

true you

LETTING GO OF YOUR FALSE SELF TO
UNCOVER THE PERSON GOD CREATED



Michelle DeRusha



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2019 by Michelle DeRusha

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeRusha, Michelle, author.

Title: True you : letting go of your false self to uncover the person God created /
Michelle DeRusha.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018020588 | ISBN 9780801077913 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Spirituality—Christianity. | Spiritual life—Christianity. | Self-actualization (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .D476 2019 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018020588>

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The author is represented by the literary agency of Books & Such Literary Management.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Noah and Rowan



Slowly
she celebrated the sacrament of *letting go*
first she surrendered her *green*
then the *orange, yellow, and red*
finally she let go of her *brown*
shedding her last leaf
she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.¹

—From Macrina Wiederkehr,
Seasons of Your Heart

I've been out of step with you for a long time,
in the wrong since before I was born.
What you're after is truth from the inside out.
Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life.

—Psalm 51:6 Message

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acknowledgments

This book was a long time in the making, which means I am grateful to a whole lot of people who helped all along the way.

Chad Allen—I wouldn't be anywhere close to this point in my journey as an author if it wasn't for you. Thank you for always being in my corner.

To Michelle Rapkin—I knew we were a good fit from our first telephone conversation (and the fact that you are two “*l*s” too). Thank you for your insightful editing and for all you did to help make this book shine.

To the Baker Books editorial and marketing teams—Rebecca Guzman, Jessica English, Julie Davis, Mark Rice, Erin Smith, Abby Van Wormer, Brianne Dekker, and Patti Brinks. Thank you for your pursuit of excellence. Your creativity, talent, and input made all the difference.

To my agent, Rachelle Gardner—you gently prodded me to work and rework the proposal for this book again and again.

Thank you for your perseverance, for your refusal to submit something that’s “good enough,” for your astute insights, and for your uncanny ability to know what’s working and what’s not. I am so grateful for you!

To my Tuscany Writers Retreat fellow sojourners, especially Jenni Burke and Jamin Goggin—thank you for receiving my brokenness with compassion and love. Thank you for being a window into God’s presence when I couldn’t see.

To my blog and *Back Patio* newsletter readers and subscribers—we’ve been together for the long haul, and I couldn’t be more grateful for your support and encouragement. Thank you especially for your uplifting comments and emails when I hit the writing wall with this book. Your encouragement helped me keep my fingers on the keyboard.

To the #LNK Blog Love Writers—first of all, where in the world did we get that wonky name? Seriously, though, you ladies are the best! I so look forward to our monthly meet-ups—it’s so good to gather with a group of like-minded writers who “get it.” Thanks, too, for teaching this Latest Adopter Ever how to Insta-story!

To Lynn Morrissey—thank you for sharing a bit of your story with me and for helping me grapple my way through the “Twine and Splint” chapter. Mostly, though, thank you for being *you*—one of the most encouraging, supportive people I’ve ever had the delight to know.

To Deidra Riggs—thank you for being my person in more ways than I can count.

acknowledgments

To my parents, Maureen and Brad DeRusha—for always reminding me that I am loved.

To Brad, Noah, and Rowan—I know I always say Josie is my favorite, but we all know that's not true. You are my favorites by a million miles, and I love you more than words can convey.

introduction

A tale of two trees

Oak trees are always the last to lose their leaves. I never noticed this phenomenon until I began a daily practice of sitting still. It all began with a whim. One sunny November afternoon while I was walking my dog, I decided to stop and sit on a park bench. The bench, a simple, dark green metal lattice seat, was new. It had appeared at the edge of the walking path earlier that summer, fastened onto a freshly poured slab of concrete, a bronze memorial plaque fixed beneath it. The spot overlooked a small ravine, a couple of oak trees, a Scotch pine, and a trickling creek. In the summer the grassy hillside is speckled with black-eyed Susans, purple coneflower, and Queen Anne's lace, but by the time I first sat on the park bench in late autumn, the wildflowers had died off. All that remained were patches of crisp tallgrass, windblown stalks, and a dry streambed.

As I rested there for a few minutes with Josie sprawled at my feet, I decided I would make this bench-sitting part of my daily routine. I vowed I would stop at that same spot along our walking route every day, and I would sit for five minutes. I would sit in silence, I determined—without music or a podcast in my ears; without dialing my mother or texting my sister; without snapping photos with my camera phone or scrolling through Instagram or Facebook. I would simply sit in silence for five minutes. I figured it would be good for me to take a tiny breather in each hectic day.



The first afternoon I sat on the park bench, I looked at my watch after two minutes and then again after four. When I shifted my weight, I felt the chill of the metal seat through my jeans. I crossed and uncrossed my legs, bent down to pet the dog, and stared at the ravine as the cool breeze blew strands of hair across my face. Turns out, five minutes on a park bench sounds short in principle but is a surprisingly long time in reality.

The next day during my five minutes at the bench, I took a cue from Josie, who sat still, ears pricked, nose quivering. I looked at what she looked at; I sniffed, trying to smell what she smelled. When she twitched her ears, I turned my head too, attempting to hear what she'd heard. I noticed a little more of my surroundings that second day, like the fact that the leaves of the burr oak on the edge of the ravine still clung stubborn and tenacious to the branches. Unlike the maples, birches, elms, and ash trees, which had dropped their leaves like colorful confetti more than a month ago, the oaks were still fully dressed, their dry leaves scraping together in the wind like sandpaper.

I also noticed something about myself on that second day. Sitting on a bench right there in the open alongside the path, I realized I felt unexpectedly and oddly vulnerable. It felt a little foolish to be doing nothing but staring into space, feeling the slippery softness of the pine needles under my feet, listening to the leaves. I was grateful that section of the path is not well traveled. I didn't want to see someone I knew, or even for a stranger to notice me and think I was some kind of crazy lady, sniffing at the air and shuffling my shoes. It was already obvious to me on that second day of sitting that the quiet and stillness made me uncomfortable, although I couldn't put my finger on exactly why.

I wasn't at all sure what I was doing there, just sitting. All I knew was that I felt compelled to do it, even though I didn't particularly like it, and even though I knew, after only two days, that I would resist it in the coming weeks. At the same time, I knew this sitting in stillness was something I had to do. Somehow I knew that the stopping—the interruption to my daily routine and my incessant push to get from Point A to Point B—was important, maybe even imperative.

Turns out, I learned over the weeks and months of sitting in quiet solitude that I am a lot like the oak tree that clings so fiercely to its leaves. I suspect a lot of us are. We, too, clutch our camouflage—the person we present to the world, to our own selves, and even to God. We, too, are unwilling to shed our false selves, to let go, to live vulnerably and authentically. We are afraid of what might happen if we drop our protective cover, afraid of how we could be seen or perceived, or how we may see or perceive our own selves. We are leery of what we may discover under all those layers. We spend a great deal of our time and energy holding tight-fisted to our

leaves, simply because we are too afraid to let go, too afraid of what, or who, we will find underneath.

Sitting in silence every day helped me see that my “leaves” of choice are busyness and productivity, drive and efficiency, achievement and success. I used those “leaves” to insulate me from my own deepest self, because, although I didn’t realize it consciously, I was afraid of what was underneath. I was afraid of who I would find if I began to prune away my layers of self-protection. And so I clung with an iron grip to my false self, to the false identity I’d meticulously crafted over the years. I was busy, productive, and driven. I pushed myself to accomplish, achieve, and succeed. *That’s just who I am*, I often told myself. *That’s just how I was made*.

I suspect I’m not alone in my tendency to hide. Perhaps you, too, are clinging to your own array of brittle branches and desiccated leaves—using your false identity or even your daily routines and bad habits to hide from something. Perfectionism, workaholism, procrastination, consumerism, materialism—even substance abuse and addiction—are all different kinds of “leaves,” different methods of self-protection, different ways we have of hiding and avoiding.

Perhaps you, like me, are evading something. Perhaps you are estranged from your truest, deepest self. And perhaps you, like me, haven’t the foggiest idea how to prune away your deadwood and begin to dismantle the structure you’ve built over a lifetime. My hope is that this book will help you begin that process. My hope is that you will join me on the journey toward uncovering the uniquely beautiful person God created you to be.



Two years ago on a warm June morning, my husband, our two boys, and I met Marsha, a volunteer guide, just inside the front gate of the Portland Japanese Garden. We were at the end of a ten-day vacation to the Pacific Northwest, and I was eager to introduce my family to this special place that I had discovered years before on a work trip. As we followed Marsha across petite wooden bridges, along winding paths, and over stepping-stones set into spongy moss, I remembered how the garden seemed to wrap its visitors in a shawl of quiet. We spoke in whispers as we strolled, a lullaby of flowing water melding with the rhythmic crunch of gravel beneath our shoes.

Marsha paused beside a large Japanese maple poised regal and elegant like a grand dame on a small, moss-covered hill, and as we waited for the rest of our group to catch up, I gazed at the tree. Its delicate chartreuse leaves fanned like antique lace over an elaborate network of dark limbs and branches that spread like veins beneath the canopy. When the stragglers joined us, Marsha explained that a particular Japanese gardening technique called “open center pruning” was responsible not only for the sculptural appeal of this maple, but also for the uncluttered space and serenity in the garden as a whole.

When a Japanese gardener “prunes open,” Marsha explained, he or she cuts away not only dead branches and foliage, but also often a number of perfectly healthy branches that detract from the beauty inherent in the tree’s essential structure. Pruning open allows the visitor to see up, out, and beyond the trees to the sky, creating a sense of spaciousness and letting light into the garden. It also enables an individual tree to flourish by removing complicating elements,

simplifying structure, and revealing its essence. The process of pruning open turns the tree inside out, so to speak, revealing the beautiful design inherent within it. Sometimes, Marsha said, the process of pruning open requires a major restructuring—cutting back limbs and dramatically altering the form of the tree—while other times, only a gentler, more subtle reshaping is necessary.

Our group continued on with the tour, but I held back, reluctant to leave this one captivating tree. I circled it, snapping photographs, trying somehow to capture its enchanting beauty and gracefulness. There was something mesmerizing about the tree, the way its limbs and branches spread like an elaborate scaffolding beneath its intricate canopy of delicate green, the way its roots, gnarled and exposed, gripped the mossy hill. I yearned to lean my body against its twisting trunk, to soak up the wisdom I sensed coursing deep within it.

Eventually I ran to catch up with my family, but even after the tour had ended, I found myself still thinking about that one tree. In the months that followed our visit, I thought a lot about the practice of pruning open, and I've since come to understand it as a beautiful metaphor—one we can look to for guidance in our own lives and along our own spiritual journeys.

The practice of pruning open is not an easy one. In both gardening and in life, it's a skill that takes discipline, insight, and years of trial and error, and in many ways, it goes against the grain. Metaphorically speaking, pruning is the antithesis of contemporary western culture. It is the path toward smaller, rather than larger; toward quiet, rather than loud; toward slow, rather than fast; toward simple, rather than busy; toward dismantling, rather than building; toward less,

rather than more. Pruning may not be a popular practice—at least according to what our bigger-better-faster-more society values—but it is an essential one, not only for trees, but also for ourselves and particularly for our souls. It is only in moving toward smaller and less—in cutting back in order to open up—that we uncover who we are at the very center of our God-created selves.

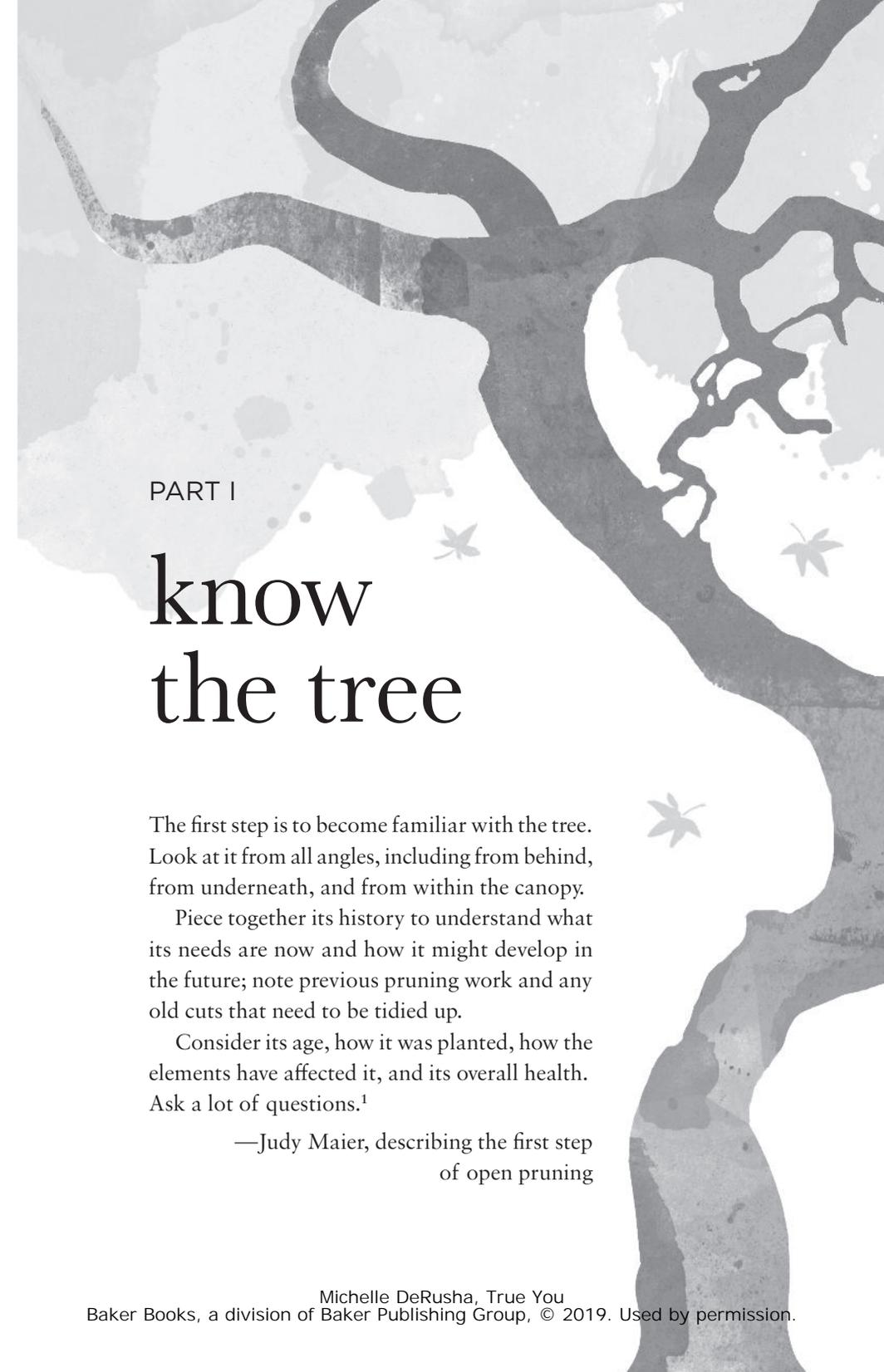
The truth is, God does not wish for us to stand stubborn like the autumn oak tree, cloaked in a façade of protection, our truest, most authentic selves obscured beneath a tangled bramble of false security. Rather, he desires us to live like the Japanese maple tree, our true essence revealed and flourishing, our true self front and center, secure and thriving. God yearns for us to live wholeheartedly and truthfully as the unique, beautiful, beloved individuals he created us to be. Most of all, God’s deepest desire is for us to know him, to root our whole selves in him like a tree rooted by a stream, and to know his deep, abiding love for us. God yearns for us to live in the spacious, light-filled freedom of Christ and to know ourselves in him, through him, and with him.

As you let go of your false self, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, and layer by layer—as you finally begin to relinquish, open up, and allow God to prune you from the inside out—you will grow in ways you never imagined: in your relationships with loved ones; in connection with and love for your neighbors; in your vocation; in your heart, mind, and soul; and in intimacy with God himself. Your true, essential self,

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the *you* uniquely created by God, is there, deep inside you, hidden beneath layer upon layer of leaves clinging fast. Like the elegant Japanese maple tree, a spacious place is waiting to be revealed, and exuberant life is waiting to unfurl and blossom.

Pruning open is the way in.



PART I

know the tree

The first step is to become familiar with the tree. Look at it from all angles, including from behind, from underneath, and from within the canopy.

Piece together its history to understand what its needs are now and how it might develop in the future; note previous pruning work and any old cuts that need to be tidied up.

Consider its age, how it was planted, how the elements have affected it, and its overall health. Ask a lot of questions.¹

—Judy Maier, describing the first step
of open pruning

1

leaves and branches

How we clutter our lives, minds, and souls

We are merely moving shadows,
and all our busy rushing ends in nothing.

—Psalm 39:6 NLT

On January 12, 2007, a young man dressed in a gray, long-sleeve T-shirt, jeans, and a baseball cap emerged from the metro at the L'Enfant Plaza station in Washington, tucked a violin under his chin, and began to play. The violinist performed six classical pieces in 43 minutes, during which time 1,097 commuters passed him. Seven of those people stopped what they were doing to stand and listen for at least one minute; one young boy craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the musician as his mother led him by the hand out of

the station; and 27 people threw money into the open violin case at the musician's feet as they passed. That means 1,070 people hurried by without as much as a glance at the violinist. Those talking on cell phones or with earbuds in their ears didn't even hear him.

Turns out, most of the people who dashed through the metro station that morning on the way to work had no idea that the musician playing next to the trash can was none other than renowned virtuoso Joshua Bell, performing on his 1713, \$3.5 million Stradivarius violin.

Bell's performance was arranged by the *Washington Post Magazine* as "an experiment in context, perception and priorities." Editors at the magazine were interested in one question in particular: "In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"¹

Prior to the incognito performance, Leonard Slatkin, director of the National Symphony Orchestra, had predicted that Bell's impeccable playing would attract people passing through the station, even if they didn't recognize the musician himself. "My guess is there might be 35 or 40 who will recognize the quality for what it is. Maybe 75 to 100 will stop and spend some time listening," he told journalist Gene Weingarten.² In preparing for the event, *Washington Post Magazine* editors were concerned about crowd control. They figured at least several people would recognize Bell, stop to listen, and then attract other listeners.

Turns out there was no need for concern.

When he watched the video of the experiment later, Bell said he wasn't surprised he didn't draw a crowd in the middle of rush hour. He was, however, surprised by the number of people who didn't appear to notice him at all. It was as

if he was invisible, Bell observed. He wondered if maybe the commuters ignored him so they wouldn't have to feel guilty about not throwing money into his open violin case. But when reporters questioned passersby later, no one gave that reason for not stopping to listen. "People just said they were busy, had other things on their mind. Some who were on cellphones spoke louder as they passed Bell, to compete with that infernal racket."³

The article about the experiment notes that there was no ethnic or demographic pattern to differentiate between the few who stayed to watch Bell from the vast majority who hurried by. The behavior of only one demographic was consistent through the 43 minutes: "Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away."⁴

I watched clips from Bell's Metro station performance on my laptop. Even on the choppy recording, the sound of his violin is lush and rich, and Bell's playing is mesmerizing as he moves along with the music, like a reed swaying in a breeze. I don't know much about classical music, but I know enough to recognize a stellar performance when I hear it.

I'd like to think I would have been one of the seven people who stopped to listen to one of the greatest classical musicians in the world play a free concert in a Washington, DC, train station. I'd like to think I would have been the mom who paused with her child for at least a minute or two to listen, entranced, before scurrying toward the exit. But I know myself better than that. I'm pretty sure I, too, would have hurried past Joshua Bell playing Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria" on his 1713 Stradivarius violin. I might have cast him a curious glance, but I would have kept right on going, bent

on arriving at my destination, tackling my to-do list, and accomplishing whatever pressing tasks awaited me that day.

Hustling for Self-Worth

“Hustle!!!”

I hear my father’s voice over the clash of shin pads and the scuffle of cleats, over the instructions shouted from my coach on the sideline and the grunts of my fellow players as they tussle for the ball, bodies banging up against one another. The command comes at regular intervals, regardless of whether I’m lagging or not. “Hustle, Shelly, hustle!!” And I do. I hustle, springing after the soccer ball, challenging defensive opponents twice my size, refusing to flinch when the ball is kicked square at my face.

Later, after the game has ended, I drift a few steps behind my parents as we walk toward the parking lot, eavesdropping on the dads. “What do you feed her before the game, raw meat?” the father of one of my teammates jokes. My dad laughs, proud.

I toss my ball into the trunk of the car, slide into the backseat, and roll down the window. As I lean back, I catch my dad’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Good hustle out there, Shelly; way to make it happen.” I beam back at him. My dad is pleased with my performance. I am tired but happy.

Truth be told, I hustled on and off the soccer field throughout my childhood and young adulthood—and not just to please my father. I don’t know if it’s a product of nature or nurture or a combination of both, but I’ve been driven to produce, achieve, and succeed for as long as I can remember.

“Make it happen” was a directive repeated often in my house when I was growing up, and it’s a mantra I’ve chanted in my head ever since.

I got my first job in the fourth grade, when the neighbor boy who lived two houses down sold me his newspaper route. Six afternoons a week, rain, wind, snow, or sunshine, I pulled a stack of the *Springfield Union-News* in a red Radio Flyer wagon (a sled if the snow was deep) up one side of our street and down the other, sliding the afternoon edition under front mats, into mailboxes, and behind screen doors. I lived for Christmas, the season of big tips: five dollars slipped into an envelope, occasionally a crisp ten. After a few years I outgrew the red wagon, and, taller and stronger, carried the papers house to house and street to street in a grungy bag worn across my body from shoulder to thigh, the canvas, like my palms, smeared gray with newsprint.

I got my first real job when I was a sophomore in high school. A couple of days a week after school I walked down Maple Street to the local nursing home, where I changed into my “uniform”—white cotton skirt, white shoes, white T-shirt, and hairnet. I worked the dinner shift in the kitchen, Saran-wrapping plated egg salad sandwiches, sliding plastic racks of dirty dishes and trays into the steaming dishwasher, and unloading scalding silverware.

I was one of those teenagers who was involved in everything—sports, clubs, social events, work—and still earned good grades, not so much because I was academically gifted, but simply because I hustled, studying hours every night after getting home from work or soccer or track practice. I “made it happen.” My parents had high expectations of me as a student, but my motivation ran deeper than their

approval. I was driven to achieve because success made me feel valuable and important. I liked the awards I racked up. I enjoyed seeing my name listed as an honor roll student in the local newspaper every semester. I kept myself busy, motivated, and focused because the results of my efforts—success and achievement—filled, at least temporarily, a seemingly insatiable desire not only to be known, but to be recognized and admired.

I graduated from high school more than three decades ago, and although a lot about me has changed since then, in many ways, I am still very much the same person, driven to achieve and succeed. I'm type A through and through—or, to be more exact, triple type A, as my husband, Brad, jokes. I'm a Three on the Enneagram personality typing system—“Achiever/Performer: success-oriented, pragmatic, adaptable, excelling, driven, and image-conscious.”⁵ According to the Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment, my top five strengths are Achiever, Activator, Focus, Discipline, and Responsibility. You get the picture.

I worked at several different jobs after finishing my college degree—magazine editor, communications director, public relations specialist—but I found my sweet spot when I landed a communications job at a Fortune 500 financial services company. Most of my colleagues were new parents at the time, and as they hurried out the door at 5:30 p.m. to retrieve their kids from after-school care and prepared to shuttle them back and forth to their evening activities, I stayed at my desk. I didn't yet have children, and I was eager to please my boss by putting in extra hours and working later than everyone else in my department. I was determined to get ahead of my peers, and, truth be told, I thrived in the competitive environment,

where raises were based on merit and climbing the corporate ladder was not only expected but encouraged.

“They’re not going anywhere in this place,” my boss muttered one evening, shaking her head as the last of her staff grabbed their coats and lunch bags and darted out the door. “You, on the other hand,” she said, turning toward me as I sat hunched in my cubicle. “I’ve got my eye on you for the fast track.” I remember how pleased I felt, how I smiled inside when she said that—“the fast track.” I vowed to make it happen—to work harder, stay later, and take on more. The corporate ladder rose glittering before me, and I couldn’t climb it fast enough.

I didn’t end up staying in that job as long as I would have liked. Barely six months after I started, my husband, who had recently completed his doctorate, landed a position as an English professor at a small liberal arts college in Nebraska. We moved from Massachusetts to Lincoln in 2001, and shortly after, we had our first child.

With a new baby (and another to follow three years later), it looked like my days of scaling the corporate ladder were over. Instead, I took a part-time job as a fund-raising writer at a nonprofit, and then, several years after moving to Nebraska, I also did something I’d never done before: I started writing in my free time. Over the course of two and a half years I wrote my first book during the fringe hours, mainly on my days off while the kids were napping and during the early mornings when the house was quiet. My professional ambitions had changed, but, as I quickly discovered, the publishing industry had a ladder too, and I set my sights on the top rung. My goal was to become a successful, published author, and I was determined to make it happen.

Years after hustling on the soccer field, in the classroom, and in the workplace, my specific priorities had changed, but my overall end goal was still the same: to succeed and achieve. And while it was no longer the grade on the top of a quiz, the score emblazoned on a board, or the next job promotion that motivated me, my definition of success was still largely based on numbers. As a writer with a goal of publication, I turned my attention to growing my number of blog subscribers and website page views, as well as the number of social media followers, shares, and retweets my posts earned. Once my first book released, I relentlessly tracked its rank on Amazon. I was still focused on “making it happen”—the “it” being success as a published author—and I was more driven, more obsessed, than ever.

I cringe now to admit this, but there were seasons in my publishing journey in which I monitored the Amazon rank not only of my own book, but of my peers’ books too, as well as stats like the number of times their blog posts were shared on social media—even writers I respect, admire, and with whom I am friends. Subsequently I vacillated daily, sometimes hourly, between euphoria when my numbers measured up and despair when they didn’t. I looked to the numbers to determine my value and worth.

Hustle, productivity, busyness, and striving to achieve make up a lot of leaves and branches on my tree. I’ve dedicated significant mental and physical energy to these pursuits over the years, and they’ve taken up a lot of space in my soul. I’ve hustled so long for my self-worth, it’s become a habit deeply ingrained in me. I had no idea how destructive this habit was to my sense of self and to my relationship with God. I walked to the drumbeat of busyness for so long, I

didn't realize it was detrimental both to my self-identity and to the well-being of my soul.

Turns out, I'm not alone. Our culture values busyness, achievement, efficiency, and productivity above all else. We are taught from our youngest days to produce, and we are rewarded for our efforts and accomplishments. Many of us wear our busyness as a badge of honor, proud at the end of the day of the number of items we've ticked off our to-do list. Ask virtually any woman and most men these days, "How are you?" and their answer is likely to be "Busy" or "Crazy busy." For a while, always aiming to one-up my peers, my answer to that question was "Insanely busy."

The Badge of Busyness

Americans in particular base their self-value on their level of productivity and their accomplishments. Consider, for instance, the most recent research on how we spend our leisure time . . . or rather, how we don't. Fifty-four percent of Americans left vacation time unused in 2016, adding up to a record-setting 662 million unused vacation days. Even when we do take vacation, we are worried about the impact of time off on our job security. Twenty-six percent of Americans polled in a 2016 survey said they feared taking vacation could make them appear less dedicated at work, while 21 percent expressed concern that taking time off would impact their eligibility for a raise or promotion. There is, however, some slightly better news than in previous years. In 2016, average vacation use increased to 16.8 days per worker, compared to 16.2 days in 2015, marking the first uptick since vacation

usage began its rapid decline in 2000. (To offer some perspective, between 1976 and 2000, the long-term average vacation usage was 20.3 days per year.)⁶

Clearly many of us are defined by our busyness, and we are only getting busier. At the same time, that hustle is of a particular nature. The kind of busy I'm talking about here—and believe me, I'm as guilty as anyone—is largely voluntary and self-imposed. We mindlessly check our email thirty times a day; we scroll half a dozen social media apps while we wait in the doctor's office or the grocery store check-out line; we take on yet another work project that will mean extra hours in the office; we say yes to another committee, event, or volunteer opportunity; we drive our kids to one more extracurricular activity; we surf the internet until all hours of the night looking for the latest fill-in-the-blank item we absolutely must have.

Part of our need to be busy and productive (or at the very least look that way) comes from our desire to be valued and known. If we are busy, we must be needed, and if we are needed, we must be important. We also like the hit of adrenaline that courses through our veins when we are maxed-out in super-productivity mode. At the end of the day, seeing a perfect black line crossing out each item on my to-do list gives me a high like virtually nothing else. And this high isn't imagined; it's the result of a real chemical reaction. Busyness can be addictive, triggering the release of dopamine, the brain chemical that's responsible for the feeling of well-being we experience after an especially productive work session.

As mindfulness expert Gillian Couurts explains, “We can be as addicted to action as much as any other type of stimulant

or habit.”⁷ Accomplishing even small, superfluous tasks delivers a rush of dopamine, which, in turn, prompts the brain to desire another hit and then another in order to maintain a sense of gratification. Before long, we find ourselves caught in the cycle of addiction, except instead of needing alcohol, or nicotine, or a new pair of Uggs, we need to be constantly busy—moving, doing, and producing.

This addiction to busyness is devastating to our souls. “Our world will divert your soul’s attention because it is a cluttered world,” says author John Ortberg. “And clutter is maybe the most dangerous result, because it’s so subtle.”⁸ He’s right; clutter is subtle because it’s easy to justify: just one more item, one more activity, one more errand, one more email. “More” comes one small thing or one obligation at a time, until before you know it, it’s become more, more, more. Clutter is subtle until suddenly it’s a mountain you can’t dig out from under.

Ortberg uses the parable of the scattered seed in the Gospel of Mark to illustrate his point. The cluttered soul, he says, is like the seed that falls among the thorns and is eventually choked out by the weeds. “The busy soul gets attached to the wrong things, because the soul is sticky,” Ortberg explains. “The Velcro of the soul is what Jesus calls ‘desire.’”⁹

We may desire money, like the rich man who asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17; see 10:17–31 for context). Or we may desire less tangible things, like power, success, recognition, or fame. Not only does the

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clutter of the world—the stuff we think we need to buy and the things we think we need to do—tempt us to covet, it also distracts us from the deeper soul work we should be pursuing. Like the crow that’s attracted to the glittery ribbon, we are wooed by shallow glitz and thus neglect the deeper contemplation necessary for spiritual growth.

The Busy Brain

Recently my son Noah and I walked out to Artist’s Point, a rocky outcropping on the shore of Lake Superior in northern Minnesota. Though it was summertime, a cold breeze blew off the frigid water, so we searched for a spot to sit that would be protected from the wind. After a bit of scrambling over the rocks, we found a sheltered nook between two large boulders. Nestled into our cozy hollow, the sun warm on my face, I pulled a book from my bag and opened it on my lap. “You should have brought something to read,” I said, turning to Noah. He shook his head no. “I don’t always have to have a book,” he said. “Mostly I’m happy just to sit.”

The thing is, I always have to have a book. Or a notebook. Or my phone. Or my to-do list. I need *something* to do, even if only to fill five minutes. I hesitate to admit this, but I frequently pull out my phone to check my email while waiting at a red light. How long does it take for a light to change? A minute? Two? And yet, I can’t sit unbusy for even that brief period. Part of the impulse to reach for my phone is habit, yet at the same time, I feel a pressing almost desperate need to be productive, to “make good use of my time.” I simply can’t bear not being busy, or at the very least, occupied.

Neuroscientist Caroline Leaf explains why. The brain, Dr. Leaf notes, is composed of networks that function together. The network responsible for the nonconscious part of the brain (called the *default mode network*, or DMN) operates 24 hours a day and is where thinking, building, and sorting thoughts takes place. The DMN is also where the brain engages in what Leaf calls “intrinsic activity” or “directed rest”—activities like contemplation, daydreaming, introspection, and sleeping. When we switch off from busyness mode, which takes place in what’s called the *task positive network* (TPN)—the conscious part of our brain that supports the active thinking required to make decisions—and transition into the more contemplative state of directed rest in DMN, we appear to slow down physically, but our mental resources actually speed up and our thinking moves to a higher level.¹⁰

Dr. Leaf describes the activation of the DMN as a “Sabbath in the brain.” In this state of directed rest, you outwardly appear to slow down, but inwardly, your mental resources increase as your brain engages in the deep work of ruminating, imagining, and self-reflecting. Dr. Leaf points out that brain imaging of people who regularly practice meditation—that is, people who regularly engage in directed rest—indicates a more active DMN, with the brain “growing more branches and integrating and linking thoughts, which translates as increased intelligence and that wonderful feeling of peace.”¹¹

When we don’t slow down and enter this rest state, we disrupt the natural functioning of the brain. The beautifully harmonized system goes awry, when, instead of entering into directed rest on a regular basis, we constantly and relentlessly activate the TPN, which results in action—busyness—as well

as, if left unchecked, an inward feeling of anxiety, restlessness, and discontent. In other words, our mind needs time and space to catch up with what our soul already knows.

Decision making and action are obviously necessary for our survival and livelihood, but not *all the time*. If we fail to activate the DMN on a regular basis and instead constantly push the TPN part of our brain to keep working, busyness can become our default mode. That's why we can sometimes feel like we're on autopilot when we are busy, and also why we can feel uncomfortable or even anxious or agitated when we're supposed to be resting or relaxing. If we've trained it to be busy at all times, our brain literally forgets how to rest.

Our mind needs time and space to catch up with what our soul already knows.

That's exactly what happened to me last February when I decided to give up social media for Lent. For the first two weeks, I found myself reaching for my phone every time I had more than a few seconds of spare time. It was almost like my hand simply needed to be holding my phone for my body to feel whole. The phone had become an extension of my physical self; without it, I felt like a piece of me was missing. More than a dozen times a day I picked up my phone, realized I had nothing to check, stared at the screen for a second, and then put the phone back down on the counter. I was astonished by how restless I felt when I couldn't check email or scroll through Instagram while standing in line at the grocery store or while waiting in the car to pick up my kids from school.

Part of the reason I gravitated toward my phone was habit. That neural pathway was so firmly cemented in my brain, my hand performed the action of reaching for my phone

almost automatically, before I even realized what I was doing. But part of my inability to simply sit still and quiet in the in-between times was my relentless drive toward efficiency and productivity. I wanted to make good use of my time, and staring out the windshield into a gray winter afternoon seemed like a phenomenal waste.

This is also exactly why I was aghast at my son's lack of reading material as we sat on the shore of Lake Superior that chilly summer afternoon. There I was, in one of the most scenic spots in all of America, the lake water lapping at my feet, seagulls circling the sky, the jagged edge of the Sawtooth range in the distance, and I was bent on finishing a chapter in the book I was reading and moving on to the next. Busy was what my brain was used to, so busy I was going to be, regardless of my surroundings. I didn't give myself the opportunity to enter into directed rest that day, but even if I'd tried, I likely would have struggled to settle into a contemplative state simply because my brain was out of practice. I hadn't offered my brain a Sabbath in years.

Noah, on the other hand, was content to sit quietly, his face turned toward the vast expanse of water that stretched as far as the eye could see. I don't know what he thought about that afternoon as we sat side by side on the shore of Lake Superior. But I couldn't help but notice he was happy to do nothing. Unlike me, my son was simply content to be.

GOING DEEPER

You may not be as prone to hustle as I am, but chances are, you too feel pressure to do, produce, and achieve from time

