

get
your
life
back

EVERYDAY PRACTICES
FOR A WORLD GONE MAD

JOHN ELDREDGE



NELSON
BOOKS

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ISBN 978-1-4002-0867-8 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4002-0866-1 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4002-1921-6 (IE)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019953528

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Brian Hampton, friend and comrade since
the beginning. We'll see you soon, pal.*

May the Son of God, who is already formed in you, grow in you, so that for you he will become immeasurable, and that in you he will become laughter, exultation, the fullness of joy which no one can take from you.

—ISAAC OF STELLA

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Introduction

THE RESCUE

There's a madness to our moment, and we need to name it for the lunacy it is. Because it's taking our lives hostage.

First, there's the blistering pace of life.

I texted friends an announcement that was really important to me; they replied with little thumbs-up emojis. I think to myself, *That's it—you can't even answer a text with a text?* Email felt so efficient when it replaced the letter; texting seemed like rocket fuel when it came along. But it didn't make our lives more spacious; we simply had to keep up. Now we're living at the speed of the swipe and the "like," moving so fast through our days that typing a single sentence feels cumbersome. Everyone I talk to says they feel busier than ever. My musician friends aren't playing much anymore; my gardening friends don't have time to plant; I currently have eight books I've started to read, and I haven't made it past the first chapter in any of them.

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We've been sucked into a pace of life nobody's enjoying.

Then there's the deluge of media coming at us in a sort of mesmerizing digital spell.

We're spending three hours a day using apps on our phones, ten hours viewing media, consuming enough information each week to crash a laptop (!).¹ We talk about unplugging, but we're enchanted—by the endless social media circus of love and hatred, the vapid, alarming, sensational, and unforgivable. We're snagged by every new notification. And while we've always had our individual struggles and heartbreaks to deal with, now we have the tragedies of the entire world delivered to us hourly on our mobile devices.

This is all very hard on the soul. Traumatizing, in fact. Exposure to traumatic events can traumatize us, and we're getting lots of it in our feed.² It's like we've been swept into the gravitational field of a digital black hole that is sucking our lives from us.

So there's all that. But everybody's talking about that. What got my attention was what was happening to me *as a person*.

I found myself flinching when a friend texted and asked for some time. I didn't want to open email for fear of the demands I'd find there. I had a shorter and shorter fuse in traffic. I felt numb to tragic news reports. It made me wonder—*am I becoming a less-loving person?* I had little capacity for relationships and the things that bring me life—a walk in the woods, dinner with friends, a cold plunge in a mountain lake. When I did steal a moment for something life-giving, I was so distracted I couldn't enjoy it.

Then I realized—it wasn't a failure of love or compassion. These

were symptoms of a soul pushed too hard, strung out, haggard, fried. My soul just can't do life at the speed of smartphones. But I was asking it to; everybody's asking theirs to.

I'm guessing you've experienced something similar. It's likely why you've picked up this book—your soul is looking for something. Are you aware of what it is? How would you score your soul these days:

Are you happy most of the time?
 How often do you feel lighthearted?
 Are you excited about your future?
 Do you feel deeply loved?
 When was the last time you felt carefree?

I know, it's not even fair to ask. Our souls are bleary, seared, smeared. Still able to love, yes; still able to hope and dream. But at the end of any given day, most people come home in a state of exhaustion. Numb on our good days, fried more often than we admit. "I feel all thin, sort of stretched," as Bilbo Baggins said, "like butter that has been scraped over too much bread."³

The world has gone completely mad, and it's trying to take our souls with it.

Now, if we had more of God, that would really help. We could draw upon his love and strength, his wisdom and resilience. After all, God is the fountain of life (Psalm 36:9). If we had more of his lavish life bubbling up in us, it would be a rescue in this soul-scorching hour.

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But this frantic, volatile world constantly wilts the soul, dries it out like a raisin, making it almost impossible to *receive* the life God is pouring forth.

That's called a double bind.

I tried to find more of God, knowing if I only had a greater measure of his life in me, I'd be able to navigate this rough terrain. I was practicing the usual stuff—prayer, worship, scripture, sacrament. But still I felt . . . I don't know . . . shallow somehow. Sipping God with teaspoons, not drinking great gulps; wading, not swimming. My soul felt like a shallow rain puddle. But I know the soul isn't a shallow puddle at all; it's deep and vast, capable of symphonies and heroic courage. I wanted to be living from those deep places, but I felt trapped in the shoals.

It's no coincidence that one of the most important books on our world, and what technology is doing to us, is called *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. We're losing our ability to focus and pay attention longer than a few moments. We live at the depth of the text, the swipe, the "like."⁴ This isn't just an intellectual problem; it's a spiritual crisis. It's pretty hard to hear "deep calling unto deep"⁵ when we're forced into the shallows of our own hearts and souls by this frenetic world.

Jesus heard even my surface prayers; he came to my rescue and began to lead me into a number of helps and practices, what I would call graces. Simple things, like a One Minute Pause, that were accessible and surprising in their power to restore. Learning "benevolent detachment"—the ability to let things go. Allowing for some

transition in my day, instead of just blasting from one thing to the next. Drinking in the beauty God was providing in quiet moments. My soul began to recover, feel better, do better—however you want to describe it. I began to enjoy my life with God so much more; I was finally experiencing the “more” of him I’d been wanting so much. I began to get my life back.

Then I connected the dots. . . .

God *wants* to come to us and restore our lives. He really does. But if our soul is not well, it’s almost impossible to receive him. Dry, scorched ground can’t absorb the very rain it needs.

As C. S. Lewis explained, “The soul is but a hollow which God fills.”⁶ In place of *hollow* I like the word *vessel*, something beautiful and artistic. Our souls are exquisite vessels created by God for him to saturate. I picture the round, curved basin at the top of an elegant fountain, with water spilling down all sides, running over with unceasing life. Wasn’t that the promise? “As Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:38).

And so it follows that if we can receive help for restoring and renewing our weary, besieged souls, we’ll enjoy the fruits (which are many and wonderful) of happy souls and also be able to receive more of God (which is even more wonderful). We’ll find the vibrancy and resiliency we crave as human beings, living waters welling up from deep within. And then—we’ll get our lives back!

But the process needs to be accessible and sustainable. We’ve all tried exercise, diets, Bible study programs that began with vim and verve but over time got shoved to the side, lost in the chaos. I have a

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gym membership; I rarely use it. There are those books I haven't finished, loads of podcasts too. Rest assured—the graces I am offering here are within reach of a normal life. I think you'll find them simple, sustainable, and refreshing.

God wants to strengthen and renew your soul; Jesus longs to give you more of himself. Come, you weary and heavy laden. “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life . . . and you'll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28–30 *THE MESSAGE*). You can get your life back; you can live freely and lightly. The world may be harsh, but God is gentle; he knows what your life is like. What we need to do is put ourselves in places that allow us to receive his help. Let me show you how.

one

THE ONE MINUTE PAUSE

I'm pretty sure a lion came through in the night. Our horses are live wires this morning—racing back and forth across their pasture, necks arched, tails high, snorting. Something put them on high alert.

My wife and I currently have two horses. One is a Paint (sometimes called a Pinto), a beautiful brown-and-white-spotted horse with white mane and black tail. If you saw the western classic *Silverado*, Kevin Costner rode a Paint in that film. The Plains Indians loved the look of Paints so much they would literally paint their ordinary horses to look spotted.¹

Our other horse is a solid brown bay, black mane and tail, with a coat so rich and glossy it looks like a beaver pelt. We used to have eight ponies altogether, but over time as our sons moved away, we trimmed our herd down to a more manageable size. Still, sometimes even caring for two feels like more than we've got room for.

Horses are powerful, magnificent creatures, but they don't see

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themselves that way; in their inner life they feel *vulnerable*. They are, after all, prey animals like elk and deer, that developed their view of the world and their survival skills on the plains of North America and Europe, running from large animals trying to eat them. In the Late Pleistocene, the plains were hunting grounds for huge lions bigger than an African lion, several types of cheetahs, terrible giant ground sloths, dire wolves, voracious short-faced bears, and a host of other high-octane predators. Horses learned their nervous ways in a very rough playground; there's a whole lot of "flight" in their "fight or flight" response.

Come summer we keep our ponies at our cabin out in the western Colorado sage. There are all sorts of predators here—packs of coyotes, black bears, bobcats, lynx, and mountain lions. Lots of lions. I had a horse blow up under me because he simply smelled lion. There was no lion there, but the males mark their territories with their scent. The horse I was riding got one whiff and exploded, leaving me behind in a pile.

Predators hunt under cover of darkness; from the horse's point of view, nighttime calls for high vigilance. Come morning we often need to settle them down before we attempt a ride, so we groom them and do some "ground work." At some point in their connection with us—once they're feeling safe and secure—they let out this wonderful sigh. Out of those large nostrils comes a big, deep, long breath. Their muscles relax; their heads lower. They have switched off hypervigilant mode. I love it when they do that; you're looking for that sigh when you're working with horses.

We humans make that sigh, too, when we feel settled and in a good place.

I'll bet you've experienced that sigh yourself. You get home from a long day, kick off your shoes, grab something to drink, maybe a bag of chips, collapse into your favorite chair, pull a comfy throw over you. Then comes that wonderful sigh. Sometimes we experience it in moments of beauty—sitting on the beach at sunset, pausing by a lake so still it looks like glass. We're comforted by the beauty and sigh. Everything seems right. Sometimes that deep, long exhale comes when we remember a truth precious to us. We read a verse reminding us how much God loves us, and we lean back and sigh as our soul settles back into the comfort of it. I did so just this morning.

It's a good sign, however it comes. It means we're coming down from hypervigilance mode ourselves.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

We, too, live in a world that triggers our souls into vigilance far too often. The complexity of modern life is mind-boggling: the constantly changing social terrain of what's appropriate, the level of trauma we navigate in people's lives. The typical sounds of a city trigger adrenaline responses in us all day long; that deep throbbing bass *whump* coming from the car four lanes over, the one you feel all through your body, is not that different from the sound of

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distant artillery. Thanks to the smartphone and the web, you are confronted on a daily basis with more information than any previous generation had to deal with! And it's not just information; it's the suffering of the entire planet, in minute detail, served up on your feed daily. Add to this the pace at which most of us are required to live our lives. It leaves very little room for that sigh and the experiences that bring it.

We live in a spiritual and emotional state equivalent to horses on the plains during the Late Pleistocene.

This morning I can't tell whether my soul is more in fight or flight. But I do know this—I don't like the state I'm in. I didn't sleep well last night (one of the many consequences of living in a hyper-charged world), and after I finally conked out, I overslept, woke up late, and ever since I've felt behind on everything.

I rushed through breakfast, dashed out the door to get to some meetings, and now I'm rattled. I don't like that feeling, and I don't like the consequences. When I'm rattled, I'm easily irritated with people. I didn't have the patience to listen to what my wife was trying to say this morning. I find it hard to hear from God, and I don't like feeling untethered from him.

I notice now in my rattled state that I want to eat something fatty and sugary; I want something that's going to make me feel better *now*. When we're unsettled, unnerved, unhinged, it's human nature to seek a sense of equilibrium, stability, and I find myself wondering—how many addictions begin here, with just wanting a little comfort? Get out of the rattled place and soothe ourselves with “a little something?”

We live in a crazy-making world. So much stimulation rushes at us with such unrelenting fury, we are overstimulated most of the time. Things that nourish us—a lingering conversation, a leisurely stroll through the park, time to savor both making and then enjoying dinner—these are being lost at an alarming rate; we simply don't have room for them. Honestly, I think most people live their daily lives along a spectrum from slightly rattled to completely fried as their normal state of being.

In the late morning, I finally do what I should have from the beginning—I pause, get quiet, settle down. I give myself permission to simply pause, a little breathing room to come back to myself and God. My breathing returns to normal (I didn't even notice I was holding my breath). A little bit of space begins to clear around me. Suddenly, somewhere outside, someone has just fired up a leaf blower—one of the great pariahs of the human race, the enemy of all tranquility. My body tenses, the stress returns, and because I'm paying attention, I see for myself how the constant stimulation of our chaotic world causes us to live in a state of hypervigilance.

Notice—are your muscles relaxed right now or tense? Is your breathing deep and relaxed, or are you taking short, shallow breaths? Are you able to read this leisurely, or do you feel you need to get through it quickly? Most of the day we simply plow through a myriad of diverse tasks, checking boxes, “getting stuff done.” It frazzles the soul, so we look to all our “comforters” to calm down. But I know my salvation is not in the frappuccino nor the fudge. So I close the

window against the screams of the leaf blower and return to a practice that's become an absolute lifesaver:

The One Minute Pause.

I simply take sixty seconds to be still and let everything go.

As I enter the pause, I begin with release. I let it all go—the meetings, what I know is coming next, the fact I'm totally behind on everything, all of it. I simply let it go. I pray, *Jesus—I give everyone and everything to you*. I keep repeating it until I feel like I'm actually releasing and detaching. *I give everyone and everything to you, God*. All I'm trying to accomplish right now is a little bit of soul-space. I'm not trying to fix anything or figure anything out. I'm not trying to release everything perfectly or permanently. That takes a level of maturity most of us haven't found. But I can let it go for sixty seconds. (That's the brilliance of the pause—all we are asking ourselves to do is let go for sixty seconds.) And as I do, even as I say it out loud—*I give everyone and everything to you*—my soul cooperates a good bit. I'm settling down.

I even sigh, that good sigh.

Then I ask for more of God: *Jesus—I need more of you; fill me with more of you, God. Restore our union; fill me with your life*.

You'll be surprised what a minute can do for you. Even more so as you get practiced at it. Honestly, you can do this pause nearly anytime, anywhere—in your car, on the train, after you get off your phone. I know it seems small, but we have to start somewhere. This pause is accessible; it's doable.

As David wrote in the Psalms, "I have calmed and quieted

myself" (131:2). Or, "I've cultivated a quiet heart." I wonder how many people in your office, your gym, your daily commute could say they've cultivated a quiet heart? What we assume is a normal lifestyle is absolute insanity to the God-given nature of our heart and soul. Broad is the path that leads to destruction, and many there are who travel it.

Nonetheless, this is the world we live in, raise our kids in, navigate our careers in, and so we need to find things that are simple and accessible to begin to take back our souls. The One Minute Pause is within reach. The practice itself is wonderful, and it opens space in your soul for God to meet you there.

The desert fathers of the third and fourth century were a courageous, ragtag group, followers of Jesus who fled the madness of their world to seek a life of beauty and simplicity with God in the silent desert. For they saw the world as "a shipwreck from which every man has to swim for their life."² And think of it: they had no cell phones, no Internet, no media per se, not one automobile, Starbucks, or leaf blower. The news that came their way was local; they did not carry the burdens of every community in the world. They walked everywhere they went. Therefore, they lived at the pace of *three miles an hour* (!). Yet they felt the world sucking the life out of them, and they decided to do something about it.

And so we who live in a far more insane hour and who want to find a better life in God ought to be the first to adopt a few practices that get us out of the madness and into a more settled way of living. Most of us would be happy simply to be a little less rattled.

GENTLE REMINDERS

We live most of our year in suburbia, in a small valley on the edge of our city. Years before suburban development crept in, a convent was established here by the Sisters of St. Francis. The abbey is a medley of beautiful sandstone buildings scattered through rolling grounds of pine and juniper. The sisters have the most lovely practice of solemnly ringing church bells first thing in the morning at six. These aren't the raucous bells that follow a wedding; these are slow, methodic rings: a call to prayer. They sound again in the evening at six. I love the resonance of old bells; they echo through our little valley like a summons out of the past. A call to prayer or silence. I decided to accept the call myself and let the bells be reminders to me to take the One Minute Pause.

A few years ago we took up the practice in our offices. At 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. every day, monastery "bells" ring out as a call to the staff to stop what they're doing, let it all go, and center ourselves in Christ again. I instituted the "corporate" practice because I noticed that I simply go from one thing to another to another, without pause, from morning till night. I finish a phone call and make another. I complete one email and plow through a dozen more. Before I can get through my inbox, I go find someone I need to meet with. There's no pause in my day, no sacred space at all. If God is going to get in, he's practically got to force his way. And I've noticed that God doesn't like to shout. He doesn't like to be forced to gymnastics to get our attention, no more than you like having to jump up and down to get your friend or spouse to notice you're in the room.

So I've seized the One Minute Pause as my sword against the madness. After I finish a phone call and before I start something else, I simply pause. When I pull into work in the morning and when I pull into my driveway in the evening, I pause. I literally lay my head down on my steering wheel and just pause, for one minute. It sounds almost too simple to be a practice that brings me more of God, but it's very effective. Because what it does is open up soul space, breathing room. And God is right there. Over time, the *cumulative* effect is even better. It's reshaping the pace of my day. It's training my soul to find God as an experience more common than rare. I feel better. I'm now treating people more kindly.

GIVING IT A TRY

The One Minute Pause can be used in many ways: for prayer or silence, to find your heart again, or to enjoy a moment of beauty. We'll develop this practice as we go along in this book. For now, here's a way to start:

Pick one or two moments in your day when you know you are least likely to be interrupted. One of those for me is when I pull into the driveway at the end of the day. I don't have to leap from the car; I can take a moment. I turn the engine off, sometimes lay my head down on the steering wheel, and just breathe. I try to let go of the day.

It will help if you set your phone alarm to remind you. Pick a notification sound that is gracious, not adrenaline producing ("Bell,"

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or better “Silk.” Not “Suspense” or “News Flash” for you iPhone users). You are not sounding an alarm; you are inviting your soul to a gracious pause.

I have developed an app called the One Minute Pause, to help you with this practice; it’s beautiful, and I think will be of great service to you. You can find it for free in the app store. This is the beginning of a new way of living, one simple practice that opens the door to many others. Your soul is going to thank you.

BENEVOLENT DETACHMENT

I'm sitting on a bluff in the wild southwest corner of Wyoming, sweeping the horizon with my binoculars. The view up here is staggering—only sagebrush and coarse grasses for hundreds of miles in every direction; I can see the curve of the earth. It's going to be a hot August day. Heat waves are already shimmering in my view, making it hard to spot my quarry. Most folks would probably call these the badlands. Blistering in summer, freezing all winter, nearly always windy—but I come here because wild horses love this country. They feel safe out here.

There are still hundreds of herds of wild horses running through the American West, a fact that makes my soul happy. Wildness, open spaces, and animals living in utter freedom are all good for our humanity. Sometimes we need geography to usher our soul into spaciousness, lightheartedness. And so I've come.

A golden eagle is sitting only twenty yards downslope in front

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of me. Golden eagles are massive raptors, with seven-foot wingspans and the strength to carry off fawns and lambs. This one is perched on the edge of a cliff, scanning the alkaline landscape for prey. It's a perfect perch for him; with the updrafts coming up the bluff, all he has to do is spread his wings, step off, and he's gone. I can't believe he hasn't seen me. Maybe he has and simply doesn't care. I sigh with peace and happiness.

At dawn this morning I got in my truck, pointed myself north, and just . . . drove away. For a blissful week of solitude. No real plans: only my camping gear, fishing rod, and maps of the Wind River range, Yellowstone, and Montana. This is an unplanned, last-minute trip—something Jesus practically insisted on. Many moons have come and gone since I took time to get away, care for my soul, find God.

And I must tell you, it's an extraordinary feeling to have your world fading in the rearview mirror, nothing but an open road before you.

It's a practice Jesus himself cherished (minus the truck). I've always been intrigued by his ability to just up and walk away from his world. Right there in the opening chapter of Mark, with excitement building and crowds swelling all round him, Jesus disappears. He just . . . leaves.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they

found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else.” (Mark 1:35–38)

Jesus models a freedom of heart I think every one of us would love to have. His ability to disengage himself from his world is so alluring.

So, like a good disciple, I’ve done the same. Everyone is wanting something from me, so I’ve followed my Master and . . . left. If I wanted to see wild horses, I probably should have gotten here sooner, but ever since I left home this morning, I’ve been moseying, stopping to read those “points of historical interest” I usually blast by. It’ll take a few days to enter in, but already I can feel that exquisite condition coming on—a rare, carefree lightheartedness.

ENTANGLED

Boy, oh boy, is it hard to disentangle from our world.

Before nature began its healing work here on this high plateau, I had spent the previous twenty-four hours obsessing over a comment someone made to me during a business meeting.

Honestly, it was only a simple observation on their part, shared within a larger conversation. But the observation was about *me*, and you know how that goes—it became the one thing in a twenty-minute conversation I seized upon, like that chia seed caught between your teeth. You can’t think about anything else; your tongue searches it out and hovers around it. Over time the quite simple, rather benign

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remark has become filled with implication and all sorts of subterfuge as I wonder and worry and speculate over what this colleague meant. I think you know well the experience I'm talking about—somebody says something to you in passing, and later you find yourself wondering, then worrying, what they meant by it.

You're running late; you text a coworker or your boss a gentle explanation that your child woke up sick and you had to arrange for care before you left for work. All you receive back is a one-word reply: "Okay." What does it mean? Are they mad at you? They're probably mad at you; one word feels like they are. They didn't say, "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry; hope they are feeling better. Totally understand. No worries." But they may also be driving and not supposed to text, and one word was all they could manage to let you know it's okay. But all those possibilities play out in our minds, so we worry over subtext and intended meaning.

I don't think of myself as an obsessive person, but in looking back upon the conversation, the comment feels loaded—which leads me to wonder what the subtext was, which leads me to wonder about the subtext to *everything* this person said to me in the conversation. Which leads me to wonder what the subtext was to other conversations we've had and to emails received in the last month. Which leads me to wonder what the subtext is to our relationship, and have I been misinterpreting everything that has been taking place?! One small comment in a marketing meeting triggered an avalanche of speculation in me—speculation about motives, my leadership, the integrity of this relationship altogether.

Lord, help us.

Over the course of these very unhelpful twenty-four hours, every time I turned to Jesus to try to get some peace and orientation, he simply kept saying, *Give this to me. Release this to me. Give them to me.* And I was struck by how difficult that is, especially once we're really worked up in speculation, worry, genuine concern, or anxiety.

Jesus didn't offer interpretation; he didn't offer encouragement. Before I could do anything else, I needed to get out of the quagmire. I needed distance, breathing room. I needed his grace before I could even begin to reinterpret all that I'd been misinterpreting. When Peter began to sink into the Sea of Galilee, Jesus didn't offer perspective; he didn't pause to talk it through. He offered his hand to lift the drowning man out of the waves and back into the boat. Release first; interpretation later.

As I began to practice the smallest measure of release, the relief was almost immediate.

BENEVOLENT DETACHMENT

We are talking in this book about making room in our lives for God so that we might receive more of his wonderful self in us and, with that, the vibrancy and resiliency we crave as human beings. There are external ways we can do this, simple steps like the One Minute Pause. And there are internal ways we do this as well.

To make room for God to fill the vessel of our soul, we have to

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begin moving out some of the unnecessary clutter that continually accumulates there like the junk drawer in your kitchen. Everybody has a junk drawer, that black hole for car keys, pens, paper clips, gum, all the small flotsam and jetsam that accumulates over time. Our souls accumulate stuff, too, pulling it in like a magnet. And so Augustine said we must empty ourselves of all that fills us so that we may be filled with what we are empty of.¹ Over time I've found no better practice to help clear out my cluttered soul than the practice of benevolent detachment. The ability to let it go, walk away—not so much physically but emotionally, *soulfully*.

Allow me to explain. We are aiming for release, turning over into the hands of God whatever is burdening us *and leaving it there*. It's so easy to get caught up in the drama in unhealthy ways, and then we are unable to see clearly, set boundaries, respond freely. When this happens in relationships, psychologists call it enmeshment.

Repeated exposure to enmeshed relationships can prevent the developing child from becoming aware of and knowing herself physically as well as emotionally. The lines between empathizing (identifying with and understanding another person's feelings or difficulties), and overidentifying (becoming enmeshed with another person) vanish.²

Mature adults have learned how to create a healthy distance between themselves and the thing they have become entangled with. Thus the word *detachment*. It means getting untangled,

stepping out of the quagmire; it means peeling apart the Velcro by which this person, relationship, crisis, or global issue has attached itself to you. Or you to it. Detachment means getting some healthy distance. Social media overloads our empathy. So I use the word “benevolent” in referring to this necessary kind of detachment because we’re not talking about cynicism or resignation. Benevolent means kindness. It means something done in love. Jesus invites us into a way of living where we are genuinely comfortable turning things over to him:

Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”
(Matthew 11:28–30 NLT)

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.
(Matthew 11:28–30 THE MESSAGE)

Now, pay attention here—Jesus said there is a way “to live freely and *lightly*.”

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His dear friend Peter echoes the invitation later in the New Testament:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you. (1 Peter 5:7 THE MESSAGE)

Carefree? The offer is a *carefree life*?! I love feeling carefree. Carefree is how I feel in the middle of vacation; it's how I feel now as I make my way through the wildlands, with nothing but an open road before me. People are desperately seeking the feeling of carefree. I think all our dissociative patterns are signs of it—the video games, the virtual reality craze, the chemicals we use to feel unburdened. You can see human beings trying to disentangle in the popularity of the helpful book *Boundaries*, which has sold millions of copies. We're looking for a way to take back some healthy detachment in our lives.

Notice the runaway hit song “Let It Go” from the 2013 Disney movie *Frozen*. You had to be in an underground cave to miss it. Young and not-so-young girls all over the world were singing that song by heart. I knew it was a thing when the nine-year-old daughter of friends sang it for us at dinner one night. This is a very healthy young lady who—unlike her peers—doesn't really care what's happening on social media. Yet she knew it by heart, not something you can master in one viewing of the movie. I later saw a YouTube video

of soldiers garrisoned in Afghanistan singing along. “Let It Go” is, safe to say, a phenomenon.

In the film, Elsa is the young snow queen of a mythic Nordic kingdom, a girl with a unique gift, perhaps curse. She has the Midas touch, except everything she embraces turns to ice. After years of isolation, during her public “coming out party,” she accidentally sets off a series of catastrophic freezing and flees to the mountains both to save her people and to escape shame and scorn over what she has done. Enter the song that captured something in the social psyche. She sings that she will never let anyone in, she will rule a kingdom of isolation, and she doesn’t care. Let it go. She is finally carefree.

Of course, she’s far from carefree: she’s hurt and she *does* care; she’s an adolescent girl running from pain. A wild horse in flight. The song really isn’t so much about a healthy letting go as it is about willful denial. A more accurate title would have been “I Will Shut My Heart Down.” It’s not release; it’s fortressing. Literally. The climax of her song has Elsa finishing the creation of her ice castle. Alone.

This is not what benevolent detachment looks like. Elsa’s letting go is angry and defiant. But it sure touched something in the cultural imagination. As did the 2018 book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*. Pardon the language, but it caught my attention because this little paperback by a relatively unknown author has sold *millions* of copies. The author touched upon an ache within us. He actually isn’t cynical; he makes the important case that you simply cannot care about everything all the time. Which I think tells us that millions

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of people are feeling massively overburdened and looking for some way to lighten their heavy emotional load.

This is something Jesus is particularly good at helping us with, which is why learning benevolent detachment is such a timely grace.

GIVE EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING TO ME

I got home from work on a Friday afternoon a few weeks ago and went outside to just sit, be quiet, try to find God. Nothing big. No crisis. Not a seven-day fast. Just sitting quietly, attempting to dial back into his presence. It was astounding how many things presented themselves in a matter of about five minutes. Things I forgot to do at work. Emails I still needed to send. Emails I needed to now send to correct emails I shouldn't have sent. The One Minute Pause is where I began. It created the space for me to then practice benevolent detachment—my only rescue.

You can't sort all this stuff out.

And you sure can't wait to find God and life and restoration until you've sorted your life out. There's too much rushing at us; we haven't the time to carefully and systematically think through every piece of information, misspoken word, confusing interaction, heartbreaking news. Subtly, maybe not so subtly, the burdens on the soul pile up.

I have a friend who is one of those beautiful people with the gift of seeing the spiritual world while they walk around in the physical

world. One of his particular giftings is that he sees people's "backpacks." "Everyone has a backpack," he says. He is referring to their burdens; he sees their burdens as backpacks they carry around with them. "Some people's backpacks are bigger than others," he says. "They're filled with past regrets, present concerns, and fears about their future. But some are wonderfully small and light. Everyone has one."

Worry is only one of a hundred things that burden our souls. Genuine concern is just as dangerous, maybe more so because it's grounded in something noble—your concerns for your aging parents, a sick friend, a people group, a cause crying out for justice. A friend of mine runs a home rescuing trafficked girls. He wrote last week to say that the government facility is overcrowded, and they asked him if he could take eleven girls. The heartbreak was my friend had room for only five; he had to make the brutal call. Today a therapist colleague who does remarkable work with military men and women suffering PTSD lamented he can't see enough people. "We're losing too many to suicide," he said. "It tears me up I can't help more."

Those kinds of things can fill a backpack and make it mighty heavy.

Jesus began teaching me about benevolent detachment almost two years ago. Every time I would turn to him with a question, he would say, *Give everyone and everything to me*. The invitation rang so true; I knew I needed to learn this. So I began to practice it as best I could. But then Jesus kept repeating the invitation. I'd be asking

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about something entirely unrelated to the people in my life—car repairs, scheduling a trip, my tax returns—and Jesus would reply, *Give everyone and everything to me*. It was irritating. I finally realized that the reason he kept repeating it was because I wasn't practicing it very well. I was carrying people. Worrying about things.

We are far more entangled with the world than we know. And the thing is, people and causes have a way of entangling themselves with *you* too.

Some of this has to do with the moment we live in and the obliteration of social boundaries.

Thanks to social media, everyone's life is open and accessible through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—all of it. We've created an assumption that you can enter and observe, or engage, with anyone, anywhere, anytime. There are no boundaries. We've created an assumption that we're entitled to enter anyone else's private space at any time. It's very harmful. Cell phones have been a major contributor to this loss of personal space. A friend who is a successful businessman explained to me how the rules of corporate loyalty have changed: "They expect you to be available anytime, day or night, because of this," he said, holding up his phone. "They can text you, call you 24/7. You are now considered to be available anytime, all the time. Those are the new rules."

I told myself as I drove off into the wilderness this morning that I would turn my phone off for a few days to enforce my disengagement. But I've checked my messages several times in the last hour. It's so odd to be dialed into the technology of the world while I drive

through rural countryside. This was the world of my grandmother, raised her entire life in rural America. Back in the day if you wanted to have a conversation with someone, if you wanted to enter their world, you literally had to enter their world. You got in your car and drove to their farm and sat on their porch and had a conversation. You also understood that there are appropriate hours for doing so. People were very aware that there were public moments and private moments, public spaces and private spaces.

All that is completely gone now.

People have this unspoken assumption they can enter your world anytime. It's suffocating to the soul; there's no breathing room. No wonder books like *Boundaries* and *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* are selling millions. People are looking for some way to push this stuff back just a few feet. Gimme some space for heaven's sake.

Exactly.

Benevolent detachment is your way out.

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I know, I know—you've got all sorts of pushback going on inside even as you read this. "This sounds impossible; you don't know my world." "But what about loving? What about caring?" "How is it right to just let things go?"

Quite simply, because you're not God.

You can't save the world. You can't even carry it.

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“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?” (Luke 12:25–26). Jesus is quite serious about turning everything over to him, actually. So let’s repeat the invitation:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28–30 THE MESSAGE)

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7) Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you. (THE MESSAGE)

These aren’t suggestions. The Bible is not a book of suggestions. You’ve got to release the world; you’ve got to release people, crises, trauma, intrigue, all of it. There has to be sometime in your day where you just let it all go. All the tragedy of the world, the heartbreak, the latest shooting, earthquake—the soul was *never* meant to endure this. The soul was never meant to inhabit a world like this. It’s way too much. Your soul is finite. You cannot carry the sorrows of the world. Only God can do that. Only he is infinite. Somewhere, sometime in your day, you’ve just got to release it. You’ve got to let it go.

We need to make this clear—the invitation of God is an

unburdened life. Come, you who are heavy laden. Cast your cares upon him. Live carefree before God. It's practically a party invitation. One of the least understood disciplines of the spiritual life. And therefore a wonderful place of discovery for each of us, and a truly liberating opportunity to experience more of God in our everyday experience.

Benevolent detachment takes practice. The One Minute Pause is a good place to start. "I give everyone and everything to you, God. I give everyone and everything to you." Often I find I need to follow that up with some specifics: "I give my children to you," for I worry about them. "I give that meeting to you." "I give this book to you." As you do this, pay attention—your soul will tell you whether or not you're releasing. If the moment after you pray you find yourself mulling over the very thing you just released, you haven't released it. Go back and repeat the process until it feels that you have.

Bedtime is ideal; Stasi and I now do it every night. "Jesus, we give everyone and everything to you." And then we usually have to name some things. "We give you our kids. We give you our aging mother. We give you what blew up at work today. We give you our ministry and mission in the world, which we care so much about—all those hurting people. We give you the Florida shooting. We can't carry this, God. We release it all to you."

As you practice release, what you're doing is creating soul space; you are literally carving out the intellectual and emotional space for God to come in.

If you build it, he will come. He *wants* to fill you.

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By the way, benevolent detachment is a gift to the people in your life. Far too often we saddle people with our expectations, hopes, and needs too. Most of the time subconsciously, but we do it nevertheless. With our need to be seen. To be celebrated. To be understood. You actually do people an enormous favor when you practice benevolent detachment, because *they'd* like to be disentangled from *you* too.

You get to break free, dear ones, “like a horse in open country” (Isaiah 63:13).

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DRINKING BEAUTY

Summer wildflowers are one of the reasons I'm so grateful to live in Colorado. I grew up in the strip-mall suburbs of Los Angeles; if we wanted to see wildflowers, we had to drive an hour out of town, up the Cajon Pass or out east to the desert. But here in the Rocky Mountain West—for a few wonderful months each summer—we have wildflowers galore. Blues of every shade; reds running from orange through crimson to pink; yellows and whites, like the palette of a good watercolor set.

One of my favorites is a lovely little fellow so easy to miss—the Many Flowered Aster, a collection of quaint little daisy-like blossoms about the size of a dime. In summer they grow profusely in clusters five inches above the ground, bright little white petals with yellow centers. Come fall they dry to a straw color standing where they were, looking like tiny little wicker baskets. Last night there was a freezing rain, and each little basket is now covered in a delicate ice.

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It makes them look like miniature crystal goblets, hundreds of them, as if the field mice were preparing a banquet.

Human beings need oxygen in order to live. Lots of it. So our loving God provided us a world completely engulfed in oxygen; we swim in life-giving air like fish swim in water. Put your arm out—it's surrounded with oxygen. Look down at your feet—they're wading through it too. God also arranged for the daily replenishment of this planet-wide ocean of oxygen, through the forest and jungles and even the algae of the seas. We take it in all day long, and all day long he renews it. Lavish. And a good thing too!

He's done the same with water. We need it daily. No human being can go without it for more than four days. Our planet is called the "blue planet" because of the amount of water we have. The oceans, of course, and the rain cycle that draws water from them and spreads it over the earth. Streams, ponds, rivers, lakes—the generosity of God can be seen here too. Without water nothing lives. Think of what happens to your lovely flowers when they are deprived of water.

Now, with the same generosity and care, God also filled the world with a renewable supply of something our souls need daily: beauty. Yes, beauty. The fact that our world is so saturated with beauty, breathtaking in so many ways great and small—this ought to let you know God feels it's something you need for your survival. We are absolutely swimming in it.

But apart from the artist and poet, most people don't intentionally pursue beauty as nourishment. Notice that beauty doesn't make

the typical lists of discipleship models, spiritual disciplines, or soul care. Even in his wonderful, seminal book on healing trauma—*The Body Keeps the Score*—Dr. Bessel van der Kolk barely refers to it. That baffles me. Beauty is one of the richest graces God has provided to heal our souls and absorb his goodness.

BEAUTY'S POWER

My trek through Wyoming and Montana took me to Yellowstone, one of my favorite places on earth. No, I don't like the crowds. But there's a simple secret to Yellowstone—if you're willing to get half a mile off the pavement, you can have one of the largest contiguous wildernesses practically to yourself. I did brave the crowds, though, to see the falls of the Yellowstone River as it plunges into the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Thomas Moran did a gorgeous painting of it after he came through with the Hayden expedition in 1871; his artwork was one of the things that helped convince Congress to make this the first of our national parks.

Artist's Point looks back up at the falls from a half mile down canyon. It is breathtaking; of course painters love its panorama. But it was overcrowded, so I went on my way to find some space of my own in the woods for the day. Later that evening, driving back to my campsite before dark, I passed a sign on the north side of the falls that read "Brink of Falls." I'd never taken this route before. The trail has a stern warning at the top, that you're about to plunge

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six hundred feet down and you'd better be prepared to make the climb back. Knowing this would sift out most tourists and curious what the brink was like, I descended. You can walk right to the edge and look down, where thousands of cubic feet of water plunge each second over the precipice, dropping more than twice the height of Niagara Falls into the exploding spray and clouds of mist boiling back up from far below.

It's hard to describe the experience. The river is clear, smooth, translucent green right as it slips over the brink. Looking down it becomes a churning cataract of unceasing, foaming waves plunging into the abyss, like the breakers of ocean waves but one on top of another, all spray and foam and deep hues, green in the depths at the top, turning lavender in the long plunge. Water is so life-giving, and the deluging cataract was not violent, but forceful in its plentitude. Living majesty, unceasingly renewed. So as I leaned over, all I saw was the foaming deluge pouring down, down, down in white billows through which jade greens, soft blues, and lavender appeared and disappeared, pouring down with such grace I practically went with it. I later told Stasi, "It looked like the glory of God; if it had been, I would have thrown myself in."

I stood there watching the surging, pulsating, thundering beauty for I don't know how long, unmoving, as people came and went. I was more than transfixed; I was held in the grip of beauty so abundant, so glorious and alive I could feel it healing my soul. You see, I had taken this trip largely because I, too, felt traumatized. I'd been through too much death to recount here, and it

seemed my entire journey was divinely orchestrated to bring me to this place.

Beauty comforts. Beauty heals. Why else would we send flowers to a hospital room or funeral?

I've been personally convinced of this for years, so it was with delight I opened a lovely little book a friend recommended: *On Beauty and Being Just* by Harvard aesthetics professor Elaine Scarry. The author is trying to restore the high place of beauty in a skeptical world:

Beauty is life-saving. . . . Augustine described it as “a plank amid the waves of the sea.” Proust makes a version of this claim over and over again. Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living. . . . It is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach.¹

That's it—beauty rescues. It rescues because it is merciful, comforting. It heals, restores, revives, renews. This is why people in convalescence want to sit in a garden, or by a window overlooking the sea. Research shows that patients recovered faster, needed fewer pain killers, and left the hospital sooner if their windows allowed views of nature.² “The pleasure we take in beauty is inexhaustible,” writes Scarry. “No matter how long beautiful things endure, they cannot out-endure our longing for them.”³

Stasi and I were on a mission of sorts to the UK last spring, a

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whirlwind trip with something like nineteen engagements in nine days. We spent two nights in the London suburb of St. Albans, one of those trendy little British towns where cobblestones streets and fifteenth-century buildings meet art galleries and upscale restaurants. It was crowded, unusually hot, with lots and *lots* of traffic. My sensitivity was probably heightened by my exhaustion—and the exhaust—but the sound of motorcycles roaring up and down the narrow streets was really getting on my nerves. What was charming soon felt harming. At that moment I received a text from my wife, who had left the thoroughfare earlier to go in search of the cathedral: “Come to the cathedral; step inside.”

As soon as I entered the garden-like grounds I began to feel better. Grass. Flowers. Trees. I stepped into the sanctuary and found myself alone. Coolness. Soft, colored light filtered down through the stained glass windows. The heavy stone structure held out every bit of city noise. Far up in front, hidden from view, the chapel choir was practicing. It was heavenly, and thus it was healing. Heaven always heals. Beauty heals, partly because it *proclaims* that there is goodness in the world and that goodness prevails, or is preserved, or will somehow outlast all harm and darkness.

“The moment of perceiving something beautiful confers on the perceiver the gift of life.”⁴

Beauty also sings to us songs of abundance.

Two days before the falls of Yellowstone, I spent an afternoon seated in a camp chair high above a lake in the Wind River Mountains, simply drinking in the valley before me. The lake and

granite cliffs were like Yosemite, gorgeous and grand, but my eyes were continually drawn to the evergreen forests on the mountain slopes. These are well-watered forests, so thick and lush it seemed I could see a million trees along a few miles of slope. My soul loved it, and I tried to pay attention to why. It had to do with abundance. One tree is a miracle; a hundred trees a celebration. But the staggering presence of tens of thousands of tall, thriving evergreens in dense profusion fills the soul with memories of Eden, visions that speak messages. “Beautiful things, as Matisse shows, always carry greetings from other worlds within them.”⁵ The Christian understands those greetings to come from the kingdom of God itself.

But most of all, beauty *reassures*. This is especially important to our search here for the grace beauty offers our life with God. We need reassuring.

Beauty reassures us that goodness is still real in the world, more real than harm or scarcity or evil. Beauty reassures us of abundance, especially that God is absolutely abundant in goodness and in life. Beauty reassures us there is plenty of life to be had. I believe beauty reassures us that the end of this Story is wonderful. The French impressionist Matisse “repeatedly said that he wanted to make paintings so serenely beautiful that when one came upon them, suddenly all problems would subside.”⁶

Beauty is such a gentle grace. Like God, it rarely shouts, rarely intrudes. Rather it woos, soothes, invites; it romances and caresses. We often sigh in the presence of beauty as it begins to minister to us—a good, deep soul-sigh.

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You don't need to travel far to find beauty. God has strewn it around the globe in such generous portions we have only to stop and notice, paying particular attention to the intimate. Yes, epic beauty is worth traveling to see—the Himalayas, the Maasai Mara, Yosemite, any tropic island. But intimate beauty is just as healing, perhaps more so, and available everywhere. (I shared the St. Albans story to remind my urban readers beauty can be found even in noisy, congested cities.)

It snowed yesterday, just a few inches. Last night strong winds followed. When I first stepped out for a morning walk, all I was aware of was that I was cold and didn't want to go. But I needed the walk, so I pressed into it. Cold makes you hunker down, cinch up your jacket, and burrow into your hood. It makes your body and soul brace against the world, keeps you from participating in the barefoot openness that summer does so well. I was trudging along the sidewalk head down, trying to keep the wind out of my jacket, when it happened. My focus was only on the few feet of ground in front of me when suddenly beauty broke forth in the patterns of the crusted snow. Multitudes of tiny windswept dunes, two or three inches high, looking like a satellite view of the desert. Wave after wave of little undulating ridges in curvilinear symmetry, like a sea frozen in time. My world was reduced—or expanded—to a few square feet of frozen front yard, like an aerial view of the Sahara in all its elegant barrenness and vast empty beauty.

Really—beauty is all around us. In the shimmering shadows

sunlight creates through any foliage. The intricate pattern and color of tree bark (stop and look; touch it). The way sunlight falls on your kitchen table in the morning. The grain of wood. Songbirds in your neighborhood. Fabric. Candlelight. The infinitely creative patterns of frost. The frost on the stalks of dried grasses this morning looked like tiny gladiolas made of glass or the calligraphy of fairies. Water in almost any form. Water on a blade of grass. Water drops on leaves. Leaves themselves—their shape, texture, the lacelike patterns running through them. A field of grass, especially as the wind plays through it. Fields of corn, wheat, any crop. The stars, the moon in all its phases. Rain-washed streets in the city at night, drops of water on your windshield. Human faces are infinitely beautiful. And I have not even mentioned flowers, vases, music, fine art, and the beautiful things we use to decorate our homes.

Given beauty's healing effects, given how it soothes the soul and opens us up to the goodness of God, I hope you will intentionally do two things:

Receive it for the gift it is! Pause, and let the beauty minister to you. *I receive this into my soul.* Too often we just notice and go on, like a pedestrian who steps over a hundred-dollar bill lying on the sidewalk. Stop and pick it up! In these moments you open yourself and receive the beauty, the gift, the grace—receive it into your being. Let it bring to you God's love, his tenderness, his rich goodness. We live so braced, not openly, but quite subtly—braced for the day, braced by the assault on our attention, braced by the noise around us.

Pause when you are offered beauty and make the conscious

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decision, *I receive this grace*. We open our clenched soul to let it in. To find God in it. I will often pray, *Thank you for this beauty. I receive it into my soul. And with it I receive you, in it, by it, through it—your love, your goodness, your life.*

That receiving part is key.

Sometimes I use the One Minute Pause simply to drink in some small beauty before me. And sigh.

Second, fill your world with beauty, as Harvard professor Scarry realized she had to do one especially bleak winter:

My house, though austere inside, is full of windows banking onto a garden. The garden throws changing colors into the chaste rooms—lavenders, pinks, blues, and pools of green. One winter when I was bereft because my garden was underground, I put Matisse prints all over the walls—thirteen in a single room.⁷

Thirteen impressionist prints in one room. There you go. Fill your life with beauty or reminders of it. When we are harried, haunted, in fight or flight, beauty seems a luxury for people on vacation. Just the opposite is true—it's a lifeline being thrown to you from heaven.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people to thank...

Luke Eldredge, my researcher. Dan Allender, who also provided valuable insights. Webb, my brilliant editor who always improves my work. The whole team at Nelson. My warrior-friends at Yates and Yates.

And dear Brian Hampton, to whom this book is dedicated—not just by me, but the whole team. We lost him during the creation of this work. He has gone before us. For a while.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Eldredge is the author of many bestselling books, including *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating* (with his wife Stasi). John is also the head of a community called Ransomed Heart, a fellowship doing so much to heal hearts and lives. You can learn more about their work at www.ransomedheart.com. As for John, he's probably down another lonesome road, chasing wild horses, fly fishing, looking for Jesus.

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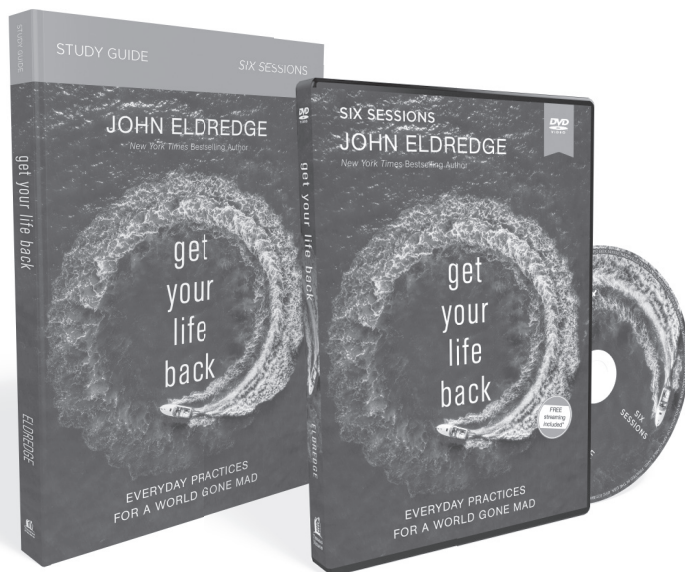
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