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UNEARTHING PEACE AND PRESENCE  
IN AN OVERCONNECTED WORLD

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*K A T E M E R R I C K*

now

# here now

UNEARTHING PEACE AND PRESENCE  
IN AN OVERCONNECTED WORLD

*KATE MERRICK*



NELSON  
BOOKS

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*To Isaiah:*

*From the first moment I saw your face, I knew I didn't want to miss a thing. You have filled my last eighteen years with awesome. You are strong, humble, kind, brave, hilarious, and I love watching you build a beautiful life, one moment at a time. Also, no one rocks Israel like you. I love you, bro-bro.*



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## FOREWORD

[foreword to come, save 4 pages]





*one*

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A COLLECTION OF MOMENTS



There are no holier experiences on this earth than birth and death, those astonishing moments when souls arrive and when they leave. The coming is the “hello, world” loved ones were waiting for with eyes wide and fists clenched, when brand-new lungs fill to the last alveolus with the sudden inflation of oxygen. When the cries are lusty and heartbreakingly beautiful. The going, on the other hand, is the “goodbye, world” loved ones wished would never happen, when worn-out lungs softly sigh their last goodbye, as the organic releases to the supernatural. It’s the heartbreakingly beautiful hush of passing through the veil, as those dearest watch with furrowed brows, and yet this time, with open hands. Hello and goodbye. Just like that.

There’s a lot that happens in between those moments, between arms filled with hello-love and arms empty with goodbye-love. A lot. We tend to focus on the beginning and the end, but it’s the collection of all the in-between moments that actually make up a life, a whole God-given, genuine life. One that starts with wide-open possibility, with a clean slate, with adventure ahead and heartbreak on the horizon. Each moment builds upon the other, slowly revealing who we become,

revealing the returns of what we have chosen to invest in. Each moment sowing into the whole, whether they are exciting and joyful, boring and burdensome, or painful and steeped in sorrow. Each moment counts, from start to finish, from first inhale to last sigh.

How easy it is to sit behind my computer screen and say how much each moment matters while finding, if I'm honest, the in-between part to be a tad distasteful. Too often I'm steeped in discontentment with the business of life, dissatisfied with how the chips are falling. The impulse is to fast-forward through the uglier, tiresome, and tedious bits in life. *Gloss over the tough spots. Don't dwell too much on the precious parts. Don't feel too much. Keep life at bay. Check off the to-do list.* I allow life to become mechanical, obligatory, unscented, and then wonder why I'm so dissatisfied, why contentment is a struggle.

But there is so much to lean into between those first and last breaths: raw beauty and abysmal pain, rapturous joy and acute sorrow, wearying work and life-giving play. Mortal monotony and sacred splendor. I know it's there, yet I smooth right over it, attempting to glide through on my own terms. I label the fragments of a life as *good* or *bad*, trying to keep them separate from each other, passing judgment on whether I want to show up for them or not.

As if I have a choice.

The night before my daughter Daisy was diagnosed

for the first time, it was business as usual. Kids tucked in, dishes clean and neatly stacked. Laundry passed from washer to dryer, steadily humming the soundtrack of the American family. Relaxed and tired, I lay in bed, shopping for some tinted moisturizer from Sephora, hemming and hawing over the million different options. I had expectations of normalcy as I lay there, blithely wondering if I should go with the nontoxic brand or the one with the microscopic sparkles. Both promised to make my freckled thirty-four-year-old skin dewy, irresistible. I spent almost an hour on that website, completely unaware that just sixteen hours later, my life as I knew it would take a sharp turn.

The minutes ticked by, spilling out of my fingers onto the computer keyboard. They rolled to the floor and down the hall, slipped underneath my front door and into the storm drain that leads to the ocean. Moments that were more valuable than I knew. Poured out, wasted. I would never get them back.

I couldn't have known what was coming, of course. There was no way. And if I did know, I'm not sure what I'd have been doing instead. Perhaps I'd be praying, maybe spending serious quality time with my husband, Britt. Maybe I would still be buying the makeup, but I certainly wouldn't have spent forty-five minutes on it. Get in, get out. No need to scroll. No need to squander even the briefest of moments. Not every second of life can be magical, but we need not waste time. Still, that is

our way, is it not? Tune out. Treat time as if it's endless and we can have as much of it as we want.

As the story goes, the next day Daisy fell down at school, went to the hospital, and was given a truckload of morphine and a cancer diagnosis. We moved in to the hospital, we held our breaths, we prayed hard through surgery. Around the clock, we suffered constant intrusion from residents, nurses, doctors, lab techs, admin people, and social workers. Fluorescent lights, rubbing alcohol, antibacterial hand wash, and electronic beeps and blips flooded our senses for eleven days. Eleven days of a different world, of noise and confusion, of fear and torment.

After those eleven days, Daisy was discharged from the hospital, and we wearily trudged up our front walkway, climbed our three steps, and stood in front of our familiar, old paned-glass front door. While fishing for the keys I looked down and saw a little brown box. Sephora. Instantly I was caught in a crossfire of disgust and rage, of sorrow and regret. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have been that oblivious? I loathed myself; I loathed the box. I loathed that I had spent so much time on something so insignificant, something more a distraction than necessity, and, mostly, I loathed that often the way life goes isn't up to me. That small brown cardboard carton of beauty goals seemed to laugh at me, mock my naiveté. *How could you have wasted a whole hour on this? You think life will go the way you want all the time? Ha!*

My foot shot out and sent that box flying.

Real life showed up without my permission and announced that there would be a change of plans. *We interrupt this regularly scheduled program to inform you that life is precarious and loving people holds no guarantees.* I think up until then I had taken for granted what I had—not grossly, not to the point of completely trampling on all the good stuff, but in a silent, sly, comfortable way. Daisy’s diagnosis was a major wake-up call.

The Sephora box settled in the corner, dented ever so slightly. Almost as if it was saying, *Stupid, shallow girl. Your life is out of control. Daisy has cancer, and you just sat like a lump picking out makeup. It probably won't even look good on you.* I hated it. I hated that I hadn’t known the state of my own daughter’s health. I hated that one minute my life was a breeze, gentle and cool, and then the next it was stifling and all the windows were stuck. I hated that I was without a choice in the matter, that there was no way out of the mess but through it.

Life had pulled a fast one on me, and I felt like I was blindfolded and swinging at a piñata that was way too high. I swung wildly and missed, all while the crowd of onlookers watched my misfortune. I felt embarrassed for spending so much time on that one purchase, for thinking I had it all under control, for lacking the reason and wisdom a proper mother should have. I had been living with a set of expectations that I wasn’t even aware of. I had expected things to always stay the same. I had



expected to not feel great pain in life, to never suffer. I had expected ease. But now I had tasted the shocking flavor of reality. I didn't want any part of it.

As the days after we got home from the hospital melted into each other, something dawned on me. I could sit paralyzed, dumbfounded by our situation, poised to throw in the towel, or I could rise up and participate right where I was. I had a choice. I can't control noninfectious diseases, natural disasters, or heartbreak. I can't control most of the things moms worry about, in fact. But I can control how I spend my time, what's worth my focus and attention, what words I say, how well I love. What was up to me were the small choices, my mindset in this earthly life, and how best to spend my first and only tour on this planet.

When you're flung into a new stage of life, the challenge of keeping up, of learning new habits of being, happens moment by moment. Each moment we are faced with a decision: Will we lean in and invest or let it pass by and miss pivotal and essential parts? One of Daisy's nurses told me about a mother of a newly diagnosed cancer kid who wouldn't stop playing a video game on her phone while the nurse was trying to give her a rundown on how to care for her sick child. Both the nurse and I were appalled at this behavior, yet I've found this same tendency to avoid life in myself. For me, it manifests in other ways—denial, pasting a smile on my face, avoiding relational conflict, or even compulsory shopping and

eating—I just happen to not enjoy video games. Also, I'm much better at keeping my dysfunctional tendencies under wraps.

Leaning into real life is super hard. It not only calls for examination, confrontation, and investment, but it takes major courage and continuous practice. I'm still finding this out, even years after my Sephora box episode. As each new season begins, I must intentionally look deep inside with brutal honesty at my expectations and lay them bare before God, willingly trading them for what he has for me and being content in that. Each phase that crops up in life—whether it's raising a teenager, having another baby, starting a new career, or planting another church—calls for courage, because, whether we asked for it or not, it is ripe ground for building a beautiful life or for tearing it down. Everything we walk through cries out to us not to miss it, not to manipulate it to go our way but to just be present in the middle of it. To accept it for what it is, to engage fully and not give away what God has for us during that time in exchange for lesser things.

That's what I call practicing presence. The moment-by-moment, season-by-season continuous investment in what's here and now, not what we wished for. That means our current circumstances, whether it's a cancer diagnosis or nursing twins or studying law at Harvard. It means our actual people, whether sticky toddlers, handsome suitors, or annoying roommates. It means our real

unretouched life, whether it's job hunting, raising kids, or rescuing women from modern-day slavery.

I think, at one time, we all had a script we wrote for our lives. One that looked vastly different than what we see here and now. It was a script that refused to be followed, though sometimes it sure looks like the next girl got what she wanted. I'm pretty sure it's not just me, but don't we have this reactive way of looking around and wishing for someone else's talents, someone else's people, someone else's life? We are seldom content with our own. Discontentment seems to be the place we find ourselves most comfortable, and we see fit to set down its insatiable roots.

But regardless of how the script plays out, this is what I've learned: practicing presence nurtures peace and contentment. It does. It's only when we practice presence that we slow down enough to see how lovely our own lives are; it's when we notice all the ways God's hand is on it. It's when we stop and look our people in the face and notice the flecks of gold in our child's eyes, the calluses on our man's hands. It's when we turn down the noise so we can hear the whispers of God's pleasure as we walk with him in our work, when we reflect his glory in our play. It's when we kneel down and inhale the fragrance of Jesus' feet, the ones washed with expensive perfume poured from alabaster by a woman just like you and me, one with a regular life marked by ups and downs. It's when we push the reset button and enter into Sabbath

rest. These real-life moments are beautiful, I think, even when we don't stop to recognize it.



There's a funny little book in the Old Testament, one which confronts the ideas of dissatisfaction and discontentment, one that urges us to practice presence. Ecclesiastes has always been a strange part of the Bible to me. And, thanks to The Byrds, I get a curious compulsion to make a flower crown and slip on my Birkenstocks every time I read it. But aside from my own cultural rendition of this ancient book of wisdom, it has come to have new meaning for me.

We know the "time for" verses. We can sing them in our heads, but if we back up and read the beginning of the book, it's kind of a downer. You see, with all the talk of "everything is completely meaningless," Ecclesiastes has become one of those biblical books we wave off nonchalantly or sweep under the rug. The one that asks more questions than it answers, which is in total opposition to the neat and tidy Christianity so many of us grew up with. And it's especially puzzling following the book of Proverbs, which heartily assures us that if we just work hard, stay away from cute boys, and choose the way of wisdom, we will be okay—we'll glide breezily through life, even. *If you just do A, B, and C, you'll surely be blessed!* Easy peasy.

Ah, if only.

Ecclesiastes shows us the other side of the coin. The book goes something like this: The Teacher in Ecclesiastes is trying to understand the meaning of life. He finds it to be elusive and, at first glance, somewhat depressing. The phrase “everything is completely meaningless” is used over and over. Different translations use different words in this phrase: *meaningless*, *vanity*, *futility*, or *pointless*. In Hebrew, the word is *hevel*, which translates as “vapor” or “smoke.” He is saying life is temporary, impossible to grab onto or control, unpredictable. He describes the way life goes, how we invest time and energy into great things like work, wisdom, or pleasure, and yet we can’t control the outcome. He admits that there is no guarantee of the wise prospering or the wicked getting their due justice. He declares everything in life to be vapor, or meaningless, and so he questions how we should live in light of it all. Do we seek pleasure? Wealth? Wisdom? Hedonism? If we can’t control anything, then why bother?

I have been in that place, feeling a bit like life is meaningless, cruel even. I can’t control the outcome. I can’t make my life match my personal fairy-tale script. So much of the time, we wish we could trade in our circumstances, prove the Teacher wrong, show him that life is not meaningless, not *hevel*. But slowly we come to understand what the Teacher is saying and face the reality of the fact that we are all going to die, some of us sooner than others, but perhaps there is still something

of worth there, something we can't see. Something that could give us a little hint as to how to live well, not just survive.

And right in that vein of thinking, there's a verse from this short introspective book that calls out to me. Right there, tucked in after the dance of the seasons, after the summation of the human life experience on earth, there is a chorus that is perfectly timed. It sings out softly to me from the din of life and death and everything in between, asking if I will listen.

The Teacher questions the reader in chapter 3, verses 9 through 11, "What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. *Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time.* He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end" (emphasis mine).

God has made everything beautiful *for its own time.* But don't we want to just get through it some or most of the time? Don't we want to shut out the times that aren't particularly lovely? Or sometimes the loveliness is too great and we shield our eyes. But we are told there is purpose and beauty in each season, in each circumstance. That eternity is in our hearts, but we are only able to see what's right in front of us, *and that's okay.* This makes us uncomfortable because it calls us to be openhanded with everything we've got: the number of our days, our life's work, our play, even our communion with God and man.

We are not meant to see it all at once. We are meant to breathe in today, and only today.

God is calling us to be active participants in our own lives, and collectively we are finding it to be a challenge. The way of satisfaction and contentment is out there. The way of faith and courage is laid before us. I didn't see them so blatantly before, but now I realize God has been offering me these nuggets of fresh air my whole life—it was just up to me to stop and notice. That Sephora box kicked off some pivotal years for me, where I had no choice but to hear what God was saying in the fray.

I don't have the secret to life; I don't have the formula for monastic contentment or the impressive ability to be present. But I do know it's something in the quieting of the soul. The resting of the eyes, the still place where we stop and listen. When the Spirit of God is allowed a voice. When we are brave enough to listen to what he has to say. It's in the deep places, the ones that take us to maturity. It's in the courage to listen, yes, but also the courage to obey. To be fruitful right now, exactly where we are. And it's dang hard. But it's good and it's real.

This is a journey that, for me, began many years ago and continues still. It involves faith, love, hope. It includes travel, food, naked people, courage, real life, holidays, new friends, and new traditions. It's about work and play, community, daily rhythms; it's about the moments that make up a life. It's a journey to presence. To going off the grid and living life with intentionality. To choosing

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peace over chaos, little by little turning down the noise, one discovery at a time. It's a journey to quickening the desperation for contentment and inviting the good, true, and beautiful. Let's walk in this together. Lay down the chaos and be prepared to get your breath back.