

Present — OVER — Perfect

LEAVING BEHIND FRANTIC
FOR A SIMPLER, MORE SOULFUL
WAY OF LIVING

SHAUNA NIEQUIST
FOREWORD BY BRENÉ BROWN



I begged Shauna for this manuscript a year ago while it was half-baked. When I finally received it, I read it from cover to cover in one sitting, then sat down at my laptop and wrote four emails bowing out of engagements that no longer fit my life, made two hard phone calls, and gave an end date to two other commitments. *Present Over Perfect* loaned me the courage, integrity, and permission I'd been waiting for. I will go to the grave thankful for this message. It has changed my life.

—Jennifer Hatmaker, author of *For the Love* and 7

Most of the teachers I've had didn't think they were teaching me anything; they just thought we were friends. Shauna is that kind of friend, and this is that kind of book. As you turn these pages, you'll be reminded about what you have loved, where you've found your joy, and perhaps what you've misplaced along the way. Most of all, you'll be guided into an honest conversation about your faith and where you want to go with it.

—Bob Goff, author of *Love Does*

I cried tears of relief while inhaling *Present Over Perfect*. I cried because I'd completely forgotten that I don't have to earn worthiness, hustle for love, or fight to belong. Shauna's words—equal parts elegant and urgent—invited me to remember that my worthiness, belonging, and beloved-ness are birthrights. I can't think of a more important, more desperately needed invitation.

—Glennon Doyle Melton, author of *Love Warrior*
and the *New York Times* bestseller *Carry On, Warrior*,
founder of Momastery and Together Rising

I've watched Shauna walk this journey away from proving and pushing toward connection and grace, and as a friend, I'm proud of her. As a reader, I'm thankful to have these pages as an inspiration and guide. For all of us who yearn for meaningful, connected lives but find ourselves sometimes settling for busy, her words are the push we've been waiting for.

—Donald Miller, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Scary Close* and *Blue Like Jazz*

Shauna awakens our desire to not miss our lives. Because that pursuit costs us our distracting habits, we need motivation beyond disciplines and rules. We have to want to really live and be with our people and enjoy this gift of a life that God has given us. Shauna's life makes me not want to miss mine, and her words here will make you not want to miss yours.

—**Jennie Allen**, founder and visionary of IF:Gathering,
author of *Anything* and *Restless*

We live in a society that can easily have us running in circles if we aren't careful. And this can result in having a life full of things we actually never intended to sign up for. Shauna helps us take a step back and reset our minds and souls. In these pages you will find wisdom and encouragement to see past temporal success and accolades to experience the deeper, more connected and truly enjoyable life. After all, it is the power of connection with others that helps us thrive in every sense of the word.

—**Dr. Henry Cloud**, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Boundaries* and *The Power of the Other*

I have already read this book seven times. It's about pursuing the present over the perfect—but it is nonetheless a nearly perfect thing, a nearly perfect book. Shauna speaks exactly to my condition.

—**Lauren Winner**, author of *Girl Meets God*, *Still*,
and *Wearing God*

With graceful confession, Shauna has created a memoir of her heart—a racing, fragmented heart that is becoming a contented, loved, and present heart. Reading this book heartened me for her, for her family, for her church, and for her generation. Shauna summons each of us to resist being sucked into the fast-paced draft of saying Yes and offers us a better way: the way of presence, the way of saying No. But this No is a Yes to something far better.

—**Scot McKnight**, author of *A Fellowship of Differents*
and *The Blue Parakeet*

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For my boys

*Aaron, I love how God made you passionate,
incredibly loving & fearless.*

*Henry, I love how God made you
wildly creative, brave & kind.*

*and Mac, I love how God made you exuberant,
affectionate & truly delightful.*

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Foreword by Brené Brown

A few months after I met Shauna for the first time at a speaking event, she emailed me to ask if we could get together during her upcoming trip to Houston.

Having recently finished her book, *Bread & Wine*, I was totally inspired to buck my normal response of “I’d love to, but I’m crazy busy right now” in favor of a hearty, “Yes! Come over and I’ll cook dinner.”

Shauna has a Benedictine passion about hospitality, gatherings, and feeding friends that I find contagious and inspiring. Of course, once the day arrived, my inspiration morphed into dread. My house was a disaster, I was two weeks late on a writing deadline, and I looked as tired and burnt out as I felt. What really sounded good was an evening of numbing out in front of the television with chips and queso. Alone.

In the middle of my “should I cancel or not” dance, I remembered this quote from St. Benedict: “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ.” Would I cancel on Jesus to hide out from my life with snack food and *Law & Order*

reruns? Honestly, I hope not. But there are days when I'm not so sure. *And don't worry—God is totally clear about this struggle. We discuss it on a regular basis.*

On this particular day, I decided to welcome Shauna in the most holy way I knew—with love and total honesty. I heated up some turkey chili and tamales, threw on some comfy pants, and opened the front door. We hugged for a minute, then she looked me straight in the eye and asked, “How are you?”

I could tell she really wanted to know. I got teary eyed and said, “I'm tired. Confused. A little lonely. But holding on.”

Shauna smiled as her eyes welled up. “Me too, pal. Me too. It's so hard sometimes.”

Our time together that night was sacred for a simple reason: we chose to be present over pretending to be perfect.

I believe the most powerful way to share what it really means to show up and be present is through story, and that's Shauna's offering with this book. Her gift to us is a collection of stories that are real, honest, and familiar in a way that is both comforting and a little uncomfortable (like truth can be).

Present Over Perfect is an open-armed invitation to welcome the people we love, and even ourselves, back into our lives. It's not an easy call, but Shauna is at the door and she knows exactly how to make us feel at home.

*God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt
life but into something holy and beautiful—
as beautiful on the inside as the outside.*

1 Thessalonians 4:7, *The Message*



Wild Geese

By Mary Oliver

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Ship to Wreck



*And, ah, my love remind me, what was it that I said?
I can't help but pull the earth around me to make my bed
And, ah, my love remind me, what was it that I did?
Did I drink too much? Am I losing touch?
Did I build this ship to wreck?*

—Florence + the Machine

This is a love story, like all my favorite stories. It's a story about letting yourself be loved, in all your imperfect, scarred, non-spectacular glory. And it's about the single most profound life change I've yet encountered.

One Saturday, three years ago, I stared at the ceiling of a hotel room in Dallas, exhausted. I said to myself, "If anyone else wants to live this life I've created for myself, they're more than welcome to try. But I'm done. I need a new way to live."

I was thirty-six years old. Aaron and I had been married for eleven years, and we had two boys—a one-year-old and a six-year-old. I was finishing a book—a month from

submitting a manuscript, longer than the previous ones I'd written, and with recipes this time, which meant that during the weekdays I was writing essays, and in the evenings I tested recipes over and over, flinging pans of burned brownies into the sink and starting again, butterflying pork tenderloin, taking notes on paper spattered with vinegar, dusted with spices. On the weekends, often I was traveling, speaking at conferences, retreats, and churches.

In many ways, I loved this life—loved my husband, adored my kids, was so thankful to be a writer. But it's like I was pulling a little red wagon, and as I pulled it along, I filled it so full that I could hardly keep pulling. That red wagon was my life, and the weight of pulling it was destroying me. I was aware that I was missing the very things I so badly longed for: connection, meaning, peace. But there was something that kept driving me forward—a set of beliefs and instincts that kept me pushing, pushing, pushing even as I was longing to rest.

My health was suffering. I was frequently sick. I slept poorly and not enough. I got migraines and then vertigo. The muscles in my neck and shoulders felt more like rock than tissue, and the circles under my eyes looked like bruises. My heart—the heart I used to offer so freely, the heart I used to wear proudly on my sleeve—had retreated deep inside my chest, wounded and seeking protection. My ability to taste and connect and feel deeply had been badly compromised. My faith was stilted—it had become over time yet another way to try and fail, rather than a respite or healing relationship.

I loved my life, but I had become someone I didn't want to be around. I had become someone I didn't want to be.

This book is an account of my winding, messy journey from exhaustion to peace, from isolation to connection, from hustling and multitasking to sacred presence. And this book is an invitation, too—a hand reaching out across the pages, inviting you into that same journey, because it has been the greatest, most challenging, most rewarding sea-change of my adult life.

Not long after that Saturday afternoon realization, a mentor of mine invited me to an event with her in San Francisco, where she lives. I wanted to go. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be away from my kids. I couldn't decide anymore what to do and what not to do, so I left her email in my inbox for a while, and then sent back a rambling, incoherent message about how my life felt so different than I thought it would, how I couldn't tell which end was up and couldn't put the brakes on, no matter how many times I tried.

She emailed back immediately. The line that stuck out to me was this: *"Stop. Right now. Remake your life from the inside out."*

For almost two decades, this wise woman's words have had a prophetic connection to my life—God has used her words in the right moments and seasons in such profound ways, and these latest words perhaps more than any others.

In that moment, I had no idea what it meant to remake my life from the inside out. Now, more than three years later, I'm so deeply thankful to look back and realize that's just

what I've done, although in the twistiest, most circuitous possible way.

I tried all the outside ways first—I imagined the changes I needed to make were about time management, or perhaps having the cleaners come more often. I quickly found it was not about managing time or housekeeping. It was not about to-do lists or scheduling or minutes and hours. This journey has been about love, about worth, about God, about what it means to know him and be loved by him in a way that grounds and reorders everything.

I've been remaking my life from the inside out, and I want to invite you into that creative, challenging, life-altering work.

It *is* work, of course. It feels, I'd imagine, like adding a basement to a house that's already been standing for decades. I thought it would be more like adding new shutters, but I'm finding it to be more like lifting up a home and starting to dig, reorienting the very foundation. There is nothing superficial about this process.

Over the course of these last years, I've been to a counselor and a spiritual director and many doctors. I've prayed and fasted. I've read countless books. I've been on a silent retreat at a Jesuit retreat center, and another at a summer camp on Lake Geneva.

I've failed miserably and begun again, asked for help, asked for grace, asked for prayer. And beyond those things I've *done*, the more life-altering parts of the work are those things I've *not done*: the moments that I've allowed—or forced—myself to stop, to rest, to breathe, to connect. That's

where life is, I'm finding. That's where grace is. That's where delight is.

I'm not, by any means, at the end of this journey. But I have traveled this beautiful new road far enough to know that this is how I want to live the rest of my days. I'm almost forty, feeling midlife-y like crazy, and this is how I want to live the second half of my life.

Richard Rohr says the skills that take you through the first half of your life are entirely unhelpful for the second half. To press the point a little bit: those skills I developed that supposedly served me well for the first half, as I inspect them a little more closely, didn't actually serve me at all. They made me responsible and capable and really, really tired. They made me productive and practical, and inch by inch, year by year, they moved me further and further from the warm, whimsical person I used to be . . . and I missed her.

The two sins at play here, I believe, are gluttony and pride—the desire to escape and the desire to prove, respectively. I want to taste and experience absolutely everything, and I want to be perceived as wildly competent. The opposite of gluttony is sobriety, in the widest sense, which is not my strong suit. And the opposite of pride, one might say, is vulnerability—essentially, saying *this is who I am* . . . not the sparkly image, not the smoke and mirrors, not the accomplishments or achievements. *This is me*, with all my limitations, with all my weaknesses.

It's as though God, in his graciousness and wisdom, pressed his thumbs into the twin wounds of my life, the

desire to prove and the desire to escape, and in that pressing is the invitation.

What I'm learning, essentially, is to stand where I am, plain and sometimes tired. Unflashy, profoundly unspectacular. But present and connected and grounded deeply in the love of God, which is changing everything.

My prayer is that this book will be a thousand invitations, springing up from every page, calling you to leave behind the heavy weight of comparison, competition, and exhaustion, and to recraft a life marked by meaning, connection, and unconditional love.

Part 1



Sea-change

*Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change,
into something rich and strange,
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell,
Ding-dong.*

Hark! now I hear them, ding-dong, bell.

—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Sea-change

Here I am, on the porch, and that feels fitting: outside as opposed to in, watching the water and the trees, listening to the music of the waves and the wind.

The word *sea-change* is from Shakespeare, from *The Tempest*: a man is thrown into the sea, and under the water he is transformed from what he was into something entirely new, something “rich and strange.”

The beautiful and obvious connection, of course: baptism. We are tipped backward into the water, and raised into new life. We leave behind the old—the sin, the regret, the failings, and we rise out of the water cleansed, made new. A sea-change if there ever was one.

This is the story of my sea-change—the journey from one way of living to another. It’s also an invitation to a sea-change of your own. No matter your age, your gender, your season of life, no matter your politics or profession, your sexuality or your faith tradition, you are invited into a sea-change.

I'm coming to believe that there are a handful of passages in our lives that transform us, not unlike conversions, where the old is gone and the new is come.

For me, this has taken the shape of a nearly four-year journey from exhaustion, multitasking, frantic and frayed living, into peace, connection, and rest.

When I look back on my life I can see a couple other sea-change seasons: One was my senior year of college, when I left behind chaos and disconnection for a renewed connection to God, to his people, to his Word and his ways of living.

Another was when I was twenty-nine and was fired from a job I held far too dearly. Also I was pregnant. And I was sitting on a book contract I was terrified to complete. That season was like off-roading, a little bit, like being plunged into new ways of living—writing, mothering, all the while grasping back to a job and identity that was no longer mine to grasp.

Years ago, a wise friend told me that no one ever changes until the pain level gets high enough. That seems entirely true. The inciting incident for life change is almost always heartbreak—something becomes broken beyond repair, too heavy to carry; in the words of the recovery movement, unmanageable.

In each of my three sea-changes, the life I'd created had broken to pieces in my hands. When I was twenty-one, my life was marked by drinking and dating and books, and only one of those things was helpful.

When I was twenty-nine, my attachment to my job was

such a white-knuckled thing, and I believe that getting fired was essentially God's grace prying my little fingers off that identity, digit by digit.

And in this current sea-change, my disconnectedness from my soul and from the people I care most about has become so painful that I'm willing to remake the whole of my life.



I've always been the bearer of what my husband calls "a Catholic imagination" as opposed to a Protestant one. I don't know where that came from, except that growing up in Chicago means growing up on all sides happily surrounded by Irish and Italian and Polish Catholics. We were the odd ones out, certainly, in our church that met in a movie theater, without crosses or priests.

More than that, though, I think this particularly Catholic imagination was born in me because my earliest loves—and my greatest loves to this day—were stories, meals, and water. Another way to look at it: the liturgy, communion, baptism.

I'm not at all an "in my head" person. I'm a blood and guts and body person, a dirt and berries and trees person. I'm a smell and taste and feel and grasp-between-my-fingers person, and both life around the table and life on the water are ways of living that I experience through the tactile sensations of them, not the ideas that float above them.



This sea-change in me began, fittingly, at the lake. I've spent summers all my life in this little lakeshore town. My grandparents had a cottage here, and both grandfathers had sailboats in this marina. My parents' first date was a walk on this pier. This town and this stretch of Lake Michigan is in my blood, deep in my bones.

For the last several years, each July, Aaron and the boys and I rent a house we love—a blue house with a wide porch and bright pink hydrangeas. We walk to the beach and the pier and the ice cream shop. We take the boat out every day, sometimes twice. We buy most of our produce at the farmer's market, and we pick blueberries and cherries to freeze and eat all year long. It's a three-hour drive to this small Michigan town from our house outside Chicago, but they feel worlds apart. I can feel myself exhale as we exit the highway and turn onto Phoenix Street, and the first glimpse of the water makes my heart leap every single time.

And so as is our custom, we arrived at the lake that July, breathless from travel, sleepless from kids, wrung out from a writing project that still wasn't finished.

Looking back, it's easy to see now that I was at my worst: weepy, snapping at everyone and everything, anxiety sky-high; deep connection to myself, to God, to the people I love most at an all-time deficit.

That July began the invitation to a new way of living, and each subsequent July has been a reset, a recalibration, a deeper invitation.

It's July once again, and I would never tell you that I'm

finished with this journey, all fixed up, nailing it. But I will tell you, with great gratitude and joy, that I am fundamentally changed, rebuilt from the inside. I have left behind some ways of living that I once believed were necessary and right that I now know were toxic and damaging—among them pushing, proving, over-working, ignoring my body and my spirit, trusting my ability to hustle more than God’s ability to heal.

My life is marked now by quiet, connection, simplicity. It has taken every bit of more than three years to learn these things, and like any hard, good work, I fail and try again more often than I’d prefer. But there is a peace that defines my days, a settledness, a groundedness. I’ve been searching for this in a million places, all outside myself, and it astounds me to realize that the groundedness is within me, and that maybe it was there all along.

I’ve always trusted things outside myself, believing that my own voice couldn’t be trusted, that my own preferences and desires would lead me astray, that it was far wiser and safer to listen to other people—other voices, the voices of the crowd. I believed it was better to measure my life by metrics out there, instead of values deeply held in my own soul and spirit.

And in the same way, I’ve always given my best energy to things outside myself, believing that I’d be fine, that I was a workhorse, that I didn’t need special treatment or babying or, heaven help me, self-care. Self-care was for the fragile, the special, the dainty. I was a linebacker, a utility player, a

worker bee. I ate on the run, slept in my clothes, worshiped at the altar of my to-do list, ignored the crying out of my body and soul like they were nothing more than the buzz of pesky mosquitoes.

Now I know that in the same way I've always believed God's Spirit dwells deeply in this world, it also dwells deeply in me. I've known that, cognitively, but my life spoke otherwise. Now I know that the best thing I can offer to this world is not my force or energy, but a well-tended spirit, a wise and brave soul.

My regrets: how many years I bruised people with my fragmented, anxious presence. How many moments of connection I missed—too busy, too tired, too frantic and strung out on the drug of efficiency.

Now I know there's another way.

You don't have to damage your body and your soul and the people you love most in order to get done what you think you have to get done.

You don't have to live like this.



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