to Him, where He can faithfully be the healer, the provider, the sustainer, the protector, and the redeemer we all long for. This is a vital message for anyone who feels lost or abandoned by God, or who needs the assurance that nothing separates us from the love of God.

—Dr. Michelle Bengtson, speaker and author of *Hope Prevails: Insights from a Doctor's Personal Journey Through Depression*

Athena has written a compelling memoir of redemption. Her story includes domestic abuse, spiritual deception, and finally the kind of restoration that can only come when God steps in. *Full Circle: Coming Home to the Faithfulness of God* is a page-turner!

—Nick Harrison, author of *Magnificent Prayer* and *Power in the Promises*

Athena Dean's book, *Full Circle*, will draw you in as this neglected little girl searches for love and meaning in all the wrong places. Thankfully, our God is a restorer of lives and Athena's redemption story is powerful. You will not be able to put this book down!

—Lisa Burkhardt Worley, award-winning author

This book drew me in and captivated me for the next four hours. I love Athena Dean Holtz's book *Full Circle* because it is a raw and honest love story. Love in a marriage, love for success, and her quest to fully know the love of God. Athena's engaging and lively writing style shows how easily we can be deceived in our quest for what we think is right and good. This book will enthrall the reader as Athena weaves us through the depth of despair, and takes us to the heights of love and renewed hope. I highly recommend this book for personal reading and a gift to those looking for deeper faith and hope.

—Heidi McLaughlin, international speaker and author of *Restless for More, Fulfillment in Unexpected Places*

Athena has done and experienced more in her lifetime than one might think possible. She went from incredible success to unthinkable emotional slavery, nearly losing herself and everything she held dear to a controlling and destructive cult. But then God showed up, changed her thinking and surrounded her with life-changing, freedom-bringing grace. This true story is a thought-provoking and God-glorifying tale of one woman's journey of learning to live deeply and fully loved.

—Jennifer Slattery, author of *Restoring Love* and founder of Wholly Loved Ministries

I highly recommend Athena's story, *Full Circle*. It is a refreshingly honest story of one woman's search for God's best for her life. Athena and I became good friends in the early 1990s. Over the years, we would spend time together when we were both exhibitors and/or presenters at ICRS, NRB and writer's conferences. I watched the change in her when she became involved with the Williamses and rejoiced with her when she finally realized their church was a cult. She paid a high price when she left, but because of the desire of her heart for God's perfect will, He has given her a husband to love her, a ministry, and a restored business. Her story of coming back "full circle" is a must read.

— Joyce Hart Owner and CEO of Hartline Literary Agency

Warning: Do not pick up this book if you are planning something important! My plan was to read it over the weekend, but four hours later I awoke to the realization that I had been captured by a love story. It is the embrace of a Father who loves us as we travel through the minefields of the agendas of those who would use and abuse us. It is a story of victory and redemption. It also is an immersion into the murky waters of a toxic church, and an experience that through grace, the power of God redeems. This story is hope personified.

—Fred St. Laurent, CEO of The Book Club Network,
Bookfun.org and *Book Fun Magazine*

Athena's writing caught my attention when I read about her cult-like church experience some years ago. I'd gone through something similar in my family of origin, so I related. Shortly after I found her writings, she took a break from sharing her story to allow her family time to heal, and I realized how significant she'd already been to my own healing from religious abuse. I thought, *Finally, someone understands*. I felt the same sense of hope and restoration upon finishing *Full Circle*. In her book, Athena is factual about the brainwashing she experienced, transparent about her own mistakes, and grateful for God's protection as she tried to find her way back to her faith. Her story is a beautiful one of God's grace and redemption.

—S. Kim Henson, writer and blogger

The unfolding of Athena's story of redemption is one that will touch lives, bringing hope to those who are broken and needing restoration, as they too choose true repentance and obedience.

—Marlene Salcher, speaker, mentor, author of
God Speaks to Me? Tuning in to the Living God

What a testimony to God's redemptive power and restorative grace! Athena's life proves that, no matter the nature and depth of our inner wounds and pain, God is willing and able to lovingly restore. Indeed, He brings beauty from ashes.

—Grace Fox, international speaker and author of *Moving from Fear to Freedom: A Woman's Guide to Peace in Every Situation*

In *Full Circle*, you'll read a story of a heroine who encounters many trials, hardships, broken hearts and moments of joy that take her on a journey she never could have imagined. And it's all true! I met Athena after she had received Christ but was in the grips of a cult (which, by the way, none of us knew at the time, including Athena). After I would speak with her, I would walk away thinking, there is something holding her back, she isn't ever fully herself. I surmised she was an introvert (oh, how wrong I was). It wasn't long before I watched Athena break free. It was like watching a butterfly struggle and battle to get out of a cocoon. From the cocoon of abuse, cults and all emerged this beautiful woman of God. A woman God had been pursuing all her life. A woman the enemy didn't want found. But God is faithful. Deuteronomy 4:29 (NASB) promises: "But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul." And Psalm 22:26 (NASB): "The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek Him will praise the Lord." Athena began to seek for the true God and she found Him because, as she does everything, she was in with her whole heart and whole soul. Once afflicted, she now eats at the Father's table and is satisfied and praise resounds. Loving pursuit, redemption, forever after . . . ah, the stuff that princess tales are made of. Enjoy!

—Kim Bangs, senior acquisitions editor,
Bethany House and Chosen Books

Toxic spiritual abuse nearly destroyed Athena, and yet God's redemption is woven through her story. His faithfulness rescued her, and the obedience to listen to the whisper of God's truth led her out of a destructive cult. Satan is masterful at weaving lies with a little bit of truth for the purpose of distorting God's character. Athena reminds us how easy it is to stray if we don't know His truth for ourselves and the consequences of unhealthy dependence on others. Her story is a brilliant reminder of God's unfathomable grace to all of us. *Full Circle* will capture your heart and reminds you to stay close to Jesus, ever listening for his voice.

—Cynthia Cavanaugh, author, speaker, and life coach

You can't help but have God speak directly to your heart while reading Athena's words in *Full Circle: Coming Home to the Faithfulness of God*. Prepare to be humbled by Athena's vulnerability. Prepare to have God shine a spotlight on the cracks in your faith. Prepare to be changed.

—Bethany Jett, award-winning author of *The Cinderella Rule: A Young Woman's Guide to Happily Ever After*

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with Inger Logelin



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Dedication

To my faithful King, who redeemed my life from the pit.

To my knight in shining armor who loves me well.

To my children, who've journeyed with me through my healing.

To the Holtz clan, who embraced me wholeheartedly.

To my church family at The Summit EFC for welcoming me
as the new pastor's wife.

And to all those who have suffered spiritual abuse and toxic leadership
. . . may my story of redemption give you hope.



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Home is something I ran from—the ties—the disapproval—the hypocrisy. I wanted to be on stage . . . I wanted the acclamation and attention I got from performing—from being out front—from being *seen*. I pulled away from my parents—especially my mom—husband—children—into the arms of what I thought would bring me happiness.

Along the way, I allowed myself to be deceived—by abuse, Scientology, mysticism, and eventually twelve years in a restrictive, legalistic cult posing as a church that took everything from me.

This is my story of how God brought me full circle. How He brought me *home* . . . to a place I had always longed for, but never knew how to find.

Athena Dean Holtz

January 2017

I woke up groggy from the anesthesia, clutching my empty abdomen.

My baby . . . my baby was gone.

My soft center, the place where my heart should be, felt like a rock.

I will not cry. I will not cry.

The man who said he loved me was gone. He started walking away . . . easing out . . . when I told him about the baby.

I guess he isn't going to leave his wife for me after all.

Used. I feel used, like a crumpled old tissue.

“Your life will be ruined, Athena. The last thing you need is a baby.”

No. The last thing I need is to trust anyone.

I'll never let anyone use me again.



ONE

See Me!

All bad behavior is really a request for love, attention, or validation.

—Kimberly Giles, *Choosing Clarity: The Path to Fearlessness*

In the slightly out-of-focus, old black-and-white photo, I'm a blond two-year old on my mom's lap . . . reaching out . . . unhappy . . . wanting to be elsewhere. Her attention is fully focused on my quiet and calm brother at her side, while I look desperate to be elsewhere.

Where did it all start—that pulling away from my mom, that need for the next thing?

My father wasn't in the photo. *Was I reaching out for him?*

I knew my dad, Arthur L. Sikking Jr., loved me, maybe because I was the only girl. Or was it because he saw his own traits in me? Like him, I was outgoing and craved attention.

Dad found affirmation in his success in sales. I didn't know it when I was a child, but Dad was one of the best salesmen ever. A self-made man, he started out selling door-to-door and worked his way up to becoming vice president of sales for Encyclopedia Britannica, making record-breaking achievements and seven figures a year.

What mattered to me was being with him, not always a frequent occurrence. When I did see him, I wanted him to *see me*—Athena.

See *me!* See *me*, Dad! I'd dance and twirl and laugh and try to catch his eye. I wanted to be the center of attention, his special girl. He'd bring out his movie camera with the blinding bank of lights across the top, and I'd come to life. He'd sing me silly songs from old commercials and tell me stories about himself.

When he was home, which wasn't often, he would pay attention to me and spoil me. He said I made him laugh. "There's my girl," he'd say. I *was* his girl. He'd look in my eyes and say, "If there were a thousand little girls in a big field, and I flew over in my helicopter, I would look and look until I found *you*. And I would pick *you* out of all the other 999. You know why? Because you're special. Because you are you."



Athena Daphne Sikking was born on March 28, 1953. Yes, that's me! It seems I was difficult for my mom from the start. We were living in Honolulu as Dad was selling encyclopedias there for Colliers. Allergic to milk, I was fed poi. Mom told me I almost choked on the cereal made from taro root more than once. I've wondered if my bond would have been different with my mom if she had breastfed me. Maybe it wasn't done in our social circles.

I was the little girl who spilled India ink on a valuable oriental carpet while visiting my grandma's house and killed the tropical fish by turning up the heat on the tank. Naturally curious and full of energy, I was a handful.

Because of Dad's drive to succeed in his career, and his workaholism, we enjoyed the fruits of his labor, while seeing less and less of him. With my father's business success came the demands of frequent travel.

The Sikkings, Dad's family, were mostly Dutch. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, the family struggled financially, losing their home in 1934, but later became well off as my grandfather worked in engineering, and grandmother rose in status as a minister in the Unity church.

Mom, Angela Seraph Sikking, was Greek—hence the origin of my name. She was a reserved and unemotional, dark-haired beauty, an elegant entertainer, and a perfectionist. Mom made sure our façade was presentable—her makeup, clothes, hair, of course, and the house, the decor, the meals. Impressing people was important to both Mom and Dad who cared deeply about appearances. But the ideal marriage and family were not within her ability to arrange.

My parents' marriage was a sham. When Dad would come home, he'd be the life of the party; but the party was over for my mom. Dad was leading a double life with ongoing relationships with other women. When I was about eleven or twelve, he fell in love with a flight attendant named Kathy, and the relationship lasted until he passed away at age eighty-one.

When Mom found out about Dad's relationship, she just made him move into a different bedroom. She didn't divorce him. They'd go out together socially—to see and be seen and keep up the sham of their showcase home and family.

Dad spent as much time as he could with his new love and at home became an absentee father. When I did see him, I tried hard to win his

approval. He was my sun, my solar system, and I needed the warmth of his full attention and approval.

Atlanta was home from age one to eight; my only memories from there come from the home movies Dad took when he showed up. As I got older, it felt as if the attention Dad was paying me was just for show. *He says he loves me, but he's going to leave again.* I felt starved for his words of affirmation—anything that would make me feel special and unique. He gave me that affirmation at times, but the words didn't feel real when he left us again.

I wasn't the kind of little girl who played with baby dolls or played house. Those things didn't interest me. I didn't dream and play make-believe about growing up and having a cozy home and children with me as the mommy. I just wanted to stand out from the crowd and win approval. At school, I was competitive, always trying to outdo my peers, and win in all the games we played—and I usually did. Being the best was important to me. While I got along well with my peers, I'm sure that got old.

My brother Jim is three years my elder, while my younger brother, Arthur Leland Sikking III, was born when I was eight. The addition of my younger brother just cemented my position as the only girl. Because of the age difference, he and I never had much of a connection.

In Chicago, our second home was in one of the most affluent suburbs in a million-dollar house with an indoor swimming pool. Dad had a helicopter he'd land on the hockey field of my private school in Wisconsin to pick me up for weekend horse shows.

My passion in childhood was horses, so my parents started me on lessons at age eleven. I'd get to the horse barn early in the morning and ride after school every day. The equestrian world gave me an opportunity

to shine, to compete and excel. I always wanted to be the best in my class. I rode hunters, and at one time had seven horses; two were my dad's, but I rode them when he was away. When I began competing in horse shows, showing four of them every weekend, I was hooked! My parents were fully behind me and never seemed to regret the expenses and time it required. Being highly competitive himself, Dad wanted to give me the opportunity to succeed at competitive riding.

My drive to please my father by winning the blue ribbon became an obsession. Once when my dad was in town for a rare appearance at my horse show, I finished a round with a perfect score. I looked out into the stands, caught his eye, and saw him give me a big smile and a "thumbs up." A warmth filled me inside and a sense of satisfaction. I had pleased my father!

By the time I was eighteen, my winning streak in horse shows had taken me across the Midwest, and I had gone national at the all-star horse show at Madison Square Garden. That was my last show, and I was showing my third horse, "Isle of Erin," a grand champion. Dad bought her for \$15,000, and shortly after showing her at the Gardens, sold her for \$30,000. She was then shown by George Morris, famous in the horse world, and sold for \$150,000 in the 1970s.



At holidays, Dad was the life of the party, but it felt like it was all show. Most of the time, Dad wasn't there, and I felt empty without his approval. When we were together, he'd pump me up by telling me, "You can do anything you want to do if you just want it bad enough." I had

everything material I wanted, but I didn't have him or his full attention most of the time. *Would Dad still love me if I didn't win?* I wondered.

My relationship with my mom wasn't good. She found me excitable, strong-willed, always causing a ruckus, like my dad. She wanted me to be like my big brother, Jim, who was docile, calm, and compliant . . . like her.

When I was five years old and living in Georgia, something happened that would change my young life. Our black maid, Odessa, began sexually molesting me. She'd say, "Little girl, this is our secret."

I didn't tell. I only have the conscious memory of one incident but know the abuse was ongoing until we moved to New York when I was eight. Those three years are mercifully like a blank page in my life; I can't remember much from those years. But the seeds of sensuality had been sown into my young life.

Mom never knew what happened, and Dad wasn't there much. I didn't turn toward my mom for comfort, but away. We were so different from each other. Mom was critical and demanding. I was messy, leaving each room looking like a tornado had swept through. I was loud; she was quiet. Did my outgoing personality traits remind her of my father, whose womanizing had left her to raise us practically alone in a loveless marriage?

She did come to every horse show and even every practice session. She'd keep a sharp eye on me to make sure I did everything exactly right. "Athena, keep your toes in and your heels down." Or, "Sit up straight! You look like a slouch!"

I'm sure she thought she was doing this for my good, but it communicated rejection to my young heart. *You're not doing it right. You're not good enough. You have to try harder!*

Jim, reserved and cooperative, didn't give her trouble. He was an A student who enjoyed the same things she did—classical music, opera, and intellectual pursuits.

I was the strong-willed child who always wanted my own way. Maybe I sensed her ambivalence about me so I'd push her to the limits of her patience. I'd choose clothes she didn't approve of and exasperate her at the dinner table by not following the correct rules of etiquette. I don't think I ever set out to please her, only my dad.

Without the constant, reassuring presence of my father, I turned elsewhere. By the time I was a young teenager, my rebellious attitude had morphed me into a boy-crazy wild child who craved attention from the opposite sex. When we'd visit my aunt and uncle in Huntsville, my cousin Kerrie and I would dance around on the balcony playing Sonny and Cher music at full blast to try to get the attention of the boys in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, the only attention my cousin got was from Uncle Henry and his leather belt.

I didn't know what my dad and uncle meant when I heard them joking about me having "bedroom eyes." I just knew I loved boys. My friends and I became groupies of The Meads, a local Chicago band. If I could be sung to from the stage, I felt as if I had arrived. Knowing the "in" people—the band—the ones in the spotlight—made me feel important and significant. After all, if I knew the guy on stage who everyone wanted to know, that made me special . . . right?

Studying and school didn't rank high on my list of choice activities. I'd get in trouble for talking too much. My mind was on riding my horses and showing them on the weekends. Homework was not important to

me, nor was trying to fit into the cool cliques. I didn't even go to my high school graduation; I was competing at a horse show instead.

My friends and I were beginning to experiment with LSD, mescaline, marijuana, and hash. We'd cruise bars, and I'd look for guys to flirt with, usually from the band, to make me feel special. The trauma of my molestation had sown seeds of sensuality and promiscuity that erupted in my late teens.

At nineteen and in my first half year of college, I got pregnant by the lead guitar player in a well-known Chicago-area band. I was determined to keep the baby. The baby's father had told me, again and again, "I'm going to marry you. I'm going to leave my wife and marry you." *Maybe he will keep his promise if I have the baby.*

But I knew he was already easing out of the relationship and the responsibility of a child.

Three months pregnant, I finally admitted my predicament to my parents.

My dad was dead set against me having this baby. "No way, Athena," my dad lectured. "Your life would be ruined. The last thing you need is the responsibility of a baby. I will make the necessary arrangements. I'll take care of everything."

I had no idea what this decision would do to me emotionally, but I allowed my dad to take over and clean up my mess.

I had an abortion at a hospital under general anesthesia, though this was still an illegal procedure in 1972.

The day afterwards, I lay, heartbroken, in my little brother's bed in his room, nearly delirious with a raging fever from toxemia.

My parents had moved into a small condo without a room for me. Somehow, that no-room-for-me thing was symbolic of my life then.

See Me!

Deeply hurt, I felt taken advantage of and used. I didn't allow myself to feel the depths of the pain of the loss of my baby, the betrayal of the broken relationship, or the abortion. I hardened my heart. *I will protect myself.*

That's when I made the vow.

I will never let anyone use me again.