

A book destined to become a classic, the sort of book you dog-ear and reread for the sheer joy of cherishing the words and experiencing the depth of the heart that wrote it.

Mary DeMuth

author of *Thin Places: A Memoir*

Where do I begin? Do I tell you that Ann Voskamp writes like a poet with the heart of a mystic? Or do I share with you how *One Thousand Gifts* is so profound that if we internalize this message of lifestyle gratitude and all-pervasive grace, we can know Christ like Adam knew Eve. To write of such beautiful, intimate union requires the pen of a spiritual artist. Open this book, then open your heart.

Lisa Whelchel

actress, speaker, and author of *Creative Correction and Friendship for Grown-Ups*

This book is one that will change the way you see the world.

Marybeth Whalen

author of *The Mailbox* and *She Makes It Look Easy* and director of [www.shereads.org](http://www.shereads.org)

Very rarely in my life have I been given the privilege of sharing about something so exquisite. As I moved from page to page, I became convinced that my life would never be the same. Prepare yourself to leave these pages a changed person. Thank you, Ann—you are the 1001st thing I have on my list today.

Angie Smith

author of *I Will Carry You* and speaker with Women of Faith

As I read *One Thousand Gifts*, I kept thinking of Walt Whitman's haunting phrase, "Finally shall come the poet." It's a rare gift that can render both life's everyday intimacies and the heart's broken rhythms in language at once lucid and lyrical, but Ann does it without seeming to try. And most of all, best of all, she employs that language to tell a story of a life—her own—transformed by the simple act of giving thanks. Finally comes the poet.

Mark Buchanan

author of *The Rest of God* and *Spiritual Rhythm*

Compelling, poetic, and poignant, Ann Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts* dares us to become grateful in everything. Voskamp is a beautiful narrator, retelling painful, sometimes grief-stricken moments with fearless vulnerability. *One Thousand Gifts* is a masterpiece full of wise hope and light, with simple truths that will inspire you to see God's grace in everyday circumstances, blessings, and hardships.

Matthew Paul Turner  
author of *Churched* and *Hear No Evil*

The book itself is the best gift of all—one that stays with you and keeps blessing your life long after you've read the last word.

Holley Gerth  
DaySpring editorial director, author, and counselor

To find your deepest heart—to know joy—read your Bible, and this treasure of a book, this portal into the deep goodness of God and of life.

Kelly Monroe Kullberg  
author of *Finding God Beyond Harvard*

Ann Voskamp's writing is vibrant, her insights piercing.

Tony Woodlief  
*World* magazine columnist and author of *Somewhere More Holy*

This book is like a treasure hunt. Ann sits beside you and speaks words that will inspire you to open the door into the miracle of holy joy.

Bobbie Wolgemuth  
author of *When Morning Gilds the Skies* and compiler of the *NCV Mom's Bible*

*One Thousand Gifts* reads like a series of prize-winning photographs, bringing the reader to stop and marvel at the depth and detail, the light and shadow, of all those scattered moments in life. Ann Voskamp tells the story behind the image—in memorable, mesmerizing prose.

Allison Pittman  
author of *For Time and Eternity* and *Forsaking All Others*

A DARE TO LIVE FULLY

RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

*one thousand gifts*

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*For the Farmer,  
who tended and grew my soul*



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CHAPTER 1

*an emptier, fuller life*

Every sin is an attempt to fly from emptiness.

*Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace*

A glowing sun-orb fills an August sky the day this story begins, the day I am born, the day I begin to live.

And I fill my mother's tearing ring of fire with my body emerging, virgin lungs searing with air of this earth and I enter the world like every person born enters the world: with clenched fists.

From the diameter of her fullness, I empty her out—and she bleeds. Vernix-creased and squalling, I am held to the light.

Then they name me.

Could a name be any shorter? Three letters without even the flourish of an *e*. Ann, a trio of curves and lines.

It means “full of grace.”

I haven't been.

What does it mean to live full of grace? *To live fully alive?*

They wash my pasty skin and I breathe and I flail. I flail.

For decades, a life, I continue to flail and strive and come up so seemingly . . . *empty*. I haven't lived up to my christening.

Maybe in those first few years my life slowly opened, curled like cupped hands, a receptacle open to the gifts God gives.

But of those years, I have no memories. They say memory jolts awake with trauma's electricity. That would be the year I turned four. The year when blood pooled and my sister died and I, all of us, snapped shut to grace.



Standing at the side porch window, watching my parents' stunned bending, I wonder if my mother had held me in those natal moments of naming like she held my sister in death.

In November light, I see my mother and father sitting on the back porch step rocking her swaddled body in their arms. I press my face to the kitchen window, the cold glass, and watch them, watch their lips move, not with sleep prayers, but with pleas for waking, whole and miraculous. It does not come. The police do. They fill out reports. Blood seeps through that blanket bound. I see that too, even now.

Memory's surge burns deep.

That staining of her blood scorches me, but less than the blister of seeing her uncovered, lying there. She had only toddled into the farm lane, wandering after a cat, and I can see the delivery truck driver sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, and I remember how he sobbed that he had never seen her. But I still see her, and I cannot forget. Her body, fragile and small, crushed by a truck's load in our farmyard, blood soaking into the thirsty, track-beaten earth. That's the moment the cosmos shifted, shattering any cupping of hands. I can still hear my mother's witnessing-scream, see my father's eyes shot white through.

My parents don't press charges and they are farmers and they keep trying to breathe, keep the body moving to keep the soul from atrophying. Mama cries when she strings out the

laundry. She holds my youngest baby sister, a mere three weeks old, to the breast, and I can't imagine how a woman only weeks fragile from the birth of her fourth child witnesses the blood-on-gravel death of her third child and she leaks milk for the babe and she leaks grief for the buried daughter. Dad tells us a thousand times the story after dinner, how her eyes were water-clear and without shores, how she held his neck when she hugged him and held on for dear life. We accept the day of her death as an accident. But an act allowed by God?

For years, my sister flashes through my nights, her body crumpled on gravel. Sometimes in dreams, I cradle her in the quilt Mama made for her, pale green with the hand-embroidered Humpty Dumpty and Little Bo Peep, and she's safely cocooned. I await her unfurling and the rebirth. Instead the earth opens wide and swallows her up.

At the grave's precipice, our feet scuff dirt, and chunks of the firmament fall away. A clod of dirt hits the casket, shatters. Shatters over my little sister with the white-blond hair, the little sister who teased me and laughed; and the way she'd throw her head back and laugh, her milk-white cheeks dimpled right through with happiness, and I'd scoop close all her belly-giggling life. They lay her gravestone flat into the earth, a black granite slab engraved with no dates, only the five letters of her name. Aimee. It means "loved one." How she was. We had loved her. And with the laying of her gravestone, the closing up of her deathbed, so closed our lives.

Closed to any notion of grace.



Really, when you bury a child—or when you just simply get up every day and live life raw—you murmur the question

soundlessly. No one hears. *Can there be a good God?* A God who graces with good gifts when a crib lies empty through long nights, and bugs burrow through coffins? Where is God, *really?* How can He be good when babies die, and marriages implode, and dreams blow away, dust in the wind? Where is grace bestowed when cancer gnaws and loneliness aches and nameless places in us soundlessly die, break off without reason, erode away. Where hides this joy of the Lord, this God who fills the earth with good things, and how do I fully live when life is full of hurt? How do I wake up to joy and grace and beauty and all that is the fullest life when I must stay numb to losses and crushed dreams and all that empties me out?

My family—my dad, my mama, my brother and youngest sister—for years, we all silently ask these questions. For years, we come up empty. And over the years, we fill again—with estrangement. We live with our hands clenched tight. What God once gave us on a day in November slashed deep. Who risks again?

Years later, I sit at one end of our brown plaid couch, my dad stretched out along its length. Worn from a day driving tractor, the sun beating and the wind blowing, he asks me to stroke his hair. I stroke from that cowlick of his and back, his hair ringed from the line of his cap. He closes his eyes. I ask questions that I never would if looking into them.

“Did you ever used to go to church? Like a long time ago, Dad?” Two neighboring families take turns picking me up, a Bible in hand and a dress ironed straight, for church services on Sunday mornings. Dad works.

“Yeah, as a kid I went. Your grandmother had us go every Sunday, after milking was done. That was important to her.”

I keep my eyes on his dark strands of hair running through my fingers. I knead out tangles.

“But it’s not important to you now?” The words barely whispered, hang.

He pushes up his plaid sleeves, shifts his head, his eyes still closed. “Oh . . .”

I wait, hands combing, waiting for him to find the words for those feelings that don’t fit neatly into the stiff ties, the starched collars, of sentences.

“No, I guess not anymore. When Aimee died, I was done with all of that.”

Scenes blast. I close my eyes; reel.

“And, if there really is anybody up there, they sure were asleep at the wheel that day.”

I don’t say anything. The lump in my throat burns, this ember. I just stroke his hair. I try to sooth his pain. He finds more feelings. He stuffs them into words.

“Why let a beautiful little girl die such a senseless, needless death? And she didn’t just die. She was *killed*.”

That word twists his face. I want to hold him till it doesn’t hurt, make it all go away. His eyes remain closed, but he’s shaking his head now, remembering all there was to say no to that hideous November day that branded our lives.

Dad says nothing more. That shake of the head says it all, expresses our closed hands, our bruised, shaking fists. No. No benevolent Being, no grace, no meaning to it all. My dad, a good farmer who loved his daughter the way only eyes can rightly express, he rarely said all that; only sometimes, when he’d close his eyes and ask me to stroke away the day between the fingers. But these aren’t things you need to say anyways. Like all beliefs, you simply live them.

We did.

No, God.

No God.

Is this the toxic air of the world, this atmosphere we inhale, burning into our lungs, this *No, God? No, God, we won't take what You give. No, God, Your plans are a gutted, bleeding mess and I didn't sign up for this and You really thought I'd go for this? No, God, this is ugly and this is a mess and can't You get anything right and just haul all this pain out of here and I'll take it from here, thanks. And God? Thanks for nothing.* Isn't this the human inheritance, the legacy of the Garden?

I wake and put the feet to the plank floors, and I believe the Serpent's hissing lie, the repeating refrain of his campaign through the ages: God isn't good. It's the cornerstone of his movement. That God withholds good from His children, that God does not genuinely, fully, love us.

Doubting God's goodness, distrusting His intent, discontented with what He's given, we desire ... *I have desired ... more.* The fullest life.

I look across farm fields. The rest of the garden simply isn't enough. It will never be enough. God said humanity was not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And I moan that God has ripped away what I wanted. No, what I *needed*. Though I can hardly whisper it, I live as though He stole what I consider rightly mine: happiest children, marriage of unending bliss, long, content, death-defying days. I look in the mirror, and if I'm fearlessly blunt—what I have, who I am, where I am, how I am, what I've got—this simply isn't enough. That forked tongue darts and daily I live the doubt, look at my reflection, and ask: Does God really love me? If He truly, deeply loves me, why does He withhold that which

I believe will fully nourish me? Why do I live in this sense of rejection, of less than, of pain? Does He not want me to be *happy*?



From all of our beginnings, we keep reliving the Garden story.

Satan, he wanted more. More power, more glory. Ultimately, in his essence, Satan is an ingrate. And he sinks his venom into the heart of Eden. Satan's sin becomes the first sin of all humanity: *the sin of ingratitude*. Adam and Eve are, simply, painfully, ungrateful for what God gave.

Isn't that the catalyst of all my sins?

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other.

Standing before that tree, laden with fruit withheld, we listen to Evil's murmur, "In the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened . . ." (Genesis 3:5 NASB). But in the beginning, our eyes were already open. Our sight was perfect. Our vision let us see a world spilling with goodness. Our eyes fell on nothing but the glory of God. We saw God as He truly is: good. But we were lured by the deception that there was more to a full life, there was more to see. And, true, there was more to see: the ugliness we hadn't beheld, the sinfulness we hadn't witnessed, the loss we hadn't known.

We eat. And, in an instant, we are blind. No longer do we see God as one we can trust. No longer do we perceive Him as wholly good. No longer do we observe all of the remaining paradise.

We eat. And, in an instant, we see. Everywhere we look,

we see a world of lack, a universe of loss, a cosmos of scarcity and injustice.

We are hungry. We eat. We are filled . . . and emptied.

And still, we look at the fruit and see only the material means to fill our emptiness. We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: *as the means to communion with God.*

We look and swell with the ache of a broken, battered planet, what we ascribe as the negligent work of an indifferent Creator (if we even think there is one). Do we ever think of this busted-up place as the result of us ingrates, unsatisfied, we who punctured it all with a bite? The fruit's poison has infected the whole of humanity. *Me.* I say no to what He's given. I thirst for some roborant, some elixir, to relieve the anguish of what I've believed: God isn't good. God doesn't love me.

If I'm ruthlessly honest, I may have said yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the no. I have. Infected by that Eden mouthful, the retina of my soul develops macular holes of blackness. From my own beginning, my sister's death tears a hole in the canvas of the world.

Losses do that. One life-loss can infect the whole of a life. Like a rash that wears through our days, our sight becomes peppered with black voids. Now everywhere we look, we only see all that isn't: holes, lack, deficiency.

In our plain country church on the edge of that hayfield enclosed by an old cedar split-rail fence, once a week on Sunday, my soul's macular holes spontaneously heal. In that church with the wooden cross nailed to the wall facing the country road, there God seems obvious. Close. Bibles lie open. The sanctuary fills with the worship of wives with babies in arms, farmers done with chores early, their hair slicked down.



The Communion table spread with the emblems, that singular cup and loaf, that table that restores relationship. I remember. Here I remember Love and the Cross and a Body, and I am grafted in and held and made whole. All's upright. There, alongside Claude Martin and Ann Van den Boogaard and John Weiler and Marion Schefter and genteel Mrs. Leary, even the likes of me can see.

But the rest of the week, the days I live in the glaring harshness of an abrasive world? Complete loss of central vision. Everywhere, a world pocked with scarcity.

I hunger for filling in a world that is starved.

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since He bent low and breathed His life into the dust of our lungs, since He kissed us into being, has never been to slyly orchestrate our ruin. And yet, I have found it: He does have surprising, secret purposes. I open a Bible, and His plans, startling, lie there barefaced. It's hard to believe it, when I read it, and I have to come back to it many times, feel long across those words, make sure they are real. His love letter forever silences any doubts: "His secret purpose framed from the very beginning [is] to bring us to our full glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7 NEB). He means to rename us—to return us to our true names, our truest selves. He means to heal our soul holes. From the very beginning, that Eden beginning, that has always been and always is, to this day, His secret purpose—our return to *our full glory*. *Appalling*—that He would! Us, unworthy. And yet since we took a bite out of the fruit and tore into our own souls, that drain hole where joy seeps away, God's had this wild secretive plan. *He means to fill us with glory again*. With glory and grace.

*Grace*, it means "favor," from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes

a free readiness. A free and ready favor. That's grace. It is one thing to choose to take the grace offered at the cross. But to choose to live as one *filling* with His grace? Choosing to *fill* with *all* that He freely gives and fully live—with glory and grace and God?

I know it but I don't want to: it is a choice. Living with losses, I may choose to still say yes. Choose to say yes to what He freely gives. Could I *live* that—the choice to open the hands to freely receive whatever God gives? If I don't, I am still making a choice.

The choice not to.

The day I met my brother-in-law at the back door, looking for his brother, looking like his brother, is the day I see it clear as a full moon rising bright over January snow, that choice, saying yes or no to God's graces, is the linchpin of it all, of everything.

My brother-in-law, he's just marking time, since Farmer Husband's made a quick run to the hardware store. He's talking about soil temperature and weather forecasts. I lean up against the door frame. The dog lies down at my feet.

John shrugs his shoulders, looks out across our wheat field. "Farmers, we think we control so much, do so much right to make a crop. And when you are farming," he turns back toward me, "you are faced with it every day. You control so little. Really. It's God who decides it all. Not us." He slips his big Dutch hands into frayed pockets, smiles easily. "It's all good."

I nod, almost say something about him just leaving that new water tank in the back shed for now instead of waiting any longer for Farmer Husband to show up. But I catch his eyes and I know I have to ask. Tentatively, eyes fixed on his, I venture back into that place I rarely go.

“How do you know that, John? Deep down, how do you *know* that it really is all good? That *God* is good? That you can say yes—to whatever He gives?” I know the story of the man I am asking, and he knows mine. His eyes linger. I know he’s remembering the story too.

New Year’s Day. He asks us to come. Only if we want. I don’t want to think why, but we know. “Already?” I search my husband’s face. “Today?” He takes my hand and doesn’t let go. Not when we slide into the truck, not when we drive the back roads, not when we climb the empty stairwell to the hospital room lit only by a dim lamp. John meets us at the door. He nods. His eyes smile brave. The singular tear that slips down his cheek carves something out of me.

“Tiff just noticed Dietrich had started breathing a bit heavier this afternoon. And yeah, when we brought him in, they said his lung had collapsed. It will just be a matter of hours. Like it was at the end for Austin.” His firstborn, Austin, had died of the same genetic disease only eighteen months prior. He was about to bury his second son in less than two years.

I can’t look into that sadness wearing a smile anymore. I look at the floor, polished tiles blurring, running. It had only been a year and six months before that. The peonies had been in full bloom when we had stood in a country cemetery watching a cloud of balloons float up and into clear blue over pastures. All the bobbing, buoyant hopes for Austin—floating away. Austin had hardly been four months old. I had been there on that muggy June afternoon. I had stood by the fan humming in their farm kitchen. The fan stirred a happy-face balloon over Austin’s placid body. I remember the blue of his eyes, mirrors of heaven. He never moved. His eyes moved me. I had caressed

my nephew's bare little tummy. His chest had heaved for the air. And heaved less . . . and less.

How do you keep breathing when the lungs under your fingers are slowly atrophying?

I had stumbled out their back steps, laid down on the grass. I had cried at the sky. It was our wedding anniversary. I always remember the date, his eyes.

And now, New Year's Day, again with John, Tiffany, but now with their second-born son, Dietrich. He's only five months old. He was born to hope and prayers—and the exact same terminal diagnosis as his brother, Austin.

John hands me a Kleenex, and I try to wipe away all this gut-wrenching pain. He tries too, with words soft and steady, "We're just blessed. Up until today Dietrich's had no pain. We have good memories of a happy Christmas. That's more than we had with Austin." All the tiles on the floor run fluid. My chest hurts. "Tiffany's got lots and lots of pictures. And we had five months with him."

I shouldn't, but I do. I look up. Into all his hardly tamed grief. I feel wild. His eyes shimmer tears, this dazed bewilderment, and his stoic smile cuts me right through. I see his chin quiver. In that moment I forget the rules of this Dutch family of reserved emotion. I grab him by the shoulders and I look straight into those eyes, brimming. And in this scratchy half whisper, these ragged words choke—*wail*. "If it were up to me . . ." and then the words pound, desperate and hard, "*I'd write this story differently.*"

I regret the words as soon as they leave me. They seem so un-Christian, so unaccepting—so *No, God!* I wish I could take them back, comb out their tangled madness, dress them in their calm Sunday best. But there they are, released and naked,

raw and real, stripped of any theological cliché, my exposed, serrated howl to the throne room.

“You know . . .” John’s voice breaks into my memory and his gaze lingers, then turns again toward the waving wheat field. “Well, even with our boys . . . I don’t know why that all happened.” He shrugs again. “But do I have to? . . . Who knows? I don’t mention it often, but sometimes I think of that story in the Old Testament. Can’t remember what book, but you know—when God gave King Hezekiah fifteen more years of life? Because he prayed for it? But if Hezekiah had died when God first intended, Manasseh would never have been born. And what does the Bible say about Manasseh? Something to the effect that Manasseh had led the Israelites to do even more evil than all the heathen nations around Israel. Think of all the evil that would have been avoided if Hezekiah had died earlier, before Manasseh was born. I am not saying anything, either way, about anything.”

He’s watching that sea of green rolling in winds. Then it comes slow, in a low, quiet voice that I have to strain to hear.

“Just that maybe . . . maybe you don’t want to change the story, because you don’t know what a different ending holds.”

The words I choked out that dying, ending day, echo. Pierce. There’s a reason I am not writing the story and God is. He knows how it all works out, where it all leads, what it all means.

*I don’t.*

His eyes return, knowing the past I’ve lived, a bit of my nightmares. “Maybe . . . I guess . . . it’s accepting there are things we simply don’t understand. But He does.”

And I see. At least a bit more. When we find ourselves groping along, famished for more, we can choose. When we

are despairing, we can choose to live as Israelites gathering manna. For forty long years, God's people daily eat manna—a substance whose name literally means “What is it?” Hungry, they choose to gather up that which is baffling. They fill on that which has no meaning. More than 14,600 days they take their daily nourishment from that which they don't comprehend. They find soul-filling in the inexplicable.

They eat the mystery.

*They eat the mystery.*

And the mystery, that which made no sense, is “like wafers of honey” on the lips.

A pickup drives into the lane. I watch from the window, two brothers meeting, talking, then hand gestures mirroring each other. I think of buried babies and broken, weeping fathers over graves, and a world pocked with pain, and all the mysteries I have refused, *refused*, to let nourish me. If it were my daughter, my son? Would I really choose the manna? I only tremble, wonder. With memories of gravestones, of combing fingers through tangled hair, I wonder too . . . if the rent in the canvas of our life backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own emptiness, might actually become places to see.

To see through to God.

That that which tears open our souls, those holes that splatter our sight, may actually become the thin, open places to see through the mess of this place to the heart-aching beauty beyond. To Him. To the God whom we endlessly crave.

Maybe so.

But how? How do we choose to allow the holes to become seeing-through-to-God places? To more-God places?

How do I give up resentment for gratitude, gnawing anger for spilling joy? Self-focus for God-communion.

To fully live—to live full of grace and joy and all that is  
beauty eternal. It is possible, wildly.

I now see and testify.

So this story—my story.

A dare to an emptier, fuller life.

CHAPTER 2

*a word to live ...  
and die by*

Eucharist [thanksgiving] is the state of the perfect man.

Eucharist is the life of paradise. Eucharist is the only full and real response of man to God's creation, redemption, and gift of heaven.

*Alexander Schmemmann*

I slam upright, jolt the bed hard, hands gripping the cotton sheets wild.

There's a halo of light by the door. I breathe, heave breathe. There are stars.

I can hear the clock in the kitchen, the one over the dining room table, making time, one loud, sure tick at a time.

My chest pounds the hooves of a thousand stallions running on and away, and the universe outside the window holds—the one stuck through with the stars—and I breathe. I breathe.

It was all dream, a mirage of the moon.

I feel my hand across the threads of sheets and there is a bed sure under the body and there are morning stars all in place out the window and his bare shoulders rise and fall beside me



in the heavy slumber and the relief courses through my veins, veins draining away the fear blue. It was all a dream.

I fall back to the pillow, lie on relief. I don't close my eyes. I stare out the window and I wonder that there is real breath in these real lungs and that is the real red Antares, Scorpion's beating heart, hanging below that waning crescent moon and I am here to see it. And they were just four nightmares in one night, a silver thread unraveling through black. And for me, she who says she never has dreams.

I lie there and untangle the memory of scenes, the string all twisted, one long strand of nightmares plagiarizing life, the fibers of the neocortex working through my life, all the life most important. I revisit dream scenes and I think about this. The all most important.

It has seemed real, the dream. It was a faceless doctor—just a voice—and it was a pallid room of walls and no windows and it was just the uttering of one word and I can feel it again, how the veins constrict.

That haunting “C” word, the one with gluttonous belly and serrated teeth and the voracious appetite to divide and dominate. *Cancer*.

It's a slam to the gut. I green. And he blandly says the cancer's been invisibly consuming bits and pieces of me while I've birthed the six babies, mopped their muddy prints off the floors, kissed the lips of their father at the door. He says there's nothing to be done. All's been devoured. Just wrap up the last of my living.

Already? No more? The heart hammers and the blood surges, scream of electric blue.

Gasping, grasping, I had tried to struggle free, to emerge up into life. Into the four scone-colored walls, the dim light at

the door, the pure white matelassé bedspread pulled up over the vows. How I wanted to surface and breathe and keep this skin on and *live*. But night's noose had tightened, and I'd been strangled back into this dream script of telling the news of my impending demise to husband, father, brother. In terrifying nightmare fashion, they all shrug their shoulders, walk away blithe. *I want to live. Fully live.* What is the message of dreams? I remember it, four times escaping up into consciousness only for the rope burn back into the choked out good-byes and last anguished touches.

I lie there long staring at ceiling, listening to the beat of my untamed heart.

This ...

But this ... this waking to the crack of a nightmare, this violet shock through the veins, even this might be better than the way I usually wake. Since ... I want to say since after the six babies, or at least since the third—the first girl and the one with the dimples—when motherhood began to sag me ... but really, no, it began years earlier. Since the girl with thick glasses in Mr. Colquhoun's English class read books to escape thoughts of her mama sitting up in a psychiatric hospital aching for the baby that bled through the blankets. Yes, it really has been all those years since then.

For years of mornings, I have woken wanting to die. Life itself twists into nightmare. For years, I have pulled the covers up over my head, dreading to begin another day I'd be bound to just wreck. Years, I lie listening to the taunt of names ringing off my interior walls, ones from the past that never drifted far and away: Loser. Mess. Failure. They are signs nailed overhead, nailed through me, naming me. The stars are blinking out.

Funny, this. Yesterday morning, the morning before, all

these mornings, I wake to the discontent of life in my skin. I wake to self-hatred. To the wrestle to get it all done, the relentless anxiety that I am failing. Always, the failing. I yell at children, fester with bitterness, forget doctor appointments, lose library books, live selfishly, skip prayer, complain, go to bed too late, neglect cleaning the toilets. I live tired. Afraid. Anxious. Weary. Years, I feel it in the veins, the pulsing of ruptured hopes. Would I ever be enough, find enough, do enough? But this morning, I wake wildly wanting to live. Physically feeling it in the veins trembling, the hard pant of the lungs, the seeing it in the steady stars, how much I *really* want to *really* live. How I don't want to die. Is that the message of nightmares and dreams? To live either *fully* alive ... or in empty nothingness?

It's the in between that drives us mad.

It's the life in between, the days of walking lifeless, the years calloused and simply going through the hollow motions, the self-protecting by self-distracting, the body never waking, that's lost all capacity to fully feel—this is the life in between that makes us the wild walking dead.

The sun climbs the horizon. I throw back the covers, take another breath, and begin. I *get* to. I *get* to live. A lone morning dove woos from high in the spruce tree. In the kitchen, I stand over the heat of the stove, slowly stirring the wooden spoon through the bubbling-up oatmeal, but my eyes are on the window, on the field. Freshly fallen snow coruscates in the sun, countless stars across fields, trees in the woods falling soundlessly, their blue shadows stretching. Down by the lane, where the gravel curves to the road, where that bulk of a yellow lab has been digging hard, steam rises slow off the earth's black loam.

Life has mirages of its own.

The nightmare creeps up the nape of the neck, clamps me in a chokehold of reality.

The end *will* come.

Doctor's warning or not, the end will come, and this life of the bare toes across grass, the sky raining spring down on eyelashes, the skin spread close under sheets, blink of the fireflies on dusky June nights—all this will all end.

I turn off the stove.

I toss in a load of laundry, pull a recipe book out of the cupboard to plan the day's menu, wipe off the counters. I try to breathe and press on. But I'm rattled, upended, undone. I can't quite shake the reality of the dream. The nightmare of my life.

Which road through this brief land? What is all most important? How to live the fullest life here that delivers into the full life ever after?

A child tromps in, boots still on, with a chestful of mail. Between the flyers of a grand opening for a new flooring store in town and a sale on tires lies a letter from my recently widowed father-in-law. On a hot night one July in the dark of room 117, God had used cancer to usher my mother-in-law, his bride of half a century, into the throne room and glory ever after. We had sung that night, "What a day that will be when my Jesus I shall see." I had laid the cold cloth on the sweat beads stringing along her brow. I tear open his envelope, slide out the DaySpring card, read his slow Dutch scrawl. But it's the last words of his card that grab me:

"Thinking on the beginning of this year, who does He call to come Home? Is it me, Lord? May I be ready. Or us. Whoever."

Emotion wells, spills. How this letter, these words, and

now, after last night's dream wrestle? After my years of mornings?

Whoever. Ready for the end of here.

Whoever. Ready for the first meeting of Him there.

Whoever. *Soon.*

Will I have lived fully—or just empty?

How does one live ready, and always? Yes, ultimately, only Jesus. Yes, this premature dying to self, birthing into the cross-life, the grace cocoon before emerging into the life unending. Without this Jesus, no, no one can be ready.

But, someone, please give me—who is born again but still so much in need of being born anew—give me the details of *how* to live in the waiting cocoon before the forever begins?

In my reality-dream (dream-reality?), I gasp for more time, frantic for more time. But I have to wonder: more time for more what? The answer to that determines the road these so-short days take.

Hard questions drive me hard to distraction. I check e-mail. More words sent this way, this time from a mother. Her seventeen-year-old has been diagnosed with, yes, specter of that word too real, cancer. I try to breathe. Today, it's hard. What are the messages of God? Her mother types the words across my screen: "Any words?"

I stumble away.

Obviously, I have no words, no answers. I am groping for my own way. Desperately feeling along today for a way to live through this fleeting blink of a life.

How do we live fully so we are fully ready to die?



I stack the linen closets. I think of all the things I might never live to do.

I think of all the things I am going to miss.

My eyes will never know China's jade-green Li River. I'm never going to see those black-haired boys under straw-brimmed hats fish off their bamboo rafts with the ringed cormorants, the mist rising behind over the karst formations, surreal and dark. I am never going to be ascending the Loita Hills of Kenya to witness the dance of gazelles migrating up by the millions from the Serengeti. I am not going to be swimming the sapphire waters of some South Pacific grotto, or sitting up late listening to the wind whisper through the Sequoia woods, or spending my golden years scaling the summit of emerald Machu Picchu.

I run my hand across the thick of the terry towels. I'm a farmer's wife. I'm the homeschooling mother of six children. There are no fancy degrees, titles, diplomas hanging on these finger-smudged walls. Are there places that must be known, accomplishments that must be had, before one is really ready? I know the theological answers, but do my blood and my pulse?

I remember once sitting at the hairdresser's. The woman beside me reads, and I read her title in the reflection of the mirror: *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. Is that it? Are there physical places that simply must be seen before I stop breathing within time, before I inhale eternity?

Why? To say that I've had reason to bow low? To say that I've seen beauty? To say that I've been arrested by wonder?

Isn't it here? Can't I find it *here*?

These very real lungs will breathe in more than 11,000 liters of air today,<sup>1</sup> and tonight over our farm will rise the Great Hexagon of the blazing winter stars — Sirius, Rigel,

ruby Aldebran, Capella, the fiery Gemini twins, and Procyon, and in the center, scarlet Betelgeuse, the red supergiant larger than twice the size of earth's orbit around the sun—and I will embrace the skin of a boy child that my body grew from a seed. The low heavens outside the paned windows fill with more snowflakes than stars, no two-stacked crystals the same; the trees in the wood draw in collective green breath to the still of January hibernation, and God in the world will birth ice from His womb, frost of heaven, bind the chains of the Pleiades, loose the cords of Orion, and number again the strands on my head (Job 38:31; Matthew 10:30).

Isn't it here? The wonder? Why do I spend so much of my living hours struggling to see it? Do we truly stumble so blind that we must be affronted with *blinding* magnificence for our blurry soul-sight to recognize grandeur? The very same surging magnificence that cascades over our every day here. Who has time or eyes to notice?

All my eyes can seem to fixate on are the splatters of disappointment across here and me.

I close the bathroom linen closet. Pick up a brush to swish toilets. I don't need more time to breathe so that I may experience more locales, possess more, accomplish more. Because wonder really could be here—for the seeing eyes.

So—more time for more *what*?

The face of Jesus flashes. Jesus, the God-Man with his own termination date. Jesus, the God-Man who came to save me from prisons of fear and guilt and depression and sadness. With an expiration of less than twelve hours, what does Jesus count as all most important?

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them ...” (Luke 22:19 NIV).

This. I live in this place, make porridge, scrub toilets, do laundry, and for days, weeks, I am brave and I do get out of bed and I think on this. I study this, the full life, the being fully ready for the end. I start to think that maybe there is a way out of nightmares to dreams? Maybe?

I thumb, run my finger across the pages of the heavy and thick books bound. I read it slowly. In the original language, “he gave thanks” reads “*eucharisteo*.”

I underline it on the page. Can it lay a sure foundation under a life? Offer the fullest life?

The root word of *eucharisteo* is *charis*, meaning “grace.” Jesus took the bread and saw it as *grace* and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be *gift* and gave thanks.

But there is more, and I read it. *Eucharisteo*, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, *charis*. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word *chara*, meaning “joy.” *Joy*. Ah . . . yes. I might be needing me some of that. That might be what the quest for more is all about—that which Augustine claimed, “Without exception . . . all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy.”<sup>2</sup>

I breathe deep, like a sojourner finally coming home. That has always been the goal of the fullest life—joy. And my life knew exactly how elusive that slippery three-letter word, *joy*, can be. I think of it then again, that night of nightmares, the flailing, frantic, moon-eyed lunge for more. More *what*? And this was it; I could tell how my whole being responded to that one word. I longed for more life, for more *holy joy*.

That’s what I was struggling out of nightmares to reach, to seize. Joy. But where can I seize this holy grail of joy? I look back down to the page. Was this the clue to the quest of all most important? Deep *chara* joy is found only at the table of the



*euCHARisteo*—the table of thanksgiving. I sit there long ... wondering ... is it that simple?

Is the height of my *chara* joy dependent on the depths of my *eucharisteo* thanks?

*So then as long as thanks is possible ...* I think this through. As long as thanks is possible, then joy is always possible. *Joy is always possible. Whenever*, meaning—now; *wherever*, meaning—here. The holy grail of joy is not in some exotic location or some emotional mountain peak experience. The joy wonder could be here! Here, in the messy, piercing ache of now, joy might be—unbelievably—possible! The only place we need see before we die is this place of seeing God, here and now.

I whisper it out loud, let the tongue feel these sounds, the ear hear their truth.

*Charis.* Grace.

*Eucharisteo.* Thanksgiving.

*Chara.* Joy.

A triplet of stars, a constellation in the black.

A threefold cord that might hold a life? Offer a way up into the fullest life?

Grace, thanksgiving, joy. *Eucharisteo.*

A Greek word ... that might make meaning of everything?



When children sleep under the scraps stitched into quilts and the clock ticks too loudly through the dark hours and the spiral galaxies spin in space, I lie under the afghan by the fire and read the words of an old sermon. It is weeks later now, and the mind stores things, waiting for such a time when God aligns the stars. I read, “The greatest thing is to give thanks for everything. He who has learned this knows what it means

to live. . . . He has penetrated the whole mystery of life: giving thanks for everything.”<sup>3</sup> Breath leaves the lung.

I whisper in the dark: *Eucharisteo!*

It really might be the mystery to the fullest life . . .

I lie on relief. I might have found the holy grail . . . and lost it, moved on. And yet really—hadn’t God set the holy grail in the center of Christianity? *Eucharisteo*, it’s the central symbol of Christianity. Thanksgiving. The table with its emblems is the essence of what it means to live the Christ-life. Sunday after Sunday in our nondenominational Bible church, we’re formally invited to take the bread, the wine. Doesn’t the continual repetition of beginning our week at the table of the Eucharist clearly place the whole of our lives into the context of thanksgiving?

And too . . . it’s the most common of foods, bread. The drink of the vine has been part of our meal taking across centuries and cultures. Jesus didn’t institute the Eucharist around some unusual, rare, once-a-year event, but around this continual act of eating a slice of bread, drinking a cup of fruit from the vine. First Corinthians 11:26 reads, “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup” (NIV)—*whenever*.

Like every day. Whenever we eat.

*Eucharisteo*—whenever: now. Joy—wherever: here.

Doesn’t Christ, at His death meal, set the entirety of our everyday bread and drink lives into the framework of *eucharisteo*? The Big Dipper lurks low outside the window. Yet how does the framework of *eucharisteo* undergird a life? Penetrating the mystery is like discovering galaxies; there is always more.

I stand the next morning on planks of light lying down across the floor, and I bake bread, yeasty dough moist between

my fingers, and that one word works me, again and again—*eucharisteo*. I won't let it go this time. I'll enter into the mystery.

I shape loaves and think how Jesus took the bread and gave thanks ... and then the miracle of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes.

How Jesus took the bread and gave thanks ... and then the miracle of Jesus enduring the cross for the joy set before Him.

How Jesus stood outside Lazarus's tomb, the tears streaming down His face, and He looked up and prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me ..." (John 11:41 NIV). And then the miracle of a dead man rising! Thanksgiving raises the dead! The empty, stiff cadaver surging, the veins full of blood, the alveoli of the lungs filling with oxygen, the coronary arteries full of the whoosh of thrumming life.

How there is thanks ... and then the mind-blowing miracle! I lay loaves into pans and feel years of the angst lying down too.

*Eucharisteo*—thanksgiving—*always precedes the miracle*.

The bread rises.

And I stand in the kitchen stirring a kettle of lunch's lentil soup, the one that calls for the salsa and the carrots and the hungry children, and I read while stirring and I have to sit down to let the words find their places: "The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world."<sup>4</sup> That was the fall! Non-*eucharisteo*, ingratitude, was the fall—humanity's discontent with all that God freely gives. That is what has scraped me raw: ungratefulness. Then to find Eden, the abundance of Paradise, I'd need to forsake my non-*eucharisteo*, my bruised and bloodied ungrateful life, and grab hold to *eucharisteo*, a lifestyle of thanksgiving. Might a life of

*eucharisteo* really work the miracle of the God-communion? I rise from the chair.

That's when I begin to track it whenever I open my Bible, the red pen in hand, hunt down the trail of *eucharisteo* through Scripture. Where it leads barbs, and I am surprised and I reel.

“*On the night when he was betrayed*, the Lord Jesus took some bread and *gave thanks to God for it*. Then he broke it in pieces . . .” (1 Corinthians 11:23–24, emphasis added). Jesus, on the night before the driving hammer and iron piercing through ligament and sinew, receives what God offers as grace (*charis*), the germ of His thanksgiving (*eucharistia*)? Oh. Facing the abandonment of God Himself (does it get any worse than this?), Jesus offers *thanksgiving* for even that which will break Him and crush Him and wound Him and yield a bounty of joy (*chara*). The mystery always contains more mysteries.

Do I really want this way?

I listen to Matthew 11 for a whole week while exercising, panting hard, skin flushed with life, before I snare this truth—and it snares me:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent.

“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.” (Matthew 11:20–21, 23 NIV)

And then what does Jesus directly do, in the face of apparent failure, when no one responded to His teaching and things didn't work out at all? He lives out *eucharisteo*. “At that time, [*precisely at that failing time*] Jesus answered and said, ‘I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .’” (Matthew

11:25 KJV). In the midst of what seems a mess, in the tripping up and stumbling down of all hopes, Jesus gives thanks?

What precedes the miracle is thanksgiving, *eucharisteo*, and it is a Greek word with a hard meaning that is harder yet to live. Do I really want to take up this word?

But I wonder it one Sunday as they pass the broken loaf on that plate of silver, from Paula Van de Kemp to Ron Collins to Tammi Lindsay reaching for it over her kids. Maybe I already take up *eucharisteo*'s hard meaning every time I take Communion? In a very tangible, physical act, aren't I enacting my thanksgiving for His pain? In a very real way, in a digestible, consuming-oneness way, I'm celebrating greater gain through great loss. "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16 NIV). The Eucharist invites us to give thanks for dying. To participate in His death with our own daily dying and give thanks for it. Then Mrs. Klumpenhower passes me the silver plate, and I tear off my small chunk of bread, chunk of the dead-and-risen-again wheat. I feel the granules between the fingers. I lay the torn bread on the tongue and I remember and press it to the roof of my mouth and the bread melts and I give thanks for the dying.

I swallow it down.

This constellation in the dark—grace, thanksgiving, joy—it might be like that—reaching for stars. So hard. *So hard.*

Is there some easier way to the fulfilling life?



The day I peel back chapter 17 of Luke's gospel, I think I have my answer.

I sit at the prayer bench before my bedroom window. Outside, our boys roll millions of flakes into a snow fort. I read the passage, one I remember from the musty basement of the Knox Presbyterian Church Sunday school. I think I know this one. Jesus restores ten lepers to wholeness. And only one returns to offer any thanks. I remember the moral too, Mrs. Morrison and her glossy red lipstick: “How often do you remember to say thanks?” Yes, I think I know this one.

I skim.

“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan” (Luke 17:15–16 NIV). Yes, thankfulness, I know. Next verse.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:17–19 NIV)

Wait. I trace back. Hadn’t Jesus already completely healed him? Exactly like the other nine who were cured who hadn’t bothered to return and thank Him. So what does Jesus mean, “Your faith has made you well”? Had I underinterpreted this passage, missed some hidden mystery? I slow down and dig. I read Jesus’ words in Young’s Literal Translation, “And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Having risen, be going on, thy faith has saved thee.’” Saved thee? I dig deeper. It’s *sozo* in the Greek. Many translations render *sozo* as being made “well” or “whole,” but its literal meaning, I read it—“to save.” *Sozo* means salvation. It means true wellness, complete wholeness. To live *sozo* is to live the full life. Jesus came that we might live life to the full; He came to give us *sozo*. And when did the leper receive

*sozo*—the saving to the full, whole life? When he returned and gave thanks. I lay down my pen.

Our very saving is associated with our gratitude.

Mrs. Morrison hadn't mentioned this. But . . . of course. If our fall was the non-*eucharisteo*, the ingratitude, then salvation must be intimately related to *eucharisteo*, the giving of thanks.

I look back to the text. That is what it says: "Thy faith has saved thee." And the leper's faith was a faith that said thank you. Is that it? Jesus counts thanksgiving as integral in a faith that saves.

We only enter into the full life if our faith gives thanks.

Because how else do we accept His free gift of salvation if not with thanksgiving? Thanksgiving is the evidence of our acceptance of whatever He gives. Thanksgiving is the manifestation of our *Yes!* to His grace.

Thanksgiving is inherent to a true salvation experience; thanksgiving is necessary to live the well, whole, *fullest* life.

"If the church is in Christ, its initial act is always an act of thanksgiving, of returning the world to God," writes Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann.<sup>5</sup> If I am truly in Christ, mustn't my initial act, too, always be an act of thanksgiving, returning to Jesus with thanks on the lips?

I would read it much later in the pages of the Psalms, at the close of a Communion service as the bread and the wine were returned to the table, the Farmer handing his Bible over to me, his finger holding the verse for me to see because he had just read it there, what I had been saying, living, believing, and the chin would quiver before I'd brim at the way God shows His salvation: "He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God" (Psalm 50:23 NIV).

*Thanksgiving*—giving thanks in everything—prepares the way that God might show us His *fullest* salvation in Christ.

The act of sacrificing thank offerings to God—even for the bread and cup of cost, for cancer and crucifixion—*this* prepares the way for God to show us His *fullest* salvation from bitter, angry, resentful lives and from all sin that estranges us from Him. At the Eucharist, Christ breaks His heart to heal ours—Christ, the complete accomplishment of our salvation. And the miracle of *eucharisteo* never ends: thanksgiving is what precedes the miracle of that salvation being fully worked out in our lives. Thanksgiving—giving thanks in everything—is what prepares the way for salvation’s whole restoration. Our salvation in Christ is real, yet the completeness of that salvation is not fully realized in a life until the life realizes the need to give thanks. In everything?

I would never experience the fullness of my salvation until I expressed the fullness of my thanks every day, and *eucharisteo* is elemental to living the saved life.

Mrs. Morrison hadn’t told me this either.

And sitting there before the window, I’m struck, a comet blazing across the empty dark of my life. All those years thinking I was saved and had said my yes to God, but was really living the no. Was it because I had never fully experienced the whole of my salvation? Had never lived out the fullest expression of my salvation in Christ? Because I wasn’t taking everything in my life and returning to Jesus, falling at His feet and thanking Him. I sit still, blinded. This is why I sat all those years in church but my soul holes had never fully healed.

*Eucharisteo*, the Greek word with the hard meaning and the



harder meaning to live—this is the only way from empty to full.

I watch our boys carve in the wall of their snow fort.

They dig and their cheeks flame with the heat of the work, their hair damp with the effort. I think of the mother of the daughter with cancer, my father-in-law asking if I'm ready to go Home. No. I still have no words. Our tallest son has a shovel and the youngest son, a garden spade, and they dig into their wall. I have just one word. A word to seize and haul up out of a terminal nightmare, a word for fearless dying, for saved, fully healed living, a word that works the miracle that heals the soul and raises the very dead to life.

The packed snow of the fort gives way and there it is. A door in the wall.

*Eucharisteo.*

The way through is hard. But do I really want to be saved?

## CHAPTER 3

# *first flight*

Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.

*Sarah Ban Breathnach*

The window in the den is open wide, the carved loon and the mallard sitting still on the sill, the heartwood of a tree hewn into a longing wing.

In a friend's kitchen, I work too, cutting cucumbers.

It's drifting in on July, and I can hear it, up from the riverside, peals of child laughter, this stream running smooth, and the seedy cucumber disks fall to the china plate, their own green platters full of summer. She has a vase by the sink.

Tall with the foxglove spires, their full pink lips flecked with drops of scarlet, and I can just see how she would have cut each stalk careful and carried it in here, beauty for the women come to the tap for water. A medicinal bloom for heart failure, I remember reading that of foxgloves, a heart strengthener. Did she think of that when she cut them, thinking of me coming?

The men voices wander in the open window too, with the smoke and the sizzling, their broad backs hanging over flame and the grill all dripping. I'm hungry. My blade slices rings of

the green. She stands at the stove, stirring a sauce, us parents cooking for the broods we have borne, and I almost don't hear her when she says it.

"You've changed." She turns to me, and I turn to catch the words.

"I have?" She's caught me off guard. I'm thick-tongued and the cheeks flame and I reach for the pitcher, to pour the cups full and distract from her catching me trying to take wing.

"Yes . . . you've changed." Shelly sets her pot on a trivet, her eyes on me, and I can feel them and I just set out the glasses.

I don't say it, but I am thinking she may be right and I had felt it for months, the maturing, the swelling, the something different that had begun to happen. But I had thought the re-creation was still embryonic, a bud of hope. I hadn't thought it had fully bloomed. I hadn't thought that anyone could see the light in the eyes.

"It's that list you've been writing, isn't it?" She clatters down bowls.

I concentrate on pouring the water steady into each empty cup.

A fly cuts the surface of one full glass. I can see it—the wounding of water.

"Yes . . ." There. A moment. And yes. "It's The List."

The wound of the water smoothes . . . fades . . . heals.



I may have always known that change takes real intentionality, like a woman bent over her garden beds every day with a spade and the determined will to grow up something good to strengthen the heart.

I may even have known that change requires more than

merely thinking the warm and fuzzy thoughts about a door and a way through and that Greek word, *eucharisteo*, holding the mystery to the full life and ever after.

But none of that at all meant that I knew what to do.

How in the world, for the sake of my soul, do I learn to practically pick up *eucharisteo*, the word I had underlined as a firm foundation to lay down under all of my days?

How in the world, for the sake of my joy, do I learn to use *eucharisteo* to overcome my one ugly and self-destructive habit of ingratitude (that habit that causes both my cosmic and daily fall) with the saving habit of gratitude—that would lead me back to deep God-communion.

To live—at all—I needed to know.

I had read that too, written by a wise man of old, Jean Pierre de Caussade: “When one is thirsty one quenches one’s thirst by drinking, not by reading books which treat of this condition.”<sup>1</sup> If we are dying of thirst, passively reading books about water quenches little; the only way to quench the parched mouth is to close the book and dip the hand into water and bring it to the lips. If we thirst, we’ll have to drink.

I would have to *do* something.

But I hadn’t known at all the day I laid aside the books about *eucharisteo* and picked up a pen to begin that list that I was really taking down, swallowing, the first real drink and how I’d transform. Or that the transformation would be so visible.

It was a dare, like a love dare of sorts, and I take it one clear November morning, not at all unlike that long ago November morning that her blood soaked the ground and I can never forget. It is the beginning of list season. Lists of holiday menus, lists of handmade projects, lists of have-to-buys. They’re

scattered and stacked across the counter, around my desk, when a friend's dashed-off digital line blinks up on my screen. She dares me, and I don't even blink. Could I write a list of a thousand things I love? I read her line again. As in, begin *another* list? To name one thousand blessings—one thousand gifts—is that what she means? Sure, whatever.

It's not like I thought that this is the carving, the flying, the healing of my wounds. Sometimes you don't know when you're taking the first step through a door until you're already inside.

I grab a scrap paper out of the ash-woven basket at the end of the counter, one with a child's drawing of St. Patrick, I think, headed to Ireland because he's in a boat and those really do look like shamrocks on his sleeve—and I flip it over. Across the backside, on a whim, a dare, I scratch it down: Gift List. I begin the list. Not of gifts I want but of gifts I *already have*.

1. *Morning shadows across the old floors*
2. *Jam piled high on the toast*
3. *Cry of blue jay from high in the spruce*

That is the beginning and I smile. I can't believe how I smile. I mean, they are just the common things and maybe I don't even know they are gifts really until I write them down and that is really what they look like. Gifts He bestows. This writing it down—it is sort of like . . . unwrapping love.

It might fit like a glove.

16. *Leafy life scent of the florist shop*
17. *The creak of her old knees*
18. *Wind flying cold wild in hair*

And when the house sleeps all heavy and only the dog barks crazy out on the lawn up at the cold round moon, I look

down at Day 1 of counting all the way up to one thousand gifts. I run my hands across the page. I see again frames of the day, a life album in miniature. Writing the list, it makes me feel . . . happy. All day. I can hardly believe how it does that, that running stream of consciousness, river I drink from and I'm quenched in, a surging stream of grace and it's wild how it sweeps me away. And I add one more to the list. To feel it all again. I can't understand why it does that. And yet . . . too . . . the list, it feels foreign, strange. Long, I am woman who speaks but one language, the language of the fall—discontentment and self-condemnation, the critical eye and the never satisfied.

And this, wasn't this . . . I finger the corner of the page neatly numbered.

Well, if all these were gifts that God gives—then wasn't my writing down the list like . . . receiving. Like taking with thanks. *Wait.*

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them . . .” *Gave thanks.*

This crazy-dare gift list—it's language lessons in *eucharisteo!*  
For real?

But *eucharisteo*—it's the word Jesus whispered when death prowled close and His anguish trickled down bloody. He took the bread, *even the bread of death*, and gave thanks. I look down at my list. This thanks that I am doing—it seems so . . . crude. Trivial. If this list is the learning of the language of *eucharisteo*—this feels like . . . guttural groanings. But perhaps the “full of grace” vocabulary begins haltingly, simply, like a child, thankful for the childlike.

But doesn't the kingdom of heaven belong to such as these?



At first, it's the dare that keeps me going. That and how happy it makes me—giddy—this list writing of all that is good and pure and lovely and beautiful. But what keeps me going is what I read in that Bible lying open on my prayer bench looking out the window to the snow fort. The fort with a door in the wall. It's Paul writing the letter to the Philippians. I read the fourth chapter. I almost don't see it, but Paul repeats it twice in only two sentences, so I don't miss it:

I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.”  
(Philippians 4:11–12)

I read it many times, groping for the latch.

There it is—the secret to living joy in every situation, the full life of *eucharisteo*. Twice Paul whispers it: “I have learned . . .” Learned. I would have to learn *eucharisteo*. Learn *eucharisteo*—learn it to live fully. Learn it like I know my skin, my face, the words on the end of my tongue. Like I know my own name. Learn how to be thankful—whether empty or full. Could the list teach me even that hard language? Over time? Gratitude in the midst of death and divorce and debt—that's the language I've got to learn to speak—because that's the kind of life I'm living, the kind I have to solve. If living *eucharisteo* is the key to unlocking the mystery of life, this I want. I want the hunt, the long sleuth, the careful piecing together. To learn how to be grateful and happy, whether hands full or hands empty. That is a secret worth spending a life on learning. Even if it takes a Rosetta Stone of decades.

I wake the next morning and I grip my pen, ink to crack the code.



Mr. Klumpenhower slides the mail into the clunky mailbox at the end of the lane, the one I painted Martha Stewart's burnt maple syrup but it really is more a barn red. I stand at the window and I hold the pen. I write it down in my journal:

*22. Mail in the mailbox*

And when my grandma's bona fide wood-handled pressure cooker from the fifties, full with the potatoes, bobbles the steam all dancey over kitchen windows come noon, I hold the pen and I write it down clear:

*23. Grandma's pressure pot still dancing*

Thanks is what multiplies the joy and makes any life large, and I hunger for it.

And when I'm in the produce section of Zehrs Markets looking for a just-ripe clump of bananas and I look over and see an old man all white-whiskered and bent, looking for the just-right card in the Hallmark aisle, I grab the journal from my bag and I hold the pen and I write it down wobbly:

*24. Old men looking for words just perfect*

I know how this makes me feel. I think I'm beginning to know why. How *eucharisteo* always precedes the miracle, even joy in a supermarket.

So I can't say I'm surprised when I read the words of Martin Luther, author of those ninety-five theses nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, but he did say, "If you want



to change the world, pick up your pen.”<sup>2</sup> This does feel like my own reformation, all things wooden-hard giving way to the sky. Recording gifts to reform. I pick up a pen and write of the God-gifts—all these things I had blithely and blindly brushed past before—and the list is my thanks, and *eucharisteo* is, I swear an oath, opening up the heights.

He says it too, John Piper—the things I am discovering, me with a hunt pen in hand—that moving the ink across the page opens up the eyes, that he may not understand how it sheds light, focuses its lens, but he only knows “that there are eyes in pencils and in pens.”<sup>3</sup>

Eyes in pencils and in pens. I hold the seeing pen, the one with eyes, eyes that, in due time, might just decode the whole of *eucharisteo*.

I am hard after it.

Because the picking up of a pen isn’t painful and ink can be cheap medicine. And I just might live.

I hold the pen. The cataracts clear.

37. *Windmills droning in day’s last breeze*

38. *Wool sweaters with turtleneck collars*

39. *Faint aroma of cattle and straw*

“A nail is driven out by another nail; habit is overcome by habit.”<sup>4</sup> Erasmus said that, contemporary and admirer of Martin Luther. When I read this thought, I am surprised because I had never known and I am sad for all that would have changed if only I had.

I look down at the pen, this pen I keep wielding, one writing her way all the way to one thousand. This pen: this *is* nothing less than the driving of nails. Nails driving out my habits of discontent and driving in my habit of *eucharisteo*. I’m

hammering in nails to pound out nails, ugly nails that Satan has pierced through the world, my heart. It starts to unfold, light in the dark, a door opening up, how all these years it's been utterly pointless to try to wrench out the spikes of discontent. Because that habit of discontentment can only be driven out by hammering in one iron sharper. The sleek pin of gratitude.

I hammer.

*54. Moonlight on pillows*

*55. Long, lisped prayers*

*56. Kisses in dark*

And in a house sleeping, my heart rings.



In the morning, my Farmer Husband comes in from the barn smelling of hogs.

“We lost another litter this morning.” He washes at the sink, dries those rough mitt hands, dark and work-worn, on a gingham towel draped over the cupboard. “All of them stillborn.”

I smother a sigh with a smile, weak and resigned. He takes it regardless. “Yeah . . .” He too smiles soft, a hand letting go, and our eyes hold each other long.

At the table, I pour milk over porridge. The Farmer sinks down into his chair at the end, lowers his head in prayer. He thanks God for the sustenance. I pray for some of that too.

I watch him eat. His three-day stubble, it's brushed with flakes of cracked corn, remnants of what he fed to the sows this morning. The neck front of his T-shirt is stained with sweat. He works four hard hours in the barn feeding hundreds of

sows, and the sun is just now meandering up to the table. The glass of orange juice set out for him sits untouched. I know what he would never tell me: more cold sores on the inner wall of his mouth. Stress.

It's just that this thing, this sickness getting to sows—getting to him—has no name. It's been months. He's sent feed samples to an international lab, run various water trials, called in the vet to run a multipronged battery of tests. Nothing. No diagnosis for this spike in late-term miscarriages, the loss of litter after still-shriveled litter.

"I told Greg that I think it's viral, not environmental." He reaches for a second piece of toast. The Farmer and the vet have known each other since grade school and the soccer fields and Good News Bible Club.

"He asked if we could reconfigure production data to analyze symptoms by parity." I hand him his two vitamin C tablets. "Some strange patterns. And the thing that makes no sense? Sows testing pregnant when they aren't. You can hear the swoosh, swoosh with the ultrasound, but she's not pregnant. Why?!"

I'm getting good at feeble half smiles.

I clear off the table and he reads Scripture. We do this at the close of every meal. This morning, the book of Amos, the prophet-herdsman with the name that means "burden bearer."

Late afternoon, the back door latches close and water runs at sink. That's always him, washing up first. I turn to the clock. He's in before dark? Before I get to the mudroom, he slips past me to the study. "I think I'm on to something."

He's already hunched over keyboard, tapping in some search. I stay in the kitchen, chop up onions, wear smells of my own. I can hear the click of the cursor, him tracking a lead.

Then sauté, then broth, then vegetables to the pot. The sun has turned off the lights, gone to bed. In the dark of the study, his face is lit by the blue web. Soup simmers low, flavors bubbling, and I slip in behind him in front of the screen. His shoulders are tight, man tense with the trail; I rub the muscles deliberate, deep. “Anything?”

“It looks like it . . .” He mutters the words more to himself than to me. “If this isn’t it, I don’t know what is. Everything just . . . lines up.”

My thumbs work circles into the sinews. I scan cyberwords. The words make me wince. “You think so?”

His cursor lingers at the end of a paragraph . . . then he spins his chair around, pulls me down to his lap. “I think that’s it—that’s the name.” He murmurs the words near my ear.

“If that’s . . .” I point to the screen, to that name too long to pronounce. “If that’s really what’s going on out in the barn, are you OK?”

I can feel his relief, the way it drains into me.

“Yes . . . and no. I don’t like what it is, or that it looks like it’s nearly impossible to eradicate, but you know what?”

I turn to find his eyes, the way he and I meet, touch. His hands around me tighten, us melded in hope.

“I’m strangely happy.”

It’s true. No furrow plows across his brow. His maritime eyes lay calm.

“God’s good. Just naming it . . . *Just naming it*. When you don’t have the name for something, you’re haunted by shadows. It ages you.”

I press my lined forehead onto his.

“But when you can name something . . .”

When you can name something.

My list of naming God-gifts lies open on the counter . . .

*117. Washing the warm eggs*

*118. Crackle in fireplace*

*119. Still warm cookies*

Naming is Edenic.

I name gifts and go back to the Garden and God in the beginning who first speaks a name and lets what is come into existence. This naming is how the first emptiness of space fills: the naming of light and land and sky. The first man's first task is to name. Adam completes creation with his Maker through the act of naming creatures, releasing the land from chaos, from the teeming, indefinable mass. I am seeing it too, in the journal, in the face of the Farmer: naming offers the gift of recognition. When I name moments—string out laundry and name-pray, *thank You, Lord, for bedsheets in billowing winds, for fluff of sparrow landing on line, sun winter warm, and one last leaf still hanging in the orchard*—I am Adam and I discover my meaning and God's, and to name is to learn the language of Paradise. This naming work never ends for all the children of Adam. Naming to find an identity, our identity, God's.

It's late, and in the lamplight when the bones finally rest, I read and turn a page and run unexpected into these words,

Now, in the Bible a name . . . reveals the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God's gift. . . . To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it, to know it as coming from God and to know its place and function within the cosmos created by God. To name a thing, in other words, is to bless God for it and in it.<sup>5</sup>

I read the words again. The heart palpitates hard. I don't

hear the clock or the slosh hum of the dishwasher. All I can see, think, is that my whim writing of one thousand gritudes, the naming of the moments—this is truly a holy work.

This naming really *does* call now a gift, a gift of God. I read again: “To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it.” I look at a day, a thing, an event in front of me, and it may look manna-strange: “What is it?” But when I name it, the naming of it manifests its meaning: to know it comes from God. *This is gift!* Naming is to know a thing’s function in the cosmos—to name is to *solve mystery*.

In naming that which is right before me, that which I’d otherwise miss, the invisible becomes visible.

The space that spans my inner emptiness fills in the naming. I name. And I know the face I face.

*God’s!* God is in the details; God is in the moment. God is in all that blurs by in a life—even hurts in a life.

GOD!

How can I not name? Naming these moments may change the ugly names I call myself.

I put a pen to a journal, to name solve, and I shake it when it runs dry, trace circles, and I coax out ink.



Some days I coax hard. I am tired. I don’t know if it’s the way the honey light runs down the walls and sticks to all the dust lying still on every surface, or if a fog films over the eyes, or if I am plain deceived. But that morning the washing machine hums early and the kids, all six, already studying long, I try taking up *eucharisteo* because I have known it before, that joy-miracle that might happen even now and here.

243. *Clean sheets smelling like wind*

244. *Hot oatmeal tasting like home*

245. *Bare toes in early light*

I do feel that. Happy when I name. But the porridge pot soaks in the sink and I don't know. How much is my tongue, tail of the heart, learning the real language of *eucharisteo*? (I didn't know then what was to come.) I forget Eden and naming and nails, and it all seems just a bit . . . juvenile. Contrived. This is the whole of the secret learning? I confess, even after all that I've seen and tasted and touched, I do scoff. I yearn for the stuff of saints, the hard language, the fluency of thanksgiving in all, even the ugliest and most heartbreaking. I want the very fullest life. I wonder, even just an inkling—is this but a ridiculous experiment? Some days, ones with laundry and kids and dishes in sink, it is hard to think that the insulting ordinariness of this truly teaches the full mystery of the all most important, *eucharisteo*. It's so frustratingly common—it's offensive.

Driving nails into a life always is.

I pick up the journal. Paul had twice said it, and I mustn't forget it. He said he had to *learn*. And learning requires practice—sometimes even mind-numbing practice. C. S. Lewis said it too, to a man looking for fullest life: “If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad.”<sup>6</sup> It might even be good. So I, too, can be like our children and the everyday training, memorizing of the Latin paradigms with the practicing chants: *amo, amas, amat*. The washing machine dings and I light. This is why I had never really learned the language of “thanks in

all things"! Though pastors preached it, I still came home and griped on. I had never *practiced*. Practiced until it became the second nature, the first skin. Practice is the hardest part of learning, and training is the essence of transformation. Practice, practice, practice. Hammer. Hammer. Hammer.

This training might prove to be the hardest of my life. It just might save my life.



Some days I pick up a camera and it's a hammer.

The lens is my ink, for cameras have sensor eyes, and pixels record. I slide it into a pocket, a thin point-and-shoot, and find another way to chronicle, to force the lids open; another way to receive the moment with thanks reverential. When he comes in from the barn, the Farmer finds me with my hammer in hand, leaning over a plate of cheese grated and sitting in sunlight. It is true. I do feel foolish. I mean, it's curls of mozzarella and cheddar piled high in a pond of golden day. And I'm changing the settings for macro, pulling in for a close-up frame. He's fed 650 sows with one strong arm this morning, flicked on a welder and melded steel. It is quite possible that the God-glory of a ring of shredded cheese may be lost on him.

It isn't.

"I like finding you just like this." He wraps one arm around my bowed middle, draws me close and up into him strong.

"Crazy like this?" I blush silliness, and he brushes close with the four-day stubble. He laughs.

"*Perfect* like this." He nods toward the cheese plate. "You being happy in all these little things that God gives. It makes me very happy."



Happy in all these little things that God gives. Ridiculously happy over slips of cheese. That I am, and it's wild, and, oh, I am the one who laughs. *Me! Changed! Surprised by joy!*

Joy is the realest reality, the fullest life, and joy is always *given*, never grasped. God *gives* gifts and I *give* thanks and I unwrap the gift given: *joy*.

It is true, I never stop wanting to learn the hard *eucharisteo* for the deathbeds and dark skies and the prodigal sons. But I accept this is the way to begin, and all hard things come in due time and with practice. Yet now wisps of cheese tell me gentle that this is the first secret step into *eucharisteo*'s miracle. Gratitude for the seemingly insignificant—a seed—this plants the giant miracle. The miracle of *eucharisteo*, like the Last Supper, is in the eating of crumbs, the swallowing down one mouthful. Do not disdain the small. The whole of the life—even the hard—is made up of the minute parts, and if I miss the infinitesimals, I miss the whole. These are new language lessons, and I live them out. There is a way to live the big of giving thanks in all things. It is this: to give thanks in this one small thing. The moments will add up.

I, too, had read it often, the oft-quoted verse: “And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). And I, too, would nod and say straight-faced, “I’m thankful for everything.” But in this counting gifts, to one thousand, more, I discover that slapping a sloppy brush of thanksgiving over everything in my life leaves me deeply thankful for very few things in my life. A lifetime of sermons on “thanks in all things” and the shelves sagging with books on these things and I testify: life-changing gratitude does not fasten to a life unless nailed through with one very specific nail at a time.

Little nails and a steady hammer can rebuild a life—  
*eucharisteo* precedes the miracle.

I snap a picture of cheese.



I roll out the dough, sprinkle the ring cheese on round pizza thin. I feel how the sun lies down warm across hands and how thanks soaks through the pores. I think how God-glory in a cheese ring might seem trifling. Even offensive, to focus the lens of a heart on the minute, in a world mangled and maimed and desperately empty.

I know there is poor and hideous suffering, and I've seen the hungry and the guns that go to war. I have lived pain, and my life can tell: I only deepen the wound of the world when I neglect to give thanks for early light dappled through leaves and the heavy perfume of wild roses in early July and the song of crickets on humid nights and the rivers that run and the stars that rise and the rain that falls and all the good things that a good God gives. Why would the world need more anger, more outrage? How does it save the world to reject unabashed joy when it is joy that saves us? Rejecting joy to stand in solidarity with the suffering doesn't rescue the suffering. The converse does. The brave who focus on all things good and all things beautiful and all things true, even in the small, who give thanks for it and discover joy even in the here and now, they are the change agents who bring fullest Light to all the world. When we lay the soil of our hard lives open to the rain of grace and let joy penetrate our cracked and dry places, let joy soak into our broken skin and deep crevices, *life* grows. How can this not be the best thing for the world? For us? The clouds open when we mouth thanks.

This thanks for the minute, this is to say the prayer of the most blessed of women about to participate in one of the most transformative events the world has ever known. Mary, with embryonic God Himself filling her womb, exalts in quiet ways: “My soul doth magnify the Lord” (Luke 1:46 KJV).

So might I; yes, and even here.

Something always comes to fill the empty places. And when I give thanks for the seemingly microscopic, I make a place for God to grow within me. This, *this*, makes me full, and I “magnify him with thanksgiving” (Psalm 69:30 KJV), and God enters the world. What will a life magnify? The world’s stress cracks, the grubbiness of a day, all that is wholly wrong and terribly busted? Or God? Never is God’s omnipotence and omniscience diminutive. God is not in need of magnifying by us so small, but the reverse. It’s our lives that are little and we have falsely inflated self, and in thanks we decrease and the world returns right. I say thanks and I swell with Him, and I swell the world and He stirs me, joy all afoot.

This, I think, this is the other side of prayer.

This act of naming grace moments, this list of God’s gifts, moves beyond the shopping list variety of prayer and into the other side. The other side of prayer, the interior of His throne room, the inner walls of His powerful, love-beating heart. The list is *God’s* list, the pulse of His love—the love that thrums on the other side of our prayers. And I see it now for what this really is, this dare to write down one thousand things I love. It really is a dare to name all the ways that *God* loves me. The true Love Dare. To move into His presence and listen to His love unending and know the grace uncontainable. This is the vault of the miracles. The only thing that can change us, the world, is this—all His love. I must never be deceived by the

simplicity of *eucharisteo* and penning His love list. Cheese. Sun. Journal. Naming. Love. Here. It all feels startlingly hallowed, and I breathe shallow. I should take the shoes off.

I am bell and He is sure wind, and He moves and I am rung and I know it for what it is: this is the other side where Daniel, man of prayer, lived. Change agent, mover and shaker Daniel, second-to-the-king Daniel, sleeping-on-perfect-peace-in-the-den-of-the-lions Daniel. Daniel is a man of power prayer, not because he bends the stiff knees and makes petitions of the High Throne three times daily. Rather, his prayers move kings and lion jaws because Daniel “prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, *giving thanks* to his God.” (Daniel 6:10, emphasis added). Three times a day, Daniel prayed *thanksgiving* for the everyday common, for the God-love spilling forth from the God-heart at the center of all. The only real prayers are the ones mouthed with thankful lips. Because gratitude ushers into the other side of prayer, into the heart of the God-love, and all power to change the world, me, resides here in His love. Prayer, *to be prayer*, to have any power to change anything, must first speak thanks: “in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6 NIV, emphasis added). “*First*, I tell you to pray for all people, asking God for what they need and *being thankful to him*” (1 Timothy 2:1 NCV, emphasis added). Prayer without ceasing is only possible in a life of continual thanks. How did I ever think there was another way to enter into His courts but with thanksgiving?

It’s that one wondrous mound of grated cheese, rung in the sunlight and captured in frame, that makes me think it. What that ancient wise woman Julian of Norwich stated:

The highest form of prayer is to the goodness of God. . . . God only desires that our soul cling to him with all of its strength, in particular, that it clings to his goodness. For of all the things our minds can think about God, it is thinking upon his goodness that pleases him most and brings the most profit to our soul.<sup>7</sup>

The gift list *is* thinking upon His goodness—and this, *this* pleases Him most! *And* most profits my own soul and I am beginning, only beginning, to know it. If clinging to His goodness is the highest form of prayer, then this seeing His goodness with a pen, with a shutter, with a word of thanks, these really are the most sacred acts conceivable. The ones anyone can conceive, anywhere, in the midst of anything. *Eucharisteo* takes us into His love. I am struck and I long chime: Daniel is only a man of prayer because he is a man of thanks, and the only way to be a woman of prayer is to *be a woman of thanks*. And not sporadic, general thanks, but three times a day *eucharisteo*. Was it the power of *everyday thanksgiving* prayer that shut the gaping mouths of the lions ravenous? Lions would count as hard *eucharisteo*.

I slide a pizza out of oven and cheese has melted over all and through all and someday I would tell Shelly that life change comes when we receive life with thanks and ask for nothing to change.

I cut the pizza round into slices. And the porcelain dove, etched with the word *peace*, the one that hangs in hope by my corner kitchen window—she looks to soar into hard winds.

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## notes

### chapter 2: a word to live . . . and die by

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### chapter 3: first flight

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