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JAMES MULLINGER

Award-Winning Comedian, Writer, Editor-in-Chief of *Maritime Edit* magazine

# Good Things Happen in the Dark

*A Candid Manifesto for  
Courageous Authenticity*

Ellen Compton

Praise for

# Good Things Happen in the Dark

“Ellen Compton’s prose is a rare and unique delight. Her zest for life and passion for understanding all that surrounds us (as well as all that is within us) will surprise and inspire you in equal measure. Thought-provoking, profoundly smart, and consistently entertaining. If you are looking for insight in your life, be sure to devour Ellen Compton’s new book.”

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“Ellen’s collection is as beautifully crafted as a rosary, each essay a gem to carry in one’s pocket, to rub between thumb and index as a mudra, a symbolic gesture invoking the holy inside each ordinary moment. Her honest, incisive, and often humorous incursion into her own life and story invites us to look with equal tenderness upon our own her(his)stories, to consider the sacredness of the body as elemental and viscerally connected to all created things. To fully inhabit our interiority with curiosity and honor, so that we might belong firstly to ourselves and then to each other.”

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Poet, Teacher, Spiritual Companion, and Embodiment Practitioner

“No questions about it, put this book in your cart, and then hold onto your flippin’ hat. This excellent, hilarious, and raw read equips you to give the those societal pressures that make you feel ‘less than’ a big, kind, Canadian punch in the face! (Think Jen Hatmaker in a badass biker gang, and you’ve got Ellen Compton). Rarely do words in our content-crammed days read as though they were picked with such care and finesse as they do in *Good Things Happen in the Dark*. Ellen is *truly* a linguistic Goddess whose indomitable frequency will turn the spirituality/self-care industry on its head.”

MEGGIE LEE CALVIN

Bestselling Author of *I Am My Own Sanctuary: How A  
Recovering Holy-Roller Found Healing and Power*

“Ellen and I go way back, and she has always impressed me as a courageously independent and free person. I’ve witnessed this offend some. But I’ve also watched this inspire others. Including me! What is so marvelous is that her courage, independence, and freedom get to blend in this book with her desire to inspire you. I was happy when I first read it to hear her voice and see her authentic self expressed through the pages. I especially like the ‘get real’ parts. I believe this is her special contribution to the world. I really do think it will indeed inspire you.”

DAVID HAYWARD

aka ‘nakedpastor’

“*Good Things Happen in the Dark* is like taking a road trip with your big sister, including all the inside jokes, gentle commiseration, and tough love advice that comes with growing up and into your unique self. Ellen knows how to wrangle the stream of consciousness into a

series of metaphors and analogies that connects life experiences with Divine intervention. Reading this in my 40s (and during a self-proclaimed mid-life crisis) is like relearning who I am, putting my ‘spiritual glasses’ on and seeing my Wonder Woman self, ‘complete with cuffs and crown.’”

ANNA RHEA

Owner of Joppa Editing

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Courageous Authenticity*

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Ellen Compton

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# Dedication

For Cohen and Ingrid.

For anyone who has ever felt like too much and not enough.

For all the hard things that attempted to take me out. Nice try.

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## Introduction

# Hey, Friend!

I'm so glad you're here. In choosing this book, I already know you're my cup of tea—one who wants to live fully and intrepidly. One who has determined to dive deeply. One who spurns the game of fitting in. You may be a spiritual anarchist, a person of faith, and likely, both at the same time. Perhaps you're also craving authenticity, and, hopefully, courage. Because, if we're honest, you can't have authenticity sans courage.

Many organizations, religious institutions, and individuals throw around buzz words like *authenticity*, claiming to encourage it. Claiming it's a core value. Claiming the *real you* is welcome here. But it's bullshit. It might be encouraged, but often, it's also punished, corrected, and sanitized.

Living an authentic life can look like an act of rebellion; an iconoclastic way of engaging that refuses *modus operandi*. Living with authenticity means being fully you. All the time. It is embracing the *intended you* before life experiences, trends, norms, religious rules, and social pressures attempted to make you more, make you less, water down your spicy, file your edges, or put you in a back room where you wouldn't bore or offend.

Things are not as they appear. Much of life has been categorized into good and bad, wins and losses, success and failure, light and dark, sacred and secular. But the more we learn, the more we know it

*isn't* one or the other. Living in a way that is richly authentic means acknowledging and courageously holding in tension the apparent binaries that make up this life.

Everything belongs. Everything has purpose. Everything has meaning.

Thematically, overlap exists between the chapters in this book. I have attempted to assign them to sections in a way that makes sense; however, as mentioned above, things rarely fit into one category, and the same is true here. If we have met before, whether in person or in writing, you've likely ascertained that I understand all of life in metaphors and pictures. Analogies are how I make sense of the world. My brain searches for and assigns meaning to every single situation (the jury is still out on whether this makes me super weird or super awesome).

Though I had thought to begin with a formal introduction, I quickly realized the redundancy of such a choice, for, by nature, I am quite meta—that is self-referential. By the end of this journey together, you will be well-acquainted with an abundance of odd and unique (and sometimes embarrassing) facts about me. More than this, my hope is that you will be well-acquainted and deeply in love with every odd and unique aspect of yourself—your real, unabridged, perfectly-loved self.

Much love to you.

Ellen

## Prologue

# Naked and Afraid

—  
“Honor the space between no longer and not yet.”

NANCY LEVIN  
—

**D**o you want to go on a journey? It won't be comfortable, but growth rarely is. As much as we would love to avoid the discomfort of transition, we recognize that there is purpose in the process. Growing pains are aptly named. The aching means something is happening.

Hermit crabs exemplify an intriguing metaphor. By nature of their aquatic group, *crustacea*, one could assume these beings carry their permanent protective coverings at all times. But this is not true. These soft-bellied creatures take up residence in the discarded shells of other creatures. A hermit crab will inhabit its shell until it has grown to the point of discomfort, and it is no longer feasible to stay without consequence. To linger in the current shell means the crab's growth will be inhibited; no longer able to protect itself by withdrawing fully into its armor. What *was* a protective abode, right for the season, has become a growth-limiting, tight space.

At this point, it must decide: stay or go.

It would be folly to remain in the current shell, but the other option is to begin a dangerous voyage between point A and point B. Transition.

Ideally, the crab has its eyes set on the next shell it will inhabit, but this is not always the case, and even when it is, there is inherent risk. The hermit crab must endure a season of significant vulnerability as it leaves the 'too small' shell in search of its next dwelling.

How many times have I felt like a hermit crab, somewhere between point A and point B? These are the phases of life when it has become obvious that I can no longer stay in my current situation, but the next step remains hidden from me. This state of limbo, teetering on the precipice of change, is daunting. If I leave the safe confines of what I know in search of what is next, I risk exposure and vulnerability. Who knows how long the journey will even take? My soft, shell-less body will be unprotected and open to all kinds of attacks.

I contemplate whether or not it would be better to stay put, but honestly, this option, though seemingly less perilous, doesn't work either. I have developed beyond what this current place can offer or protect; it no longer fits. And so, like the hermit crab, I have to decide whether to stay safe and stop growing, or embrace vulnerability and grow.

For most of us, willful discomfort isn't something we seek, but we also know that growth does not occur in the comfort zone. Shunning growth equates to turning away from becoming who we were created to be. And so, with gritted teeth, I will continue to choose growth over comfort.

My transition journeys often begin with positivity and determination. Though I may or may not have a sense of what is next, I begin with hope and lean hard on faith. This feeling of adventure and 'whatever it takes' usually sustains me for a while. I do my best not to have concrete ideas about what it all means and how it will play out.

Yet, my personality is such that there is usually a very detailed map lurking somewhere just beneath my consciousness. “Laid back” is not a descriptor that has *ever* been used for me, though I *am* learning to allow life to unfold.

When the vulnerable journey between shells takes longer than anticipated, which it inevitably does, there are a couple of traps I have learned to identify, only by nature of having fallen into them repeatedly.

There have been times—a *lot* of times—that I have longed to return to a metaphorical captor. At least in captivity, I knew the rules! I may have been a slave and it might have been subsistence living, but I knew what to expect and could *make do* with what was, even if it wasn't always enough. My temptation partway into a journey can be to return to what I knew, to the known and the comfortable, even if it wasn't right. Steeling myself to resist the urge, I continue moving forward.

A second stumbling block I often encounter in the interim is the temptation to settle. There are times when I've been annoyed with God because it seemed that we were journeying past perfectly good shells. “This is actually *good enough*. Let's stop here. I'll be content with this!” The lure of the *good enough* is almost stronger than the lure of ‘what was.’ The adage “the good is the enemy of the best” is certainly what's at play here. Though these shells would function, they are not the end goal. Not the best.

Transition is not random, meaningless discomfort, but a purposeful plan that will certainly come and not delay. And so, let's allow it to unfold. Lean in and trust that Love will hold you safe. Let's embrace the vulnerability; the feelings of being unmoored, homeless, naked, and exposed without our protective shells.

I promise you, it will be worth it. Are you ready?

# Unguarded

*(My Dark and Twisty Self)*

## Chapter 1

# Good Things Happen in the Dark

---

*“Sometimes when you’re in a dark place, you think you’ve  
been buried, but actually you’ve been planted.”*

CHRISTINE CAINE

---

**M**any of us dread the darkness. It shelters the monster under the bed, the boogie man, evil, and all things nefarious. Darkness must be avoided. We push it away by any means necessary—quelling, numbing, pretending. We deem it *bad* and fight with all of our might to keep the lights on.

I have been in great darkness. Actually, allow me to be more honest. I *am* in great darkness. Most of the time, you would never know it to see me. I choose joy. I fix my eyes on goodness. I cling to hope. I engage in loving kindness. I try to be careful with my words. But it’s all taken an extreme amount of determination.

There’s a significant difference between talking transparently about where we *have been* once we’re on the other side of it, and talking vulnerably from where *we are*.



Vulnerably, I'm coming to you from my darkness; a darkness that has been constructed layer by layer by layer over this last while. Layers of disappointment, heartbreak, fear, disgust—with individual people, with groups, with institutions, and with the world at large.

At first, with only one layer, I was like a child under a blanket, covered, but still able to discern shapes and light. With another layer, the forms of things began to disappear, though I was still able to identify sources of brightness. Another layer removed sight and light. Another layer made it too warm and muffled. Another layer rendered it difficult to breathe. Another layer paralyzed me. And now, it sometimes feels like you can no longer see me. And I can no longer see you. This is where I've been. *This is where I am.*

But what if darkness has been villainized? What if we look at darkness differently?

*We always* have a choice. We can resist the darkness, cowering and suffering, avoiding and reviling.

Or we can embrace it.

Because, my friends, many exceptional and meaningful things happen in the dark.

Sometimes the darkness is frightening. Sometimes the lights do need to be turned on to expose the tiny, lurking fears that have been harassing us. But often the darkness is rich and important. We need to *leave it be* if we desire the fullness and growth that is intended for us.

Though I likely wouldn't be the first to volunteer for a dark season ("*Pick me! Pick me!*"), I *will* be the first to acknowledge that most of my character growth has occurred in the dark.

Darkness is essential during gestation. New humans and animals grow inside the safe, nurturing darkness of their mothers' wombs.

Darkness is imperative for the development of fine art photography. An invasion of light obscures what should have been clear and defined.

Darkness is necessary for a good night's sleep. Total darkness increases the body's production of melatonin. And it is during this sleep that our minds regroup, and our bodies heal and grow.

Darkness is intimate. A close sharing of space, of air, of proximity. Lovers reaching for one another in the night.

Darkness is a vital part of transformation. A caterpillar in chrysalis form must be wrapped up and protected for the miracle to occur. Interestingly, synonyms for this dark little cocoon include evolution, expansion, improvement, increase, maturity, advancement, and development.

Darkness is imperative for the sprouting of seeds. Those exposed to direct light dry out and die. But those that are forced into the darkness of the ground produce life.

So I am embracing the darkness. I am reframing the darkness. I am not going to be bitter. I am not going to rot in the ground. I am not going to disappear.

Instead of feeling lost and afraid, I will choose hidden and safe. Instead of feeling disorientated and vulnerable, I will choose held and comforted in the shadow of the wing. Instead of feeling buried alive, I will choose *planted*.

We can't rush the process. We need to resist the urge to brush back the soil to see what's happening. Do not subvert germination by digging up the seed. Stop checking up. Stop checking in.

During this season, I'm waiting quietly and safely in the darkness. I'm allowing my tears to flow as often as needed; these tears water the soil that nurtures the seed.

It will seem like nothing is happening. It will feel like you are dead in the ground. But if you wait, you'll crack open and roots will begin to grow. Above ground, you and others might observe that nothing is happening, but your roots *need* to push down deep in order to sustain any life that will appear on the surface. Then suddenly, it will happen.

Green sprouts will emerge, and the life that has been forming in the dark will be visible to you, and to others.

But the dark part has to happen first.

In the meantime, you are safe. You are held. You are growing. You are going to thrive. And so am I.

Good things happen in the dark.

## Chapter 2

# Opting for Uncomfortable

—  
*“Anything I’ve ever done that was ultimately  
worthwhile initially scared me to death.”*

ANONYMOUS

—

A few weeks ago, I found myself in a situation that located my heart firmly in my throat. As I stood behind a piano on a stage for the first time in years, I wondered what the heck I had done? How could I *possibly* have agreed to this? Leading music from piano *used* to feel completely comfortable for me, but after five years of leading only with my voice, this no longer felt okay. In fact, my brain was interpreting it as the *exact opposite* of okay. It might as well have been a saber-tooth tiger crouching for attack. Or a Junebug.

During rehearsal, feeling entirely overwhelmed and very much in-over-my-head, this fully-grown, mature person actually contemplated *faking sick* and running out of the building.

And then a counterintuitive thought began forming in my mind: *“What if this is good for me?”*

My response? *“Oh no you don’t, brain. You don’t get to re-frame this horrid situation into something useful!”*

Like most people, I prefer to be good at things. I desire to do things well. I gravitate toward situations where I feel confident, in my *wheelhouse*, and capable. While this *sounds* entirely reasonable, if we are not careful, we can easily begin to live small, fearful of failure, and avoidant of opportunities that call us away from our field of expertise and into the realm of average.

*“There’s no growth in the comfort zone and no comfort in the growth zone.”<sup>1</sup> (Anonymous)*

This favored quote of mine has recently come back to bite me. Previously, I’d applied it almost exclusively to personal growth, inner healing, and ideas pertaining to identity. But I’ve begun to recognize that it applies, also, to intentionally opening ourselves to experiences that aren’t a *sure thing* in terms of success—like playing sub-par piano in a venue full of people.

There are seasons in life when it’s wise to seek and accept comfort. And, there are seasons for growth when it’s essential for your overall well-being to put yourself out there, to leave the realm of exceptional and be completely *mediocre* for a while ... or even straight-up *awful*.

Your brain might fight you on this, but the truth is, it’s healthy to step outside of our comfort zones, to try something new, to go back to beginner. Maybe this looks like engaging a hobby you haven’t explored in a long time. Maybe it means signing up for a Spanish course. Maybe it means being brave with your words, knowing they will rock the boat. Maybe it looks like auditioning for a part in a musical, or joining a sports team. Maybe it means leaving a successful career to pursue a dream.

This past year, awakened to the call of adventure, I sought change. For almost two decades, I worked as an elementary school teacher in the same school. I knew my colleagues. I knew the rules. I knew the norms. I knew the larger school community. I knew the families. I

knew where the art supplies were stored. I knew who had extra coffee pods when I ran out. I knew the best times to photocopy in order to avoid waiting. I knew that my administration (my bosses) supported me and my *sometimes* wildly-off-roading-brain children. I felt trusted. They knew I worked hard and cared deeply for my kids each year, and I didn't have to prove myself. My classroom felt like a second home.

So why in the world would I decide to leave the known for the unknown? Why leave expert behind? Why opt for uncomfortable?

**Because I want to stay awake.** While it's comforting to know the ropes and to be the expert, when we've done the same thing for a long time, the 'challenging' becomes the 'mundane.' When we are *accustomed* to the point that things no longer require our rapt attention, we can become blind; we fall asleep. Though I have such affection for my now 'former' school and colleagues, I had a longing for what was beyond the shore. (Moana, I get you. Totally.) I have an intense desire to keep growing and learning. To pay attention. Going back to beginner helps us to see again. To appreciate the details. To stay awake in our lives.

**Because I want freedom from fear.** Upon hearing my decision to embrace a new adventure, *many* people asked, "But what about your pension?" and other such practical questions. When we rely on circumstances and structures for our safety—whether financial, social, or otherwise—the idea of leaving those comfort zones can make us fearful. If we make ourselves beholden to the known, we become slaves to it. Engaging change—trusting that our needs will be met and that we can successfully navigate the transitions—allows us to step out of fear. To be clear, I'm as careful and rigid as they come when it comes to finances and responsibilities, so I'm not advocating leaping blindly. It's only smart to check your gear before launching yourself over the edge. But then ... launch yourself over the edge! Trust the process

even if it feels like free-fall for a bit. Step out and leave fear in the rear-view mirror.

**Because I Want A Strong Brain.** Left to their own devices, our brains are lazy. Once they build pathways and make necessary connections, they typically settle into auto-pilot. It no longer takes any thought to complete a task. Think about driving a familiar route—it's possible to get there and not even remember driving because our brains know exactly where we are going.

Our brains are also risk-averse. In my classroom, you'll often hear me saying, *"If you're not making mistakes, you're not risking. If you're not risking, you're not growing."* I share frequently with my students that grades are not necessarily an indication of hard work. Effort counts for so much! In my opinion, an average "C" that has cost something in terms of effort, risk, hard work, perseverance, and courage is far more valuable than something that was easy. Sure, we love to see a report card of "straight As," but if those were easy As that came with little to no effort, then suddenly, they look a little more brassy and a lot less gold.

In order to continue growing and strengthening our brains, we have to do things differently. Take a different road home. Brush our teeth with the opposite hand. Try something new. As much as we might think we like comfort, our brains need and ultimately *appreciate* being forced to work.

**Because I want to say *yes* to the call.** Some people might refer to it as "the writing on the wall." Some might call it guidance. For me, it's usually the voice of the divine. No, not an audible, booming Charlton Heston/God voice, but that still, small voice inside me. That voice that *could* be mistaken for my own thoughts, except the thoughts carry a different kind of weight. A kindness and an exhortation. An impact far greater than my own meandering thoughts. This is what propelled my decision toward a new adventure.

More than a year ago, I sensed that something would be shifting, that it was time for a change. I pursued various leads that seemed good to me, but in the end, they were not the thing. And then I stumbled on to a particular school website that nearly took my breath away. The mission statement and core values mirrored my own. The educational philosophy sounded like *me*. I recognized in an instant that this was *the thing*. And so I waited. I checked the career opportunities page regularly as I waited for my future job to be posted. The process was rigorous *and* filled with ease all at once. As each new door appeared before me, I simply walked through it.

While I have a thousand years of teaching experience and ‘know’ many facts about my new educational home, I would also be navigating lots of unknowns—older students, new colleagues, distinct norms and mores. At this point, I hardly know where the light switch is in my own classroom! But still, I *know in my knower* that this change is right and necessary. And though I’ll feel like a beginner for a little while, all of the unknowns will soon become known.

Though seemingly paradoxical, to live fully and richly, there are times when we have to step outside of our comfort zones. Nope, it’s not comfortable. But it needs to be done.



## Chapter 3

# Holding On for Dear Life!

---

*“Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak shit anyone can throw at us.”*

ANNE LAMOTT

---

Life is gorgeous, and hard, and awe-inspiring, and messy. We can re-frame, see *all* the silver linings, count it as blessing in disguise, speak positively, and practice gratitude. We can and we should and we *do*. But this doesn’t negate the existence of painful things.

Yes, life is wondrous, and it can still be hard.

Perhaps you’ll be tempted to tag me as *pessimistic* or *void of faith*, but before you do, how about reaching, instead, for the word *honest*? I feel called to shout *truth from the trenches* of life, to live vulnerably and authentically, to voice what most of us feel.

There are some very real struggles *around* us and *in* us. And I’m not sure why this truth tends to throw us off-kilter because in God’s book, we’re actually given a heads up that *we will* have trouble in this world.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of perception of safety, there seems to be a natural progression for most humans. These are massive, sweeping, simplified

generalizations, but the point is to show development through life stages.

Early on, so long as a baby's needs are met—warm, clean, fed, and comforted—the baby will feel safe. In later months, a baby or young child may experience anxiety when separated from the adult to whom he, she or they is attached but will soon learn that while adults may leave, they will surely return. In a healthy attachment situation, a child will launch into the world, feeling capable and mostly free from fear. As an adolescent, the experience of safety and immunity to consequence becomes even stronger, as the brain rewires and the prefrontal cortex (the part that insists on self-control and well-thought out plans) temporarily abdicates its position. (As a parent of teenagers, this is terrifying). Eventually, we experience a few hard knocks to help us understand that we are not invincible. Not strong. Not above the natural consequences of our choices. Not immune to pain.

For me, the deconstruction of my perceived safety began as a young teenager and continued intermittently into my thirties.

Romantic notions like “marriage lasts forever” were countered with reality when my own parents' marriage ended. And then later, my own. Suddenly, that covenant which had seemed inalterable to me was vulnerable. I was dismayed to understand it was a fragile entity, not unsusceptible to real life. It changed my view of true love from *trusting belief* to *how do you know?* Blunt truth: you really don't.

The *fame*-like ideal, “*I'm gonna live forever!*”, came crashing down when I was sixteen years old. As a pastor's kid, I'd been around death my entire life. By the time I was ten years old, I'm sure I visited more funeral homes with my dad than most people do in a lifetime. But these were old people. Their turn was over. When I was in tenth grade, one of my best friends was killed in a car accident. She was fifteen. There was no foul play, no alcohol. Only bad road conditions, inexperienced driving, and an inflated sense of safety. On that day, just

before Christmas, I got a phone call from a hysterical little sister telling me that my friend and two others were gone. It's amazing how the tears still come when I revisit this now decade's old memory. I remember recognizing that life as I knew it was forever altered. I understood that we are not safe and that we are not guaranteed immunity from death.

Another myth dispelled in my early-twenties was the *romantic comedy film plot*: my person and I would meet, something hard would happen to separate us or to blind us to our love, but in the end, it would all work out. Happily ever after. At nineteen years old, I met someone who I was confident I would marry (thank you, Evangelical indoctrination). We were friends, but I loved him more than that. Although he didn't recognize it as more, I was certain he would eventually know we were meant to be. My heart was *betrothed* to him for years, unbeknownst to him. Years later, only days after I finally found the courage to send him an honest letter, I learned through a friend that he had just got engaged. My letter was already in the mail. Heartbreak and humiliation. And then he got married. End of dream. Thanks for the letdown, Hallmark.

In my early twenties, I experienced a friendship that was rich and life-giving. I had never been more open and accountable. I felt so safe and loved. I shared myself deeply, only to learn later that my confidences hadn't been respected or treasured. My faith and safety in friendship was rocked.

Suicide is another realm that remained blissfully inconsequential until it infiltrated the realm of possible. Though I knew of people who'd committed suicide, it wasn't something I thought much about or even entertained as possible. It was *not in my backyard*. When someone important to my family took his own life, it revealed a door that had previously not existed. *Before*, when someone wasn't answering my phone call, the reason was clearly that they had forgotten to

charge their phone or they were sleeping. *After*, my first thoughts in every scenario flew to suicide. I realized fearfully and heartbreakingly that humans are so very vulnerable.

All of these hardships curbed the reckless safety in which I'd lived. These realities burst through the false walls of immunity that I'd so carefully constructed. They introduced plot lines that I'd never intended for my life. I was going to grow up, be very educated, be a rockstar, fall in love, get married forever, have lots of children, and hugely impact the world. There would be no rejection, no broken trust, no divorce, no death. So when all of these things were introduced into my experience, my world was shaken. I realized with despair that I wasn't really safe.

This tight space, almost like a bottle neck or funnel, occurs for all of us at some point. The revelation can cause a number of responses. In my life, the option that presented was the choice between despair and fear *or* hoping in something or someone higher. For me, it was the someone higher. Hoping in God became the pathway to a new kind of safety. Not in myself, but in Love.

Finding our security in God doesn't mean that we now wear some sort of supernatural immunity cloak. We live in a world that is broken and the rain falls justly and unjustly. The difference is in our *experience* of the hard things. We are promised over and over that God is with us.

A life of faith doesn't make us exempt from adversity. Those who hope for only health and wealth will surely be disappointed. I believe God *is* good—the source of hope, joy, peace, fulfillment, identity, comfort, wisdom and healing—but it doesn't always feel like that. We are not promised problem-free living. Because we live in this beautiful but imperfect world, we *do* experience challenges like sickness, death, betrayal, and loneliness.

While we may not always feel bubble-wrapped or be plucked from terrible situations like we'd wished, what we *do* have is *God with us*. We are not alone in the hard things. We are strengthened and held together. All things can be repurposed for our ultimate good. Even the parts that don't make sense, like the earthquakes that rock our foundations.

One of my favorite (and possibly most-prayed) pieces of writing is this excerpt from "Saint Patrick's Breastplate":

*Christ with me,  
 Christ before me,  
 Christ behind me,  
 Christ in me,  
 Christ beneath me,  
 Christ above me,  
 Christ on my right,  
 Christ on my left,  
 Christ when I lie down,  
 Christ when I sit down,  
 Christ when I arise,  
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
 Christ in every eye that sees me,  
 Christ in every ear that hears me."*<sup>2</sup>

Love is in us and with us. Love surrounds us.

Like you, I have already weathered many storms. But I am not overcome. I am honest about the hard things, but truly, I live with *great joy*. My heart is at rest. Peace goes beyond my understanding and doesn't even make sense in light of the circumstances. There are some losses I hope I will never experience, *but even if I do*, I know I will be okay.

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN IN THE DARK

I walk boldly and with confidence even while holding on for dear life, knowing that whatever comes, Love is with me. Love is bigger. And this fills me with hope.

## Chapter 4

# No One. No Thing.

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*“You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”*

ST. AUGUSTINE

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We like to believe that for every craving, there is a satisfying agent. For every want, there is fulfillment. For every ache, there is a remedy. For every heart longing, a requiting love.

When I crave something sweet, a Reese Peanut Butter Cup is exactly the cure. And if I can't have that, I melt peanut butter and chocolate chips together in the microwave. When my brain is fried, I need Netflix. When I have the kind of stress that makes my heart pound, I want a glass (bottle) of red wine. When I have bone-deep exhaustion, I need a nap. When I long for connection, I want coffee-time with friends. When I need a creative re-boot, I orchestrate a time of solitude. When my thoughts are jumbled, I need journal time. When my feelings can't escape my body, I sit at the piano and allow music to say what words cannot. When I have pent up frustration, I head out for a power walk. When my brain is relentlessly busy, I am quieted with list-making and meditation.

I wanted academic success to fulfill me, and though I am proud of what I've achieved and have grown in learning, it has not quenched the desire for more. I believed a life partner would fulfill a deep soul-longing, but even our 'person' cannot fully satisfy the ache to be truly known. Though I know better, I really felt like renovating our home would feel good. And it did, in a way. I value esthetics and I love our physical space, but that's as deep as it goes.

We have ways to meet our needs. Or, at least, to quiet them. To numb them. Temporarily. Momentarily. Detrimentally?

The distasteful news is that no one and no thing will permanently satisfy your deepest need. There is no once-and-for-all miracle.

Not alone time. Not friend time. Not coffee. Not a dog. Not a different job. Not a new hair color. Not a new sofa. Not having a baby. Not meeting the right person. Not bigger biceps. Not a different church. Not your children. Not your husband. Not chocolate. Not wine. Not Netflix. Not size 6 pants. Not a hot bath. Not Advil. Not a different partner. Not more success. Not a new pet. Not food. Not *no* more food.

No one. No thing.

C.S. Lewis says that "*we live with a God-shaped hole in our hearts.*"<sup>1</sup>

Created things and constructs are meant to be enjoyed, meant to add to the human experience. But we are not only physical beings. So physical things do not quench the eternal thirst. They cannot satiate the divine hunger. They do not fill the hole.

We become quickly dissatisfied. We leak. We need constant infilling.

The only satisfying agent for every soul hunger, every unquenchable thirst, and every longing is divine. For some of us, that means Jesus. For some of us, that means the Great Spirit. Or the Universe. Or another name for God. Regardless of the name you use, humans straddle two worlds. With one foot in our concrete, physical experience,



and the other firmly floating in the realm of spirit, we live in limbo. We see as through a glass darkly. We are in the *now* and the *not yet*. The fulfilled and the unfulfilled. Though we experience moments of connection when heaven touches earth, we cannot arrive and set up camp at *fullness*. Regrettably.

Perhaps the answer is to simply notice and embrace the empty feeling when it arises. To live with great love and empathy for ourselves and for others, awake to the ache that is intrinsic to all of humanity. Instead of attempting to outrun the void, or stuff it to full with lesser things, why not cherish and protect this space that is intended only for divine connection?

In the interim, I don't believe we are meant to merely endure this world. We don't have to scrape by, longing only for "heaven." I am fully aware that the combination of peanut butter and chocolate isn't the fullness of heaven, but for me, it's a taste of heaven. I know that Netflix cannot compare with true inner peace, but I certainly embrace it as a gift in this moment. My kids are imperfect humans who are mostly wonderful and are sometimes jerks, but we love whole-heartedly, even if imperfectly. For me, they are a taste of the fullness.

We are meant to live wholly in the now and the not yet. We are made to enjoy God and enjoy others. The place of longing is by design.

Though I, like you, live with the God-shaped hole, I am simultaneously filled with great joy and peace along the journey. We may not live in the perpetual fullness, but we can embrace every small, joy-inducing measure with gratitude along the way. And this, my friends, is divinely satisfying.

## Chapter 5

# The Whole Damn House

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*“We can not selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.”*

**BRENÉ BROWN**

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**Y**ou are a hugely gorgeous house. You have many rooms. You were made this way. So, why are you camping out in one room?

God talks to me. Very Joan of Arc, I know. But I’m not special in this. The divine speaks to you and to *all* of us if we’re paying attention.

As parents, we communicate with our children in unique ways, according to who they are and individualized by our relationship with them. In the same way, we are spoken to in ways that are specific to us and according to the unique friendship with us. The more we listen and learn how God speaks to us, the easier it is to recognize the voice. When my mom calls me on the phone, she doesn’t have to say, “Hi Ellen, it’s Mom!” I talk with her *all the time*, so I know her voice. It’s the same with God.

I am a *words* person. I require a lot of words to explain my thoughts and feelings, and when others share their words with me, it helps me to feel loved. I might know in my heart that you love and appreciate

me, but when you *tell* me with your words, spoken or written, I *really* get it. Interestingly, I rarely hear words from God. Epiphany often occurs for me in the form of an image or picture in my mind; something visual that unfolds into analogy or allegory. Occasionally, there are accompanying words.

An image that I saw in my mind, many years ago now, was of a large, older house—an expansive and stately home with high ceilings and spacious, well-appointed rooms. It was so beautiful, and I was eager to explore. As I wandered through, it seemed that many of the rooms had been closed up, like a summer home prepared for a vacant winter season. Room after room, shutters were closed on windows, and dark drapes were drawn. Furniture was hidden under dust clothes. Discarded, broken items cluttered surfaces. Lights were extinguished and there was an absence of heat. Cold and dark. Uninhabited.

Eventually, I found one room which was lived in. In the whole of this glorious house, one small space had light, and heat, and life. The house, as it turns out, was me. And the accompanying words said, “Live in *all* the rooms of your house.”

Many times, though the intention *is* for us to live in a spacious house with many rooms, we end up shutting things behind closed doors. Perhaps we want to escape painful experiences or memories. Shut the door. Maybe we feel ashamed when we remember something we’ve done or that was done to us. Shut the door. A relational breakdown that is never resolved. Shut the door. Refusal to forgive and bid bitterness good-bye. Shut the door. Hopes deferred and dreams in decay. Shut the door.

Before we know it, we find ourselves in a small space, existing in one meager room though the whole house is ours to inhabit.

It will require massive amounts of courage, but we need to open the doors. We need to walk into the rooms we’ve closed up and turn on the lights. Throw open the heavy drapes to illuminate what we’ve

tried to hide, or forget, or ignore. We cannot live whole-heartedly when we're afraid of being found out, when we're hiding things, or when we're unwilling to deal with the hard stuff. Full freedom comes when we turn on the lights and see the monsters for what they are: not real, not powerful.

To paraphrase the brilliant thoughts of Brené Brown, *if you numb the hard stuff, you numb the good stuff*. Wouldn't it be lovely if we could carefully select the feelings we will feel? Throw open certain doors and windows but keep others locked up tight? But we can't have it both ways. When we attempt to limit pain, fear, and embarrassment, we unwittingly shut down joy, peace and gratitude.

Before you apply the "Jaws of Life" to the chained and dead-bolted doors on the rooms in your house, remember that Love is kind and compassionate. Ask for guidance with your process. Sometimes memories will gently resurface, or our attention will be drawn to something specific, and we can simply consent to the journey. At other times, we might need to be more intentional about going after things, especially those we know still have a hold on us. We can ask God to walk us through it; we can invite and receive healing. Nobody loves dealing with their pain, but there is no way through it but through it. And it's so worth it. As you've no doubt heard, courage isn't an absence of fear; it is feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

At the risk of sounding prescriptive, there are many things we can do to reclaim our houses.

**Schedule time.** We *have* to have time for process. We're often so busy and preoccupied with life that we rarely have quiet. Spend time reflecting. Write in your journal. Ask God to talk to you. It's in stillness that locked rooms will be drawn into our awareness.

**Feel your feelings.** If you have discomfort or pain about something, listen to it. Feel it. We need to get comfortable sitting with our pain. Open one of your closed doors and walk into the room. Sit

there for a while. Cry. Groan. Be *angry*. Stay, even when you want to run out screaming. The Comforter, who I believe is God's Spirit, will meet you there.

*Vulnerable admission:* Sometimes I get really loud when I'm in my car by myself. I yell, I pray out loud, and sometimes I even groan ... because, friends, though I love words, words cannot always express what needs to be said.

**Ask for support**, whether in the form of presence or prayer. That *thing* that is *so* hard or loud in your head can be rendered mute when we share it. Whether it's from trusted friends or family or your community, ask for what you need.

**Forgive.** We have to forgive—forgive others, forgive ourselves. Forgiving somebody is *not* a way of saying “what you did is okay.” It's saying, “I'm unhooking myself from this heavy thing; it will no longer weigh me down or have a hold on me.” And it's not a friendly suggestion; if we want to live fully, it's imperative.

**Therapy** is an invaluable resource. Talking to a professional counselor is my absolute favorite. Honestly, what could be better than someone who is being paid to listen to you? And they can't tell anyone else anything you say. And they ask you really good questions. There are no inane reasons for counseling. We all know that there are worse things in the world than what we are experiencing, but your experience is *your* experience. You're allowed to wrestle with it.

*Honest moment:* a few years ago, I spent time talking with a counselor about many things, but one of which was that my excessively urinating dog was bringing out a rage in me, the likes of which I have never experienced. True story. See, no dumb reasons.

As daunting as it may seem to open long-closed doors, the beauty is, when it's done, it's done. You don't have to be afraid that in entering a room, you'll never come out. Sure, we may go through a deeper level of healing on a same or similar issue at another time, but the

more we face our hard stuff and experience the mental, spiritual, and emotional relief that comes, the more we understand it's worth it.

*You* are a hugely gorgeous house. You have many rooms. You were made this way. No more living like a hermit in one small space because your whole house is filled with garbage. Fling wide the doors. Clean it out. Let in the light. Live in your whole damn house.

## Chapter 6

# Less Like Scars, More Like Character

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*“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”*

KHALIL GIBRAN

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Not long ago, I read an article about maps that astounded me. Cartographers reveal that it is immensely difficult to distinguish between mountains and valleys on a topographical map. Something akin to an optical illusion occurs when we view them from an aerial perspective, from too far away. It takes getting closer to a mountain to know it's a mountain. It requires proximity to a canyon or valley to identify it as such.

The same can be true in our lives. So many times, from an aerial view, I have faultily categorized experiences as “bad” or “good” only to realize on closer inspection that the hard thing was *actually* a good thing, rich with meaning. And sometimes, the thing I'd deemed good *wasn't*.

In my home, short-sleeved shirts and long-sleeved shirts do not share the same pile. Random kitchen paraphernalia, like cork screws and pate knives, go in the second drawer down. Do not put the dessert forks with the dinner forks. They each have their own space.

I want life to be like this, too. I want everything that happens to fit neatly into its assigned drawer or cupboard or shelf. But, as we know, this doesn't happen.

I've thought about this a lot this year. It has come up in my conversations. It resurfaces in my journal. It gets referenced in my writing. And I feel that I have *finally* grasped how simplistic and errant this *good/bad* analysis has been. While it works for us occasionally, it fails us regularly. There is *not* always a place for everything, and everything *isn't* always in its place. I'm learning that most experiences in life can be assigned to either column, depending on how we look at them... how we frame and re-frame. And weirdly, many things can find their home in both columns, concurrently.

Our bodies are marked with memory and story. We are physical records, living artifacts. Some of the marks have pleasant memories attached. Some have painful memories attached. Many fall into the "*both*" category; things that hurt so much at the time, but that somehow became lovely. Our scars tell stories.

I have a shiny, circular scar on the inside of my ankle that has been with me for more than thirty years. It reminds me of the summer I was first allowed to venture out on my own to the busy, tourist-filled streets of Cavendish, Prince Edward Island. I would leave my home, high on independence, and scooter alone toward the Tourist Mart where I would buy a root beer flavored popsicle or maybe a Fun Dip. For a relatively flat province, there were many long hills that challenged my ten-year-old muscles. As I pushed my scooter along with my right leg, my bare ankle would often graze the brake; so regularly,



in fact, that it didn't heal all summer long. And I still have the mark. It was worth it.

There are marks on my body that speak of embracing my individuality and coming into my own. Some of the choices made can still be seen, and some are ghosts. You can see the faded tattoo that remains from a visit to a random basement (I don't recommend this), but you can't see that I once had a buzz-cut (I, also, don't recommend this). While my nose still bears the piercing that my Doc Marten-wearing self sought out in Toronto a hundred million years ago, I have other empty holes on my body; left-over piercings no longer filled with jewelry. But I remember the rush of every single one. It was worth it.

My belly looks like a treasure map with X-shaped scars literally marking the spots. These faded scars can still make me weep this many years later when I remember the life that grew in the wrong place and the rupture that necessitated emergency surgery — a surgery that saved my life but also removed a tiny life from my body. I remember my first baby, and I am filled with gratitude that my life was spared. Though it hurt so much, I grew in trust and character. It was worth it.

I have a scar on my knee that still turns pink after a hot bath more than ten years later. I'd been boating with *min venner* (my friends) in the fjords of Norway and we pulled up to the rocks to barbecue steaks on an *engangsgrill* (a totally non-eco friendly one-use grill). Afterwards, we launched ourselves into the freezing cold water for a swim. It was so shockingly cold that I scrambled my way up a rocky ledge to escape imminent hypothermia. Frozen, I didn't feel my knee being shredded on the razor rocks. It hurt like crazy later, and it took forever to heal, but the scar still fills me with warm, sun-burned memories of being in one of my favorite places in the whole world. It was worth it.

When my children were younger, they remarked regularly whenever they saw the stretch-marked skin of my abdomen, "*Mama, why*

*does your belly look funny?"* I always answered, *"Because you grew there. And you were so worth it."*

And now, as I've pushed further into my forties, I notice other marks on my body. I see evidence on my skin of time spent outdoors. And my eyes bear witness to many years of smiling. And it's been worth it.

But the external marks are not the only ones we bear. I have soul scars that can still be painful when pressed just so. Things that maybe didn't heal quite right and left ugly scars, something I'd rather not have as a part of me. But even *these* scars carry stories. If we accept the invitation, *even these* can produce character in us.

The painful ache of loss was because I loved him deeply, and it couldn't work, but I don't regret it. It was worth it. The sting of humiliation was because I attempted something brave and failed. But I'm still glad I did it. It was worth it. The sickening shame of self-awareness, realizing I acted selfishly and immaturely, taught me to own my weakness and seek help. These were all hard lessons that were worth it.

We get to decide how we read situations, how we view our scars. Are they evidence of damage done or evidence of healing that occurred? Are they painful reminders of regret or are they experiences that have added valuable patina, contributing to our character?

We hold physical, spiritual, and emotional records *in us* and *on us*. It's inevitable. So, while some may see stretch marks, creases, aging skin, and soul scars, I'm choosing to see the story of where I've been so far. I'm looking carefully at the *perceived good* and the *perceived bad*. I'm treasuring *all* of it, recognizing that, sometimes, the parts I thought were valleys were actually mountains. All of these stories have contributed to who I am and to who I'm becoming.

As time passes, the marks are looking less like scars and more like character.

## Chapter 7

# Not Dead

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*“Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly. Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams go, life is a barren field, frozen with snow.”*

LANGSTON HUGHES

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**T**he story of Lazarus is a shot of adrenaline into a failing heart. You see, the story of Lazarus isn't just about Jesus raising a physical body from the dead. It's a story about speaking life to things that are dead. Like really dead. Too far gone dead. Stinking dead. Impossible dead. Grieved and over dead.

There are times when I can't discern whether a piece of writing should remain in the vault of my private journal or be vulnerably shared with the world. This is one of those times. Though this exhortation was certainly intended for me, I feel a sneaking suspicion it might be for you as well. So, I'm opening up my journal.

Here's a brief synopsis of the story of Lazarus, in case you haven't heard it:

He was sick, like, *really* sick. His sisters, Mary and Martha, contacted Jesus to come quickly (they knew he could heal the sick). Jesus got the news and took his time (nice one, Jesus). Lazarus died (umm,

what?!). His body was prepared for burial and placed in a tomb. Jesus finally showed up days later. The sisters were upset (and, maybe, *really freaking mad?*) that he hadn't come in time to heal Lazarus. When Jesus arrived, they had already said a final good-bye to their brother. They were already grieving. They had already lost all hope for his healing. It was over. Or so they thought.

They didn't fully understand that Jesus isn't only a healer. He's a resurrector.

What have you declared dead, wrapped in burial clothes, and placed in a grave? Perhaps it's a dream that wasn't fulfilled like you'd thought, and so, you've set it adrift. Maybe you've been praying for years for rescue from addiction or chronic illness—and it seems so many years have been wasted. Did you receive a word of promise, but now you're questioning, "*Did God really say ... ?*" It may be that there is a relationship in your life, like a marriage, that has been wasting away—it has been on death's doorstep for so long, or has maybe ended, even though the piece of paper still says otherwise.

I feel strongly that some of us may need to roll back the stone and have a look inside our tombs. What has died for you? Not because you *wished it* dead, and not because it was left untended or neglected, but because the circumstances didn't change, the timeline ran out, the miracle didn't come.

It's terrifying to enter those dark places of disappointment, to willingly re-visit hopes and dreams that have faded into non-existence, or to re-open those deaths already grieved.

When I summon my courage, roll back the stone, and enter my own tomb, I observe several hopes, dreams, and plans wrapped in burial clothes. Some of the plans died a natural death. Some of the hopes and dreams that died *needed* to die. They had their origin in my own ideas and ambitions.

In my younger years, I dreamed of auditioning for Broadway musicals. I was going to arrive at a cattle call and have the casting producers realize they'd found their new lead girl ... Les Mis's Eponine, or Rent's Mimi. I've performed in a number of local musical theater productions in the past, but the unrealistic Broadway dream has drifted on by. And it's really okay. I have chosen a life here with my family (and let's be honest, I wasn't going to make it past the first cut, anyway—also problematic is that I am not the ideal ethnicity intended for any of the roles I desired).

These dreams fade or alter with relative ease. We grow older, we mature, we determine who we really are. Though we might experience regret or loss, wishing things had played out differently, we can also be pragmatic in our analysis, able to understand (and possibly even appreciate) why the particular thing *didn't* happen. They are light things, easily blown around, and carried away like dry leaves.

But, my friends, there are other promises and dreams that *don't* die easily. They are weighty, deeply buried, substantial things. You know the ones I mean. The ones that we struggle to release. That we cannot seem to get over. That maybe we *shouldn't* get over. But because they didn't get fulfilled according to *our* timeline—because Jesus didn't show up when we thought he would have done, or should have done—we declare it *over*. We didn't want to let it go, but by all human accounts, it was very obviously dead. So we buried it.

These are the longings, the plans, and the promises that were placed in our DNA when our bodies and persons were formed. *And even though we've declared some of these things dead, Love views it differently.* If we can be brave enough to re-enter the tomb, Love will highlight the ones that are active and living, even though our natural eyes may not perceive it.

As in the story of Lazarus, Jesus isn't restricted by our timelines, or bound by our natural laws. Jesus isn't inhibited by dead things. He

doesn't look at your dream or your situation and say, "*Argh! I should have got here sooner. Damn it ... sorry about that!*"

The writer of Romans talks about the "God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."<sup>1</sup> I love this. It doesn't become *harder* for God to restore, redeem, and renew once something has died.

When there is no response, according to *our* preferred timeline, it's not a lack of care for us, nor that there is no intention of keeping the promise. It's because there is a larger story. A story authored by Love.

When Jesus arrived at the home of Mary and Martha, four days after Lazarus had died, the sisters were understandably upset. Jesus says to them, "*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?*"<sup>2</sup>

We are asked the same question: "Do you believe this?" Yes. I believe it. I believe that you will breathe life into things that I have laid to rest, dreams that have fallen asleep in the waiting. I believe you will call things that are not as though they are. I believe. Help my unbelief.

The miracle is not late. Love has not let us down. If it has been spoken, it will be fulfilled. Love does not disappoint. The resurrection comes at exactly the right time. Oh, how I need to remember this.

## Chapter 8

# Tapestry

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*“The dark and the light, they exist side by side. Sometimes overlapping, one explaining the other. The darkened path is as illuminated as the lightened ...”*

RAVEN DAVIES

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**H**ave you ever looked closely at a woven tapestry? It requires many, many colors and varieties of thread to achieve an overall image. Weavers understand that you cannot choose only your favorite tones or your one preferred medium and then begin. Though you may intend for a certain color to be prominent, it takes others—light and dark—to truly magnify and highlight the overall pattern. While you may love the silk, gold, and silver warp threads, without the necessary weft threads, often made from regular old cotton or linen, the image cannot be created.

I am a magpie. I love to surround myself with bright, shiny things. Superficially, if I could, I would have all of the beautiful colors and experiences and feelings in my nest, and *none* of the hard things. However, on a more pragmatic level, I know this never works.

Any time attempts have been made to that end, the result is a one-dimensional, Polly-Anna, bubblegum, Pleasantville-like experience.

It's hollow and false. It lacks the depth and nuance and richness that comes from hard-won battles, honesty, and walking it out, no matter what.

There are parts of my life and my story that hold beauty and provide joy in the remembering. Some of my favorite, shiny filaments have been synergy in partnership, intimate friendships, my passionate children, feeling meaningful in my job, the ability to create music, and the spiritual heritage extending down both sides of my family tree.

But some fibers in my history feel like they've woven an indelible stain or a darkness that I'd rather not revisit. The dark strands are those shadow times when I knew I'd veered from the path intended for me but couldn't seem to climb back up from the ditch. The dark strands are the things I never wanted in my story: anxiety, disappointment, heart break, divorce.

And then, there are those seasons of 'non.' As someone who feels deeply and who is quite "Anne of Green Gables" in terms of my highs and lows, this place of mundane, dreary, middle ground is *not* my favorite. These are the times that are neither good nor bad, they just are. The waiting, treading water seasons that lack enough discomfort to drive us into God but that don't contain enough joy to remind us we are living.

But all of these threads—the light, the dark, the neutral; the common, the rare, the breathtaking—together, they contribute to the total design.

With maturity and a more seasoned perspective on life, I've learned to live engaged in the moment. I am not, by nature, a person who remains easily in the present. I tend to reflect on the past, wallowing in nostalgia and regret, *or* I strain toward the future, dreaming of and planning for what will be. While I agree that great contentedness comes from staying awake in our everyday lives, I also believe there



*can* be value in looking behind, in turning around to gaze over what has been. Where I've come from. Not for the purpose of entertaining regret or shame, but in a way that allows me to learn from and appreciate the overall pattern.

A number of years ago, I listened to a wonderful Indigenous speaker, Terry LeBlanc, talk about walking backwards into the future.<sup>1</sup> This notion speaks to the value that can be gained in remembering and understanding our pasts. It's about allowing where we've been to inform where we are going. It resonated greatly with me.

For some of us, the idea of looking back over our lives produces dread or fear. We don't *want* to remember what was, whether the good or the bad. Perhaps in remembering the 'good old days,' we wonder if we've passed our prime; are our pinnacle days behind us? Looking back, thus, leaves us sad and longing for what was. Or maybe, what was behind was hard. Evil, even. The thought of reliving any part of it, even in the thinking of it, causes a vehement reaction to run, to turn away, to slam the door. Or perhaps we feel shame when we look behind, because we turned subtly or severely from what we knew was right. As a result, we experience regret and guilt when we remember things done and not done.

But here is what I know. When we take a deep breath, summon our courage, and choose to turn around, what we see will take our breath away.

When I reflect on my life, thus far, I feel both a healthy pride and some small amounts of disdain for my bone-headedness (we're making that a word). I live as a person forgiven, free of shame and regret, but I'm also self-aware and cognizant of my own flaws and errors. I've had strong faith ... and sometimes, I've chosen another path because I thought I knew better. I've worked to serve others and to bring healing ... and conversely, I've hurt others and myself. I have chosen over and over to remain aware of Love's closeness in the midst of difficult

times ... and also, I've done anything I could to escape pressure and to numb my pain.

When I gaze behind me, I *do* see the good, but I also see the deviations and mis-steps. I see the dark threads. If it were possible, I know I'd be tempted to root out those dark threads from my story. Wouldn't you? But were we to do that, the complexities and patterns that have been created wouldn't be what they are. You wouldn't be who you are. I wouldn't be who I am.

If God is a creator, and if God is unchanging, which most days I believe to be true, then God is *forever creating*. It's in a creator's nature to continue to create, and recreate, and redeem, and restore, and utilize every. single. part.

While we tend to see events, experiences, and feelings in isolation, categorizing them as "good" and "bad," (especially when we're in the middle of a season and don't have a bird's eye perspective), a creator sees it all as valid and useful material. When we offer our raw material, a creator can make use of everything. God uses all the material of our lives to weave the most intricate and beautiful tapestry. The individual strands of disappointment and pain and joy and surrender get woven together in such a way that the overall image is beauty.

I don't believe that God causes pain or inflicts illness. I think it's simply part of the human experience—the result of living in an imperfect world with imperfect people. But I certainly *do* believe that Love can weave together something beautiful with all the fibers of our lives. And it's not done yet.

Take a big breath. Tell your regrets, and your shame, and your fear to be quiet. And then, turn around. Have a look at the tapestry flowing out behind you; the masterpiece extending from the loom of your life. It's lovely and complex, light and dark. And altogether, it's beautiful.

# Elemental

*(Earth, Wind, Fire, Water)*

## Chapter 9

# Shake Up to Wake Up

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*“Now, everytime I witness a strong person, I want to know: What dark did you conquer in your story? Mountains do not rise without earthquakes.”*

KATHERINE MACKENETT

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**A**n earthquake can be a devastating force. My early years were lived in southern California where benign quakes were a regular occurrence and it was no big deal to see water sloshing in the neighbor’s pool. But I have also seen with my own eyes the aftermath of a massive quake in Haiti that left the country in ruins. Earthquakes can ravage in minutes what has taken years or decades to build.

Recently, while meditating, I saw a picture in my *mind’s eye* of a tall skyscraper rocking back and forth. It was almost as if it had become rubberized and was swaying, Gumby-like, side to side. It was evident an earthquake was occurring. The ground heaved, and the building trembled and shook. But it didn’t fall. It had been built for this.

There are a number of ways to earthquake-proof buildings. One way to make a simple structure more resistant is to tie the walls, floor, roof, and foundations into a rigid box that holds together. Another

engineering masterpiece is to incorporate a massive water tank at a high elevation within a building to absorb the vibrations of seismic activity. Something like a giant pendulum has also been suspended into the center of skyscrapers with the goal of counterbalancing the lateral movements of the earthquake. Whatever the design, these are not technologies typically included in regular construction. They are intentional, preventative measures.

Preparation and proper engineering can be the difference between *still-standing* and rubble. The same is true for humans.

Like buildings that are designed to handle the vertical load of a roof and walls, we can typically support the vertical load of regular life bearing down on us: schedules, jobs, expectations, budgets. But earthquakes present a lateral or sideways force to structures that is more complicated to account for. These unexpected, sideways motions in our lives might look like infidelity, job loss, or a cancer diagnosis. Bracing against these quakes requires a more intentional design.

I am determined to withstand life's quakes ... and not *only* to withstand. I want to *stick it* to those unexpected lateral forces, repurposing them into something that serves instead of destroys.

Regretfully, I don't believe we're born ready. Yes, some humans have a naturally higher level of resiliency, but more often, it's a case of being retro-fitted, which is always uncomfortable, messy work. But necessary work.

There have been seasons in my life that I didn't understand at the time. In retrospect, I can see that what felt destructive was an intentional, preventive measure. I was being quake-proofed.

Remember when you felt gutted, like your fragile insides were being removed but possibly being replaced with something much stronger? It was for this. Remember when it felt like your foundations were crumbling, jack-hammered, and bull-dozed? It was for this. Remember when you got dug down so deeply that you wondered if

you'd ever see the light of day again? It was for this. Remember when you were deconstructed to the point that you no longer even recognized yourself or your faith? It was for this.

When we've been made strong by engineer-God, we can withstand and even prevail. The quakes that threaten to take us down might make us sway and crumble a little. We might shudder and tremble, but baby, we won't fall.

Divine presence in us literally acts as the counterbalancing force against life-quakes. When the lateral pressures come and we are swayed, God-in-us stabilizes us. Where once we would have been devastated, now, we stand firm.

Permission to speak freely? Metaphorically, of course.

**Sometimes a little earthquake *isn't* the worst thing in the world.** What might be intended for evil can be used for good. If we want to be our truest and best selves—if we want to discover *essence*—we *need* some things to fall away. And a quake is the very thing to accomplish it.

It is frighteningly easy to float along, ignorant and self-absorbed, deaf and blind to our own ideas, beliefs and passions.

We don't even know what we think about things.

We grip batons of opinion handed to us like they're our own.

We wear mantles that do not align with who we were created to be.

We define ourselves by uninvited labels that were slapped onto us by others.

We tout beliefs that actually hold very little resemblance to divine goodness.

We enable relationships that are hazardous to our health.

We gird with extra layers of protective padding that end up isolating us.

**Sometimes we *need* a little shake up to wake up.**

In my early thirties, the ground shook and it all fell down. While my building was technically still upright, I experienced a deconstruction that altered every aspect of life as I had known it, no part left untouched. My beliefs swayed, my family structure altered, my understanding of my place in the world trembled, and my sense of safety, belonging, and meaning shook. The facade crumbled and my building was beyond recognition.

During this time, I experienced something like a vision or a thought-process or a movie in my mind; you can choose whatever language you're comfortable assigning to such inexplicable experiences.

I saw myself crouched before something like a giant pile of broken concrete and rubble; a mountain made up of the debris of my life. I was on my hands and knees, hunched over and overwhelmed. I couldn't discern what was worth saving and what was lost, what was God-made and what was human-made, what was truth and what was lies. It was all mixed up together in that giant mountain before me—a mountain I knew was mine to sort through.

And then I became aware of a presence; someone was with me. To my right, I pictured Jesus on his knees beside me. Sobbing and gasping, I said, "*Jesus, I just can't ... oh my god, I just don't even know where to start!*" He looked at me, face full of understanding, then gave me a wink of solidarity that said, "*Right, let's do this.*" He pushed up his Jesus-sleeves, pulled my burden across his own shoulders, and began the sorting. As he pulled out each bit of rubble, he'd look at it, and then look at me, "*This is garbage. Pitch it. This is truth. Put it in the keep pile. This isn't love. Get rid of it.*" And so on.

The *vision* went on for quite a long while. I remember the absolute comfort and safety of his presence. I felt held. He was with me. And when the sorting was complete, I had a drastically smaller pile than when I began, one I could hold in my two hands. But it was truth.

My building looked more bare-bones and less ornate, but it was truly, authentically me.

This *epiphanal* experience (urban dictionary agrees with me that epiphanal should be a word) has remained with me throughout the years. The earthquake was worth it. I still hold these most important God-truths like precious treasures. There are a lot of ideas and patterns, habits and rules to which we blindly adhere that don't actually have their origin in God. They are cultural norms, mores, practices—not *all* bad, but not always that important. I'll take a small handful of treasures I know to be genuine over a giant mountain of rubble any day.

So, this quake you're experiencing right now? The truth is, it may leave you a little banged up. It might cause a few fractures in your structure. Your beautiful facade may crumble and you might not even recognize yourself. You're gonna feel it all. But God is within you. You will not fall.

Let's reframe the inevitable quakes of life for good instead of devastation. When we are fortified, earthquake experiences can, surprisingly, serve us well. They shake our foundations enough to wake us up and to remove the accumulation of non-essential crap we carry around with us. We don't have to be afraid of these quakes.

Love holds all things together. That includes you.



## Chapter 10

# Deadhead

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*“The purpose of pruning is to improve the quality of the roses, not to hurt the bush.”*

FLORENCE LITTAUER

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**M**y life is an enormous metaphor. The more I’ve learned about myself, especially through the lens of the Enneagram<sup>1</sup>, the better I have understood that not everyone ascribes meaning to elements of life in the same way that I do. There are occasions that I read into situations and find meaning where there isn’t any, but there are others where the insight is immeasurably useful and helps me to understand important things. I truly believe that metaphor is one of the ways the divine speaks to me.

My morning routine has involved coffee, journaling, and prayer my entire adult life. In fact, my preferred perch in our living room is made plain by the indent on our sofa. I’ve tried to move around so as not to permanently imprint my bottom on that one cushion, but it just doesn’t feel right.

Often, I begin with a self-assessment of how I am entering the day: *How did I sleep? How do I feel? What lies ahead today? What am I*

*thankful for?* All of this can be thought or written. Next, I'll engage with a short reading or chapter to focus my thoughts. Then, I'll sit quietly with my eyes closed, listening for what God has to say. It is typically during this intentional quiet or meditation that I sense what Love is speaking. As I mentioned above, it is common for understanding to be communicated to me with images and metaphors.

On one such morning, my thoughts were drawn to the African violet sitting on my coffee table, right beside my crossed feet. It was massive. I had never done never anything special for it—and yes, I know that African Violets like to soak up water through their roots (holy, high maintenance!)—but I'd always just dumped it on top. Because I cannot be bothered. (Side note: I love plants and green things, but I've adopted a rather Darwinian stance toward the plants in my house. This is what you get. Deal or don't deal. Survival of the fittest, baby). In spite of the standardized treatment, this hardy violet was perpetually covered in beautiful, bright purple flowers.

However, that morning on closer observation, I realized that sections of the flowers were dead. They stood upright among the viable blooms, looking very much alive and purple, but they were dried out.

I was suddenly overcome with an intense compulsion to pick off the dead flowers—a crisis situation that felt bigger than dead flowers on a plant. Deadness in the form of bloom and leaf was draining energy from the parts that were alive! The initial early-morning task became a rampage throughout my entire house (yes, I can be a little intense). With a grocery-store bag in hand, I attended to every plant in my home, removing dry blooms and dead leaves. It took ages and made a mess, but in the end, I felt like I'd accomplished something tremendously healthy for my plants. And, strangely, also for myself.

*Deadhead* is a term that refers not only to the appreciators of Jerry Garcia (of whom I was one), but to the removal of faded or dead

flowers from plants. It's generally done both to maintain a plant's appearance and to increase its overall health and performance.

Deadheading is tedious, but important work. Most flowers lose their allure as they fade, diminishing the overall appearance of a garden or individual plant. As flowers shed their petals and begin to form seed heads, energy is focused into the development of the seeds, rather than the flowers. Regular deadheading, however, re-directs the energy into the flowers, producing healthier plants and sustained blooming.

Deadheading can feel like a never-ending chore. It can also feel like your plant looks a little less full and alive once you've removed the deadness because sometimes, as was the case with my African violet, the *faux* blooms still *looked* alive. They were pretty and gave the illusion of a full, healthy plant. But they were dried and dead. Not alive. Sometimes it's hard to get rid of the blooms that *seem* alive.

Some things, in my humble opinion, *are* actually better *faux*. I regularly sport a "genuine pleather" (aka "vegan leather") jacket that is my absolute fave. My closet houses A LOT of faux fur, and there are giant faux-wolf throw pillows in my living room. Some things are better faux, but others are not. You are not good *faux*. Your life is not good *faux*.

Applying this measure of thought to my own life, I began asking questions. What looks like the real thing, but is not the real thing? What seems alive but is perhaps dried and dead? What is diverting energy away from the living parts? What do I need to deadhead?

On the simplest level, deadheading may need to happen in the form of purging excess from our homes, dealing with physical clutter, and donating our extras.

Maybe deadheading means simplifying our schedules. Determining what parts *need* to stay and then getting ruthless with the optional items. What *used* to be good but has now begun to deplete precious energy? What needs to go?

Is there a relationship that needs to go? This one is challenging, for we remember how beautiful these blooms once were. And if we squint, they can still *seem* alive; even though, in honesty, we know their season has passed.

What about those experiences in our personal histories that harass us over and over, diverting life—peace, joy, contentment, security, self-worth—away from the richness and health of our *now* life? We're usually aware of the things that continue to grip us like childhood hurts that never fully healed, the pain of rejection, broken relationships, the residual fear or poverty mentality from a season of lack, the inability to forgive.

For some of us, there may even be a deeply hidden fear that if we remove dead blooms, there will be nothing left. That *could* happen. At least for a period of time. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have a few vibrant blooms than many dried, dead blooms.

The thing about deadheading is that we can never check it off our list permanently (which I hate ... I like doing jobs once). It's a practice that must be undertaken regularly if we want to be strong and healthy, blooming continually in season. If we haven't been in the habit of deadheading our lives, at first it may feel like a massive undertaking. But as it becomes part of our regular routine, a quick scan and an occasional pluck are all that are required.

Take some time to observe your life. Give attention to your soul. What is pretending to be alive, but is no longer alive? Ask God to show you what is no longer life-giving for you. Then do the work. Your vibrant, alive parts will reap the benefits. Your authentic self will thank you.

## Chapter 11

# Reclaiming My Garden

*“Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention.”*

L.R. KNOTT

**I**n my corner of the world, flourishing gardens are a bold, lofty, and often unrealistic idea. Because deer. Seriously. Many, many deer.

I've essentially given up on the flower gardens that surround our home. There are approximately four varieties of plants that the deer won't eat, and so, that is what I grow. A whole garden filled with boxwoods, lavender, and geranium-based plants. But my vegetable garden is worth fighting for.

For more than a decade, I've planted a vegetable garden each spring. It is guarded by seven-foot high fences to keep out the deer. But deer are not the only pests. In order to deter rabbits and raccoons, the bottom half of the fences are overlaid with orange netting that extends into the ground. It looks terrible, and I'm sure my neighbors hate it, but it works. The garden contains raised beds with boards wide enough to perch on while I weed. Though I've attempted to thwart the pathway-weeds with landscape fabric, newspaper, mulch,

and even gravel, the walkways refuse to remain level or tidy. (*I get it, pathways. I don't like to be contained either*). The wood components are showing their age with weathered posts and boards. The raised beds are no longer level because of frost heaves. In spite of the mess, it's lovely to me.

This messy garden has produced beans, peas, beets, carrots, cucumbers, potatoes, greens, parsnips, zucchini, tomatoes, pumpkins, herbs, and more. In addition to a primary harvest, we have also enjoyed by-products like pickled beets, salsa, relish, and zucchini muffins.

But it has given far more than healthy food for my family. It has provided years worth of memories with my children. It taught them that vegetables come from the earth, not from a grocery store. When they were little more than toddlers, I'd send them up to the garden with a bag to pick what they wanted for supper. It taught them to love food that they might otherwise have despised, simply because they had harvested it themselves.

My garden has been a place of solitude where I've been able to think my thoughts. It's been a place where I've escaped my own noisy head and connected with the earth. I can pull off *fancy*, but I'm a dirt girl. There is nothing quite like weeding and digging in soil to settle me.

Each spring, I have returned to my garden. I've pulled out weeds, replenished beds, bolstered fences, and nourished soil. Though a mammoth endeavour, it is immensely satisfying work.

Except ... last spring, I didn't even walk to our back field to look at it.

Though outwardly you might not have known because I continued to smile, to work diligently, and to show up in my life, inside I was broken. For a number of significant reasons. Healing and restoration required most of my energy, and as a result, there were many elements of my life left unattended. Some parts were abandoned because I just

could not. Others were fallow by choice. It was a time of necessary sabbatical. I carefully decided what I would do, and possibly more importantly, what I would no longer do—or, at least, set aside for a time.

Some things had to go, and as I engaged sabbatical, I realized my vegetable garden was one of them. It was too much work, and I had too little reserve. I simply walked away, assuming it was forever.

I didn't foresee that it would only be for a season. Retrospectively, I now understand that my garden needed to lie fallow. And so did I.

Some would define *fallow* as neglected and unproductive...vacant. In our culture, lack of productivity is considered failure or wasteful. But farmers know that soil needs to be given rest. When we offer fields a reprieve from planting, it allows the soil to heal. The nutrients replenish and fertility returns.

This spring, I was ready to take back my garden.

It was overgrown and ugly. The fence posts were leaning in to the point that I couldn't even walk down one side of the space. Frost had heaved the beds many inches above the ground. The soil was depleted, both from being washed away, and because it had been stolen for other uses. Some of the planter boxes had decayed and crumbled. My precious garden was in shambles.

I had to restore the fences and boxes and re-establish pathways between planters. I had to work the rotting, organic matter of the last year into the soil. I had to weed and decide what to plant.

And as I did the work, I became rapidly awake to the idea that the garden was a metaphor for *me*.

### **I restored fences.**

For me, this meant re-evaluating my boundaries. Boundaries are not to keep people out but to indicate *what is okay for me and what is not*. It's not a means of controlling other people; it's a way of caring for and loving one's self.

Boundaries also allow us to redefine spaces. This is in, this is out. This lives inside my fences, and this stays on the outside. This is safe for me, and this is not. Establishing healthy boundaries gave me permission to allot value to what is important to me, without apology, like lots of alone time.

You can have the best boundaries in the whole world, with seven-foot fences, and all the chicken-wire, but if you leave the gate wide open, even by accident (like I did the other night), damage can occur quickly. I went out in the morning, realizing I'd forgotten to clasp the gate after watering the evening before, and found that the tops of my beets were all gone (*and I like to eat those!*), as were many of my tomato plants.

If you know something or someone is going to come into your garden and trample your precious plants, you're allowed to forbid it/them entrance. It's not mean. It's not paranoid. It's healthy boundaries. Make sure fences are firm and your gate is closed when needed. You get to decide who and what has access.

### **I decided what to plant.**

It's my garden and I get to choose what grows there. I'm owning my own beliefs, likes, and dislikes. Just because you love carrots, doesn't mean I have to plant carrots in my garden. Just because you don't like zucchini, doesn't mean I can't plant a whole bed of those delicious beasts. And guess what else? Maybe I used to like growing potatoes, but now I don't. I'm allowed to change my mind. No apologies.

Deciding what will grow in my garden means that I must then remember what I planted, so that I can easily identify intruders that have sprung up uninvited. Often, weeds mimic the plants they accompany. Sometimes they're even pretty. And they are certainly persistent! Stay diligent. Do the work. Because they will deplete the soil of moisture and nutrients. They will choke out the healthy plants.



They will sometimes grow up and cast shadow. We need to discern residents from squatters.

For me, this has looked like differentiating what I *actually* believe from ideas and thoughts passed on in childhood, or through my Evangelical church upbringing. What is true Truth, and what is human interpretation? What is actually important for my well-being, and what seeks only to control me?

**I made the shit work for me.**

Have you ever pondered the difference between poop and composted manure? Though essentially the same thing—digested-waste—one has been worked through, composted, and rendered useful. The other lays obscenely on the surface, stinking, and doing *no one* and *no thing* any good.

When hard things happen, we get to decide whether to be a victim, or make it valuable. We can't always control crappy situations (*ugh, terrible, unintentional pun*), and we certainly can't eliminate challenging issues entirely. But we *can* control how we respond to the situations and make them work for our benefit. We can smell like excrement and become a landmine for shoes, *or* we can do the work, till it down in, and allow it to enrich our soil.

No sane person would ever say that manure smells good. You're allowed to turn up your nose, gag a little, and cringe. But then, put it to work. Even if it was meant for harm, we can use it to become rich soil for growing.

Let's reframe the hard things. Instead of looking at it through the whining lens of "Why is this happening? Why does everything happen to me?," see it all as manure. It's easy to be thankful for the beautiful things. But manure is a gift, too. It's just in disguise.

For a whole year, I was fallow. But no more. I have found tremendous joy in reclaiming my garden—in reclaiming *me*.

Do not worry if your garden is in disrepair or has been fallow for too long. That place that has been neglected, depleted, abused, overgrown, unused, and ignored can grow new and healthy things. But personal growth and wholeness don't happen by accident. Set your intention. Get to work.

I've often said that I gravitate toward people who have experienced pain—who have walked it out well. I prefer them. There is a quality to a person who has done the work. There is a presence to someone who has experienced hard things. It lends an authenticity and authority to their words. It gives you the sense that life can rattle their cage, and they'll still thrive. It makes them feel safe and rich. It's the kind of person I desire to be.

And so, this is the work. To repair our fences. To decide what is allowed to grow. To see manure as a gift. To reclaim our gardens.

## Chapter 12

# Refined

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*“And once the storm is over you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm’s all about.”*

HARUKI MURAKAMI

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The storm I dreaded ravaged me. And it rescued me. Things have been onerous in a manner not necessarily visible, or even easily explicable. While the quotidian continued along its usual and expected trajectory with intermittent periods of joy and frustration, ecstasy and drear, I became acutely aware of a spreading dryness. Scanning our landscape, I observed that areas, once lush, had become parched. Parts of our terrain had turned extremely and dangerously dry.

And all the while, an elemental pressure was building. We desperately needed the rain, but I lived with dread of the storm. I listened nervously for rumbling thunder and observed the sky for signs of electricity. One spark in this wasteland could mean devastation.

The configurations and details of our dreaded storms are individual and extremely personal.

Maybe, for you, the gathering pressure is financial. You've lived teetering on the edge, barely keeping your balance. You've attempted to outrun the impending inevitable, but now, faced with reality, you cower under the battering rain of bankruptcy and loss.

Maybe you have attempted to evade a worrisome health issue. You've ignored it and explained it away for too long before finally acknowledging it aloud. It's all in your mind, you hope. It's nothing to worry about, you pray. The physicians observe and test ... and you wait. The phone rings, the thunder rolls in the sky, and you feel in your gut that life is about to shift.

Maybe it's a relationship that's been frustrating and so painful, in spite of your many attempts toward restoration. You've read the books; you've prayed the prayers; you've visited the counselors; you've had the conversations. But the storm clouds continue to gather, and the sky threatens to open. Perhaps it's sustained relational tension or even infidelity, suspected or confirmed. You'd never have imagined it possible, but you now stand overlooking the precipice of divorce.

Maybe your dreaded storm is a dark night of the soul or a total loss or restructuring of faith. You always thought you knew the answers. You tried to live faithfully. But now, large questions brew and swirl. And you know you must turn to engage them.

The storms we dread have this in common: they build over time and we live in the heaviness of them—waiting, ignoring, enduring, dreading, avoiding, slogging. The air is thick, suffocating, paralyzing. We try—oh, how we try—to fix our gaze on the positive, denying that the parched ground is smouldering, hot and dry, ripe for devastating fire. We pray for rain, but we fear the implications of the storm that will deliver the very thing we need. A tiny spark, combined with tinder-dry conditions, is all that is required for a catastrophic wildfire.

As for me, I kept one eye on the sky, trying to stay ahead of what I perceived would be the worst, most horrific thing. When lightning struck and the landscape of my life was ravaged by fire, the storm simultaneously broke. And the rain poured.

The storm that ignited the fire almost immediately contained the fire.

The blinding flash and deafening crash of the storm finally breaking was dreadful, but in retrospect, I've come to believe that the drought conditions and the gathering storm were *actually* the harder part.

Though we dread it, the eruption of the storm—the actual crisis moment—can be the very thing to break the pressure.

Last week, I heard rumbling thunder in the distance, and my thoughts launched a scenario I attempted to capture with words. Though very simple, it felt revelatory to me.

*“I see a dark, foreboding sky and feel the brooding, angst-filled, low grade pressure of an impending storm. Lightning strikes, and with an overtly aggressive crack of thunder, the sky splits and drops begin to fall—giant, pounding drops. Slowly at first, but then faster. The drops conjoin to become a vertical flood. Releasing the pressure. Releasing the heaviness. Releasing the cloud sorrow that’s been held, though only barely, for too long. I dreaded this, but now I see that with the breaking comes relief. The water pours; initially tears and anguish unleashed, but then, fresh water ... washing, rinsing, cleansing, quenching.”*

The fire that was burning in my brain—the painful sparking of synapses with every thought, every flash of memory, every replay—has been doused with cool rain. The fire is extinguished and the swelling pressure is relieved.

The fire is out. Yes, it burned furiously for a moment, but it's out.

In the aftermath of the storm I so dreaded, the atmosphere has changed. The air temperature is fresh and breathable. The thickness is

broken, and I move with ease through what was but a short time ago stifling, constricting, and suffocating.

I didn't want this fire. I didn't seek this storm. But I notice something in its aftermath. The burning has removed chaff. The burning has removed facades. The burning has removed excess. The burning has removed ignorant certainty.

The fire was painful—sickening, undesired, charring, diminishing—and though memories of heat remain in my scorched skin, the rain has cooled and soothed.

The debriding will take time as the charred remnants of emotion, security, and illusion are removed. It's a tedious process, excruciating and ugly, but necessary for healing. This temporary pain is for restoration and regeneration. Superficially, there will be scars, but underneath, health abounds.

Though I grieve the loss of what was—what existed before—I embrace my new reality. My altered landscape. The storm hit and we were ignited, but the rain came and saved me from irreparable devastation.

So now, I rise. Face marred with soot and ash. Broken skin in the process of healing. I hold in my hands the precious and essential elements that resisted the fire. I have been refined. Love remains.

Beauty from ashes. Joy from mourning.

## Chapter 13

# Crashing Waves

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*“Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling with the mistaken belief that you cannot bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain.”*

KHALIL GIBRAN

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When waves of grief, fear, discouragement, hopelessness, frustration, and physical pain crash over us, we don't have to be tumbled. We can plant our feet, steady our legs, hang on tight, and hold our ground.

Grief is frustrating. Its borders are fluid and changing, rendering it difficult to define. It's experienced in as many ways as there are people on the earth. Certainly, humans do seem to navigate specific stages of grief, such as denial, anger, and bargaining, as identified by Elizabeth Kubler Ross.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even in this, it's rarely in defined succession or order. It's more of an *overlapping—concentric circle—retracing of steps—all at once—not at all* kind of gong show.

The instigators of grief are many. Whether it's the loss of a person, a job, an ideal, a dream, or our health, loss in *any* form causes humans to experience feelings of disbelief, anger, hopelessness, and pain.

During my own seasons of grief, those who have healed me the most are God and people. And when I say *healing*, I don't necessarily mean miraculous rescue and the total removal of pain. Sadly, in the absence of unhealthy numbing, that kind of escape is not really a thing for humans. I refer more to the provision of solace for my soul, a safe place for my pain, and a supply of physical, spiritual, and emotional support.

We were never promised a by-pass around hard things. We live in this world, and we are not immune to the human experience. What Love *does* promise is that we will not be alone.

Though we may feel the impact of raging waters and blazing fires, we are not overcome. Even when a loved one is sick. Even when a relationship implodes. Even in bankruptcy. Even in the face of infertility. Even in loneliness. Even when dealing with addiction. Even in depression. Even in job loss. Even in betrayal. Even in the mundane struggle that is life. There is comfort and solace in the midst of all of these hard things—a peace that goes beyond our understanding and doesn't even make sense in light of what is happening or *not* happening.

As for people, what is needed the most, especially initially, are the ones who simply let you feel what you're feeling. They don't try to coax you from your darkness or tell you that everything will be okay or that "God's going to work everything together for your good." \*I know that he is (\*to be read through gritted teeth), but in this moment, I'm going to need you to shut your face with any and all trite bandaids and platitudes (No offense. Love you!). For me, the most healing comes through the people who are willing to crawl into my darkness and sit with me there. The ones who admit that they don't know what to say or how to help, but assure me they are with me; that I'm not alone and they're not going anywhere.

My mom was one of the people who entered the darkness with me during one of my most grief-filled times. The details are personal and



not only mine to share, but I can tell you this. I've lost people close to me to death. I've missed them so terribly and felt the aching loss of knowing I'd never see them again, but *this* grief was different. With death, it's a heart wound that, with time, will heal. Eventually. But this was a wound that could never fully heal because it was constantly being re-opened.

All I could do (all I can do) was (is) keep it clean and freshly bandaged.

For the better part of a year, when I couldn't bear to be alone, I'd pack a bag and arrive on my mom's door step. First, she would wrap her arms around me. Then, she'd wrap me up in a blanket and seat me in a rocking chair in her kitchen. She would always pray for me and often, she'd mix me a drink. I would rock and weep. And I would rage and reel with the extreme disparity between life *before* and life *after*.

Though I've never been in a severe accident that has left me broken physically, I have certainly been in "accidents" that have left me every bit as broken, emotionally, and spiritually. A conversation with my sister during her own season of extreme loss initiated the way in which I now understand grief.

Grief is like a wave, or waves, that crash over us. I'm not referring to pleasant whitecaps, lapping at our toes in the sand. There is no sunshine, there are no beach towels, and there are no smiling faces in this vignette. I'm talking about the huge curl you may or may not see coming from a long way off; the wave that takes your breath away and makes you prickle with fear. The wave that leaves you wondering whether to try and stay afloat, or run for your life. But you cannot rise above it, and it cannot be outrun.

It's not a lack of faith or trust in God to feel the fear and cry out when such a wave threatens to tumble us. There's no pretending it's all okay or denying that you feel like you might drown. There is nothing to be done ... but stand.

There are seasons for advancing and being victorious and there are seasons for just standing (which, arguably, takes as much or more faith and courage). Trusting is all that is required. Like waves do, the grief will crash hard ... and then it will recede. And you'll still be standing.

Though I am occasionally ambivalent about many parts of the Bible, the Psalms remain my favorite because I value authenticity. David is brutally honest about how things are and how he feels, but after the vent, he always lands on: but *this* is who *you* are, God. This is what *you* say about my situation. You are good. You do all things well. I trust you.

Instead of running from the waves trying to crash over you and living in constant fear that they will, turn and plant your feet. Now, brace your legs. Steady yourself and lean in. Let them crash! The waves will recede and you will still be standing.

# Notes

## **Chapter 2: Opting For Uncomfortable**

1. Anonymous; has been attributed to numerous people

## **Chapter 3: Holding On For Dear Life**

1. Jesus, John 16:33 NRSV
2. Saint Patrick, "Saint Patrick's Breastplate," Liber Hymnorum

## **Chapter 4: No One, No Thing**

1. C.S. Lewis, paraphrasing Augustine

## **Chapter 7: Not Dead**

1. Romans 4:17 NRSV
2. John 11:25 NRSV

## **Chapter 8: Tapestry**

1. Terry Leblanc, speaking at National Vineyard Gathering, Penticton, BC. July 2010

## **Chapter 10: Deadhead**

1. For more information on the Enneagram, search [enneagraminstitute.com](http://enneagraminstitute.com), or read *The Road Back To You* by Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile, 2016

### **Chapter 13: Crashing Waves**

1. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, first in *On Death and Dying* 1969

### **Chapter 19: Forgive Me?**

1. Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)
2. “The Lord’s Prayer,” Matthew 6:9-13 NRSV
3. Karen Swartz, MD, The John Hopkins Hospital, [hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-you-health-depends-on-it](http://hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-you-health-depends-on-it)

### **Chapter 23: Au revoir, Joy-Thief**

1. For more information, search “research between social media use and anxiety.”

### **Chapter 25: You Are Not The Only One**

1. Maya Angelou, Oprah’s Master Class appearance

### **Chapter 27: Fully You**

1. Gord Downey, “Ahead By A Century,” The Tragically Hip, 1996
2. Marianne Williamson, *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, 1992
3. Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability”, [www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)

### **Chapter 29: Speak Up**

1. Quote by Edmund Burke

### **Chapter 34: Lean Hard**

1. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, David Kessler, *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living*, 2000

2. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, 1964

### **Chapter 37: Does Everyone Have Friends But Me?**

1. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, 1992

### **Chapter 38: Telephone-Pole-To-Telephone-Pole**

1. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 1937
2. Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts*, 2011

### **Chapter 39: Keeping It Real IV**

1. Jack Handey, "Deep Thoughts," Saturday Night Live

### **Chapter 41: A Nasty Case Of The Februarys**

1. Julian of Norwich, 1343-1416

### **Chapter 42: Autumnal Reflections: What Needs To Go?**

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NRSV

### **Chapter 43: Sabbatical**

1. Diadochus of Photiki, quoted by Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 1981
2. "Headspace" and "Calm" are both available for trial or purchase in your App Store.

### **Chapter 44: How To Save Your Own Life**

1. Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling*

## **Epilogue: A Door of Hope**

1. Quote by Jim Morrison
2. Quote by Unknown
3. Quote by Charles Dickens
4. Quote by Adrian Rogers
5. “The Narrow Way”, painting by David Hayward, aka the nakedpastor
6. Hosea 2:15 NRSV
7. Ephesians, 3:2 NRSV

# About the Author

**E**llen is a family-prioritizing, coffee-drinking, truth-telling, authenticity-pursuing, list-making, God-seeking, world-loving, ambiverted, wine-imbibing, question-asking, former closet writer. She's a traveller and an educator. Ellen was a worship leader at many churches and conferences for years, and was a song-writer and singer on several albums. The words "laid back" have never been used to describe her. She is spicy, empathetic, and honest. She is an unabashed over-user of hashtags and emojis. The message written on Ellen's heart is one of identity; she is passionate about living authentically as the person she was created to be and helping others to do likewise.

Ellen lives on the east coast of Canada with her family. She calls her teenagers "occasionally mind-boggling, and entirely magnificent." In addition to writing, she teaches French to High School students... and all remaining hours are, quite literally, spent in her vehicle, driving the teenagers to hockey practices, rehearsals, horseback riding, and to visit friends. It's a full, imperfect and magnificent life.

She can be found at:

- [www.ellencompton.com](http://www.ellencompton.com)
- Instagram @ [\\_ellencompton\\_](#)
- Facebook @Ellen Compton

For more information about Ellen Compton,  
or to contact her for speaking engagements,  
please visit *www.EllenCompton.com*



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# We always have a choice.

We can resist the darkness, cowering and suffering, avoiding and reviling. Or we can embrace it. Because, my friends, many exceptional and meaningful things happen in the dark.

There are unfathomable experiences in this life that attempt to take us out; that torment us with our too-much-ness and our not-enough-ness. These raw words are guidance for spiritual mavericks who are *done* with fitting in, and are ready to live authentically. Even if you've always played the game, *or* you haven't and you've been punished, corrected, and sanitized by others for being real, you *can* find joy in the mess, and live free from the social gauntlet.

Certainty is an immaturely constructed sentiment or stance that allows humans to bypass or mitigate discomfort. It's an illusion that helps us feel safe. So, I cannot promise you certain outcomes. All I can do is share my own stories and hope that this witty and vulnerable book will leave you ...

... feeling encouraged to love the parts of yourself that have been labeled "hard to love."

... with increased confidence in and appreciation for who you were made to be.

... with a sense of solidarity that you are not alone in your story.

... more able to hold space for yourself and your people in times of joy *and* loss.

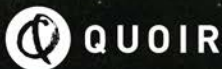
... with tips for navigating the process of growing in self-awareness and wholeness.

... better prepared to resist social pressure and embrace what it means to be fully human.



**Ellen Compton** is a family-prioritizing, coffee-drinking, truth-telling, authenticity-pursuing, list-making, God-seeking, world-loving, ambiverted, wine-imbibing, question-asking, former closet writer. The message written on Ellen's heart is one of identity; she is passionate about living authentically as the person she was created to be and helping others to do likewise. Ellen lives on the east coast of Canada with her family.

[www.EllenCompton.com](http://www.EllenCompton.com)



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