

NOTHING BETTER

Five Gifts for Living When Control Fails

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The book in short form

We will all lose all we love.

Six years. That's how long my wife, Gretchen, lived with breast cancer.

Most of those years had a rhythm in the afternoons. The kids would come home from school and she would be on the couch, sometimes upright, sometimes not, depending on how the chemo was that week. She would ask each of them about the day. She wanted to know who had said what at lunch. She did this when she was so tired she could not stand without help, and she smiled at the answers, and the day would gather itself around her smile until it was almost an ordinary afternoon. I have a lot of memories from those years. That is the one I keep coming back to.

After she died, the mornings turned into long walks. A six-mile loop through the Park Cities in Dallas: front door, down University, through the SMU campus, onto the Katy Trail, and back along Armstrong. The world was carrying on. The loop carried me through it without asking me to be part of it.

The question came on the walks. Not the question people asked me. People asked, how are you. People asked, are you sleeping. The question was: how do you build a life after everything you built has been swept away.

I read what people read, and the question was still there when I closed the books. Wisdom may keep you safe, but it won't keep you warm. It would not sit beside me on the couch in the evening. It would not make a meal worth lingering over. I needed a wisdom with hands, with a chair, with bread on it, with enough room for grief and ordinary laughter in the same hour.

So I went back to a book I had read many times before, and I started reading it differently.

The book is Ecclesiastes, written about three thousand years ago by a writer who calls himself the Preacher. I'm a Christian, and for me it is a sacred book. I want to say that plainly, because what follows grows out of a particular text from a particular tradition. But Ecclesiastes is one of the strangest books in the Bible, and the strangeness is what makes it portable. It says things that make a Christian reader uncomfortable and things that make a non-Christian reader lean in. You don't have to share my source to find what follows useful. It is for anyone with a week in front of them.

What Ecclesiastes does is name the conditions of life so accurately that you stop arguing with them. Life is brief. The world goes on whether you do or not. Wisdom will help you, and wisdom will fail you. There is only one life, and you do not get to step outside it to check whether it is going well.

And then, in the middle of that hard honesty, the writer interrupts himself. He tells you to eat and drink. He tells you to be joyful and to do good while you live. I commend joy, he says, because this is what remains under the sun.

Out of those passages came a framework. It is small, and the smallness is the point. When a life comes apart, the enormous answer is more than anyone can carry. But bread is not too heavy. A walk is not too heavy. A chair at a table, a small good task, an honest gift, the choice to face joy for one more day: these are small enough to pick up. They are also, the Preacher insists, large enough to live by. There is, he says, nothing better.

ETERNITY IN THE HEART

There is a moment most people have, usually around a dinner table, when they look at the people they love and feel the future leaning in. The future where some of these people will not be at the table. The future where you will not be at the table. Nothing is wrong. But the moment is suddenly very large and very old, because something in you knows what is coming.

The moment passes. Somebody asks for the salt. But the visits leave a residue. The feeling is information about what you are.

He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Two claims sit together in that sentence uncomfortably. The first is that there is something in you sized for eternity, a hunger that will not be filled by ordinary things, even the very good ordinary things. The second is that you cannot get there. You can see pieces. You cannot see the whole. The hunger is real. So is the limit.

You can deny the first half and call the hunger a glitch. You can deny the second half and say you have the system solved, which is the religious version of the same move. Or you can let the verse stand and learn to live inside it, and the living is the good part.

The writer of Ecclesiastes lives inside it, and from there he does something startling, again and again. He has been describing the brevity and the unfairness of things. Then he stops and tells you what to do. Eat and drink and find enjoyment in your work. Be joyful and do good while you live. The posture is not denial and it is not solving. It is receiving. Nobody can be commanded into a feeling. Anyone can be commanded to turn toward a table and sit down.

THE THREE SPIRITUAL QUESTS

A friend of mine spent years building a small business, then sold it for a number that meant his children would be fine. I talked with him six months later and expected him to be radiant. He was a man who had walked through a door he had been pointed at for twenty years, found out the room behind it was just a room, and was standing in the room trying to decide what to do with his afternoon. He said the worst thing was the absence of the next thing.

The hunger Ecclesiastes calls eternity in the heart is not a single feeling. It is three hungers running through every life, trading places at different ages. I call them the three spiritual quests. A quest is not a goal. A goal sits still and waits to be reached. A quest moves toward a horizon that recedes the closer you get.

The Infinite is the longing for possibility. The next horizon, the next thing. The entrepreneur looking at a market and seeing what is not there yet; the teenager driving with the windows down on a summer night. Its fear is the fear of getting stuck: the closed door, the road narrowing at fifty without your noticing. My friend had built a business on the Infinite. What kept him awake was that he had finished, and there was no next horizon yet.

The Indelible is the longing for permanence. To leave a mark, to build something still standing after you are not, to be loved in a way that does not end. The parent writing a letter to be opened on a wedding day twenty years away; the old man standing a long time at his wife's grave without speaking. Its fear is the fear of loss. Of being forgotten.

The Ideal is the longing for perfection. An architect spends three years trying to make a real building match the one she drew. A parent goes to bed short of the parent the kid deserves. Its fear is the fear of falling short, that the gap between who you are and who you should be is not closing.

The fear in each case is the longing turning back on itself. A person with no fear of loss does not love very deeply. The fears are the cost of being made for more.

Everything that follows turns on one sentence. That ache is not a curse. It is a gift. If you had been made without the longing, you would settle for less than you were made for. If you had been made without the limit, you would mistake yourself for God. The Preacher offers a way of living between those two truths. He calls it joy.

VAPOR

Come into the kitchen at six on a cold morning in November and make coffee. The kitchen is dark except for the small light over the stove. Stand at the window and watch the steam come off the cup. It is there. Then it is less there. Then you cannot see it anymore. Your breath does the same thing on the other side of the glass.

That is the word. The Hebrew word Ecclesiastes uses for almost everything is *hevel*. Vanity, in the old translations. Vapor is closer. Steam off a cup. Breath on a window. It appears almost forty times in twelve chapters, and it doesn't mean nothing matters. It means life is short and cannot be held.

Vapor is real. You can see it and feel it on your face. But you cannot save it for later. A child's birthday party. A first kiss. A run of good health. The smell of your grandmother's house. You will not get any of these back. Vapor is what they always were.

Most people do one of two things with that. They deny it or they distract themselves from it. Denial is the industry of productivity and optimization, life managed as if it were a project that could be completed. Distraction is the other industry: the endless feed, the evening that

disappears between dinner and bed. Both fail the same way. The vapor is not deceived. It waits, and it shows up at the diagnosis, at the funeral, at the birthday with the zero in it, and the people who spent decades not looking meet it with no practice.

The writer of Ecclesiastes did neither. He took the vapor seriously and then he did something nobody expects. He recommended joy. He has spent his whole book taking consolations away: legacy will not save you, wealth will not save you, wisdom will only get you so far. A reader braces for stoicism. And the conclusion is eat your bread with joy. It lands like a joke at a funeral, and it is meant to. When nothing can be held, holding was never the assignment. Receiving was.

There is a word for what he recommended, and it does not get used much in religious writing. The word is play. Not a game. A way of being, the posture you take toward life when you have stopped trying to control it. A person at play has buried the people they have buried and is living with their hands open anyway. The opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is gripping. And the grip holds nothing anyway. The hand cramps around steam.

David Gibson calls this the central move of the whole book. Life, he writes, is gift, not gain. I want to take his phrase one step further. Receive life as gift, not guarantee. The gift is real. The guarantee is not coming. There is only the cup that is in front of you, and the choice of whether to drink it.

HOW WE SEE

There is a kitchen I have walked into a thousand times. The other day, after a hard week, I noticed something I had never noticed: a series of small dents in the refrigerator door, golf-ball sized, a foot from the bottom. They have been there for years. The dents had not changed. I had not changed. Only my attention had changed.

What you can see depends on how you are looking. The neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist puts it this way: "The kind of attention we pay actually alters the world: we are, literally, partners in creation."

So before the gifts, four lenses on the same moment. The Material lens attends to the things you shape and steward: the objects in your house, the tools in your hand, the money and where it goes. The Physical lens attends to how you live in your body and in time: whether you slept, whether you have been outside, the ache in your back. The Relational lens attends to the people you live among, seen as people and not as roles. The Emotional lens attends to what you feel and carry: grief sitting on your chest, the joy that surprised you on Tuesday. Most people live in one and let the others go dark, because whatever your work rewards is the lens that gets exercise.

It is a Saturday morning and you are washing dishes from last night's dinner with friends. The Material lens notices the platter that was a wedding present and the chip on the blue bowl. The Physical lens notices the hot water over your hands. The Relational lens replays the table: who told the story that made everyone laugh, which friend seemed quieter than usual. The Emotional lens catches a contentment with a thread of melancholy in it, because the evening was good and

good evenings end. One sink of dishes. Four ways of being present to it. The moment did not change. The amount of it you received did.

You cannot receive what you cannot see. That is the whole reason the lenses come before the gifts.

FEAST WITH FRIENDS

Picture a fire at a friend's place, somewhere with no neighbors and no cell signal. Eight or nine people on folding chairs and a couple of logs. Hot dogs. Wine in plastic cups. They sit there for hours. The kids stay up later than they should. Somebody tells a story everyone has heard before, and they listen to it like it is new, because the telling is the point, not the story.

Go, eat your bread with joy, the Preacher says, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do (Ecclesiastes 9:7). A feast is not the same as a dinner party. It is a meal where four things arrive at the same time, with the same people, in the same room: relationships, abundance, hospitality, belonging. The food can be simple. Soup will do. The people have to be people you do not have to perform for. And the time has to be unhurried. A feast that has somewhere to be in an hour is a meal.

Unhurried time is the part that scares us. A meal with no ending has room in it for the second question, the one that gets at how you actually are. Being found out is exactly what the lonely version of a full life has been organized to prevent, which is why the calendar fills. Busy is a hiding place.

Every feast is a protest against despair. The world is hard, and you sit down at a table anyway. You light the candles anyway. The room becomes its own room, and inside it the news cannot reach you. It does not solve anything. But for the time you were at the table, the despair did not have you. The table won.

If you have not built a small handful of people you can call about dinner on Friday, that is the first work. Pick a night and hold it. Keep the menu beneath your ambitions. Hold the night through the awkward first attempts, and by the eighth or ninth Friday the guests walk in without knocking and open the refrigerator. Meaning is shared at the table.

DO SOME GOOD

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The word that does the work is whatever. Not the right thing. Not the thing you have been called to. Whatever.

The CEO and the receptionist have the same instruction. It is aimed at the hand and not the resume, because the hand does not know the difference between important work and small work. It only knows whether it is working with might or working while looking over its own shoulder. The rank was always the audience's concern. The might was always yours.

Work is your portion. Not your identity. Not your proof. A portion is what is set out in front of you; you did not pick the menu. This sounds like a demotion. It is a relief. A bad quarter becomes a bad quarter, not a verdict on your soul. A portion, unlike a proof, can be set down at six o'clock. The fear was never fuel. It was drag dressed as fuel.

Set beside that the woman who cleans rooms at a hotel off the interstate. The work is repetitive and underpaid, and no sentence here makes it otherwise. She does it well anyway, the corners squared, the vents wiped, because the work is hers, today's portion. She is not secretly fulfilled. That is the version of good work this refuses to prettify, and it is closer to the Preacher's meaning than any calling discovered at a retreat.

Do what you do, then, the way you would throw a piece of bread into a moving river. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days (Ecclesiastes 11:1). You are somewhere in the middle of chains you cannot see from either end.

Notice where the joy lives. Not in the result. Not in the praise. The joy is in the doing. Watch what you do in the last minute of a task. The person still working for the result looks up and begins composing the announcement. The person who has found the joy in the doing lingers a second with the thing itself, the way a carpenter runs a thumb along a sanded edge nobody will ever look at. The thumb is not checking for approval. The thumb is enjoying the edge.

Burn your calories for good. Your hands. Your hours. The day in front of you.

ENJOY YOUR PARTNER

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:9). The verb is enjoy. Not endure. Not honor. Not stay married to. Enjoy. Enjoyment requires presence, and you cannot enjoy someone you have stopped seeing.

The verse points at a covenant of joy between two people who chose each other. Lose sight of that and the household runs on duty and habit until one of you wakes up and realizes there is no joy left in the house.

What dims the enjoyment is not the dramatic things. It dies of management, the endless logistics of who is taking which kid where. It dies of inattention: the phone goes first at the breakfast table, work follows you home, and the marriage gets the half-attention that is the most attention you have left. And it dies of resentment, the small accounts kept, the thing said three weeks ago still being added to the column. The repair is usually one honest sentence, spoken before the total gets impressive.

The practice lives in small things. Asking the question and waiting for the answer. Not the logistics question. Tell me one thing about today that I would not have known. The touch that is not asking for anything. None of these require advice. All of them require attention. Boredom in a long marriage is almost never a verdict on the person. It is a verdict on the attention.

A word for the reader who has no partner to enjoy. This is the gift that is particular rather than universal. The table is open to everyone; so is good work, so is what you have to give, so is joy. This one is not, and if you were never married, or were and are not now, or buried the person

this is about, this is not an accusation. Covenant love is one of the ordinary gifts. It is not the whole of joy, and it was never the price of admission to the rest.

Stay faithful and keep building. A marriage that stays without building has gone still. The building looks like ordinary work: a meal cooked together, a trip taken, a tradition that started ten years ago and is now just what your family does. The building is the joy. The joy is what gets built.

SHARE YOUR STUFF

You know the feeling before guests arrive. Whether to bring out the good towels, or not, because the good towels might get used. The wine you actually like versus the bottle that is fine if someone finishes it. The new candle tucked in a drawer because you were saving it for something.

You know the other version too. The house you walk into and immediately relax. The friend who opens the refrigerator and says take whatever you want. Both houses belong to real people. Sometimes to the same person. The question is which one you actually live in.

Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, the verse says, this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 5:19). There are two halves to that and most readers see only one. Having is one gift. The power to enjoy is a separate gift. You can have without enjoying, and the gap between the two is where most of us live.

What blocks the enjoyment is fear. Fear that what you have is not enough, that if you let it go more won't come, that you might need it later. Fear is a faithful god. And fear never presents itself as fear. It presents itself as arithmetic. You can check what is actually running the ledger with one question: how much would be enough to let you open your hands? If the answer has moved every time you reached it, the arithmetic was never the issue. Enough is not a number.

When we share, we break fear's control. You cannot reason your way out of fear; you can only act in a direction it says you should not. The first time you give something away that you were afraid to give, the fear loses a small share of you. A small honest gift breaks the grip more than a large performative one.

Life is better when it circulates. Inventory is deceptive; use is honest. You do not know whether the guest room is hospitality or storage until someone sleeps in it. And the stuff is wider than money. Time, which lands harder than a check when it is given. Skill, the most hoarded stuff in modern life, because we bill for it. And hospitality, the house itself, offered instead of defended.

Use what you have for others' good. The things you have came to you in motion. They are most fully yours when they are moving.

OPT FOR JOY

Gretchen did not love being photographed, and as the cancer and the chemotherapy worked on her body she liked it less. But the photographs we have from those six years are mostly of her

smiling. Not the polite smile. The real one. It is the face of a person who has been told she does not have much time left and has decided what to do about it. The decision is on her face. It is a small and absolute thing.

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

I commend joy. The verb is in the active voice. He is not saying joy will come to you. He is recommending a posture you take. Joy is not weather you wait on. It is a heading you hold.

Nobody blames you for rain. But nobody teaches you to sail in it either. And it matters where in his book the Preacher says this. Chapter eight is not a sunny chapter; he has just been writing about wicked men praised in the very city where they did their damage. The commendation arrives inside that catalog, not after it has been resolved. A joy that needs good news is a mood.

There are two failure modes. The first is waiting for joy: the right job, the right house, the right amount in the bank, and by the time the conditions are right the years have passed. The second is forcing it: the vacation photo taken four times until everyone's smile held. They are the same mistake wearing different clothes. Both put joy downstream of control.

Real joy lives between them, and it is also the choice to feel what you actually feel without that being the end of the story. Real joy can sit on a couch with grief. The widow can laugh at a memory and then cry about the person the memory is of, and both are true. Joy that cannot hold grief is not joy. It is just denial wearing a smile.

Most days it does not look dramatic. There are still four or five decisions left in a ruined Tuesday, and each one has a hinge in it. Eat lunch away from the desk or at it. Hold the heading through enough ruined Tuesdays and the ruined days stop being able to tell you who you are.

I went through all of the photographs from those six years once, looking for the evidence that what I remembered was true. Memory had not softened it. There is one taken about a week before she died. She was in full liver failure. She knew she was dying. She is smiling, and the smile is not brave or staged or trying to comfort anyone. It is just hers. It is the smile of a person who decided, a long time before that week, that joy was a direction she would set her course toward, and who kept setting it even on the day she could not stand without help.

That is what I mean by joy as a direction. By the time you are dying, the direction is who you are, and the smile arrives on its own.

Set your course toward joy. A ship does not move in straight lines. The wind shifts, the current pulls, the captain corrects, and the corrections are how the ship arrives. The proof is the wake, and a wake takes years to read. Do not judge the direction by the day. Judge it by the decade, and give yourself one.

THE RHYTHM OF PLAY

Picture an ordinary Saturday. Work in the morning on the thing you had been putting off, and the hard part done by noon. Lunch on a friend's porch, and an hour helping him move a piece of furniture. A late afternoon with the person you are married to, talking about nothing in particular. Friends at dinner, and the table held a long time.

Nobody plans a day like that. It arrives. What you notice the next morning is that all five gifts were in it, and that you have had that same Saturday, hour for hour, and missed all of it, running a meeting in your head that had not happened yet. The ingredients were identical. The presence was not.

The five gifts are not a checklist. They are a rhythm. A checklist is what you would make if the gifts were tasks. Did we feast this week? Check. The auditing posture the gifts were meant to break comes back through the side door wearing the gifts as a lanyard. The gifts are closer to the five strings on an instrument. You do not complete a string. You play it, and some songs lean on one string for a while, and the music is still the music. A hospital week wipes out every box, and the checklist reads that week as failure. The rhythm reads it the way a drummer reads a rest: counted, held, and then played through.

The gifts feed each other. You can trace it in a single loaf of bread on a Friday table. It was bought with money the work earned. Slicing it is a small good done with the hands. Passing it to the person on your left is sharing your stuff. The person on your left, some nights, is the partner you chose and keep choosing. And whether the bread tastes like joy or like carbohydrates depends on the direction the eater has set. One loaf, five gifts. Eat your bread with joy is the whole system, in six words, on a plate.

What ties them together is play. Play is joy practiced. It is joy in motion. A person at play does the work without the work owning them, sits at the table without managing the dinner, loves the partner without trying to fix the partner. The first time you set your course toward joy, the choice is hard. The thousandth time, the choice is the person you have become.

There is a five-word version I use on hard days. Feast. Work. Love. Give. Rejoice. They tell you which gift you are missing. Which of the five is within reach today? Reach for that one.

When you are thirsty, there is nothing better than water. When you are bewildered, there is nothing better than life's simple gifts. Life will not be controllable. Inside that fact, there are five things you can do today that will make the day worth what it costs you.

You do not need a better life. You need to drink the one in front of you. The cup in front of you is the cup. The people at your table are the ones you have. The work in your hands is what you were given.

Drink it.