

Present  
— OVER —  
PERFECT

28 DAYS OF REFLECTION  
A GUIDED JOURNAL

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# DAY 1

Three years ago, I sent my mentor a rambling, incoherent email 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."*

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

*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*

Have you ever felt like your life was out of control? How did you work from the inside out?

## DAY 2

This is what I know: I've always been a *more is more* person, and something shifted this summer. Something inside me said *no more*.

No more pushing and rushing. No more cold pizza at midnight, no more flights, no more books, no more houseguests, no more of all these things, even things I love, things I long for, things that make me happy. No more. Only less. Less of everything. Less stress. Less crying. Less noise. Less TV. Less wine. Less online shopping. Less *one more thing one more thing one more thing*, whether that one more thing is a trip or a movie or a boat ride or a playdate. Less cramming 36—or 56 or 106—hours into a day that has only ever held 24.

*What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*

Matthew 16:26

What *one more thing* are you cramming into your life right now? Take a moment to pray and seek how to let go of the need for the *one more thing*.

# DAY 3

You can make a drug—a way to anesthetize yourself— out of anything: working out, binge-watching TV, working, having sex, shopping, volunteering, cleaning, dieting. Any of those things can keep you from feeling pain for a while— that’s what drugs do. And, used like a drug, over time, shopping or TV or work or whatever will make you less and less able to connect to the things that matter, like your own heart and the people you love. That’s another thing drugs do: they isolate you.

Most of us have a handful of these drugs, and it’s terrifying to think of living without them. It *is* terrifying: wildly unprotected, vulnerable, staring our wounds right in the face. But this is where we grow, where we learn, where our lives actually begin to change.

*See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:19*

What is your drug of choice--the way you anesthetize yourself? How do you feel when you think about giving it up? What possibilities might open up if you do give it up?

# DAY 4

As I unravel the many things that brought me to this crisis point, one is undeniably my own belief that hard work can solve anything, that pushing through is always the right thing, that rest and slowness are for weak people, not for high-capacity people like me.

Productivity became my idol, the thing I loved and valued above all else. We all have these complicated tangles of belief and identity and narrative, and one of the early stories I told about myself is that my ability to get-it-done is what kept me around. I wasn't beautiful. I didn't have a special or delicate skill. But I could get stuff done, and it seemed to me that ability was my entrance into the rooms into which I wanted to be invited.

*What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." 2 Corinthians 6:16*

Stop for a moment and reflect: What is the most important thing to you, the thing you live and value above all else? What has become your idol?

# DAY 5

*No* became the scalpel I wielded as I remade my life, slicing through the tender tissue of what needed to go and what I wanted to remain. My mentor's words rang in my ears: *Stop. Right now. Remake your life from the inside out.* I don't know a way to remake anything without first taking down the existing structures, and that's what *no* does—it puts the brakes on your screaming-fast life and gives you a chance to stop and inspect just exactly what you've created for yourself, as difficult as that might be.

*“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. John 12:24 The Message*

What do you need to say no to in your life? What keeps you from saying no?

# DAY 6

I bet it all on busyness, achievement, being known as responsible, and escaping when those things didn't work. What I see now is that what I really wanted was love, grace, connection, peace.

When you decide, finally, to stop running on the fuel of anxiety, desire to prove, fear, shame, deep inadequacy—when you decide to walk away from that fuel for a while, there's nothing but confusion and silence. You're on the side of the road, empty tank, no idea what will propel you forward. It's disorienting, freeing, terrifying. For a while, you just sit, contentedly, and contentment is the most foreign concept you know. But you learn it, shocking as it is, day by day, hour by hour. You sit in your own skin, being just your own plain self. And it's okay. And it's changing everything.

*But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 1 Timothy 6:6-7*

What are you being called to walk away from so that you can accept God's view of you? Sit for a moment in the truth that God's love for you, just as you are, will never change.

# DAY 7

I used to believe, in the deepest way, that there was something irreparably wrong with me. And love was a lie. Now I'm beginning to see that love is the truth and the darkness is a lie.

It used to be that I was my most anxious, jittery, frantic self when I was alone and still... and that makes sense to me now—essentially, I felt like I had a hollow core, and that emptiness became deafening in the stillness.

What I find now, though, is that the stillness is where I feel safe and grounded, and that the frantic living spins me away from myself, from my center, from my new and very precious awareness of how deeply I'm loved. I return to the silence to return to love.

*He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalm 46:10*

Take a moment to be still before God. What do you find in stillness? What thoughts creep in? Make peace with that scary sense of hollowness, and invite in the reality of God's unshakable love.

# DAY 8

My friend Geri taught me something about prayer many years ago, and the image has stayed with me. She told me that when you begin to pray picture a bottle of oil-and-vinegar salad dressing. The vinegar, probably red wine vinegar, rests on top of the olive oil. The green-yellow oil is at the bottom of the bottle, rich and flavorful. When you begin to pray, pour out the vinegar first—the acid, whatever’s troubling you, whatever hurt you, whatever is harsh and jangling your nerves or spirit. Pour out all the vinegar until it’s gone.

Then what you find underneath is the oil, glistening and thick: *we’re going to be fine. God is real and good and present and working.* This is the grounding truth of life with God, that we’re connected, that we’re not alone, that life is not all vinegar—puckery and acidic. It is also oil, luscious, thick, heavy with history and flavor.

But you have to start with the vinegar or you’ll never experience the oil. Many of us learned along the way to ignore the vinegar—the hot tears banging on our eyelids, the hurt feelings, the fear. Ignore them. Stuff them. Make yourself numb. And then pray dutiful, happy prayers. But this is what I’m learning about prayer: you don’t get the oil until you pour out the vinegar.

*Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.* Psalm 107:6

Do you offer your honest feelings and prayers to God? Or do you stuff those prayers away in favor of good and dutiful prayers? Take a moment to pour out your vinegar—your real self—to God.

# DAY 9

These days, I'm relearning daughter-ness, and I find it most through silence and nature. Nature, of course, connects us back to that innate sense of having been created—of order and beauty and humility. We have been made. We are fragile. We live in connection to water and air and plants and sunshine, and when we acknowledge those things, we acknowledge our Creator.

*When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. Psalm 8: 3-8*

Have you ever considered your daughter-ness? Your son-ness? Take a minute to reflect on Psalm 8 and your place as a daughter or son in God's created world.

# DAY 10

When I practice silence just for a few minutes, when I practice allowing myself to be seen and loved by the God who created me from dust, I start to carry an inner stillness with me back into the noise, like a secret. There's a quiet place inside me that I bring with me, and when I start to feel the questions, the fear, the chaos, I locate that quiet, that stillness, that grounded place.

When you begin to carry God's love and true peace deep within your actual soul like a treasure chest, you realize that you don't have to fling yourself around the planet searching for those things outside yourself. You only have to go back into the stillness to locate it. That treasure you've been searching for— for so long—was there all the time.

*Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.*  
Proverbs 17:1

Are you searching for things like love and peace outside yourself? What would it mean to carry God's love and true peace like a treasure chest around with you?

# DAY II

Whatever thing you think you can't do without: alcohol, shopping, that number on a scale. That car, that secret habit, that workout. The pills, the lies, the affair. The money, the success, the cutting. Whatever it is that you clutch onto with angry fists, that you grab like a lifeline, when you release that thing, when you let it go, that's when you'll hear the notes between the music. That's when you'll feel the groove, the rhythm you were made to feel, that you've covered over a thousand times with noise and motion and fear and all the things.

When you hear it, you'll realize it sounds a lot like your own heartbeat, the rhythm of God, of life, pumping in your chest, the most beautiful song you've ever heard.

*Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge. 1 Timothy 6:20*

What are you using to cover over the groove, the rhythm you were made to feel? Put your name in place of Timothy's in the verse above and feel the invitation to turn away, to let go.

# DAY 12

This life you're building is entirely your creation, fashioned out of your dreams and fears. What do you want? What do you love? What ways of living have you simply acquiesced to, because someone told you to? Because it seemed smart or practical or easy? Are those the best words to describe how you want to live?

The world will tell you how to live, if you let it. Don't let it. Take up your space. Raise your voice. Sing your song. This is your chance to make or remake a life that thrills you.

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Ephesians 4:1*

Are you living your own life...or just one you have acquiesced to? Does that thought of remaking your life thrill or terrify you?

# DAY 13

It seems to me that one of the great hazards is quick love, which is actually charm. We get used to smiling, hugging, bantering, practicing good eye contact. And it's easier than true, slow, awkward, painful connection with someone who sees all the worst parts of you. Your act is easy. Being with you, deeply with, is difficult.

But quick charm is like sugar—it rots us. It winds us up and leaves us jonesing, but it doesn't feed us. Only love feeds us. And love happens over years, repetitive motions, staying, staying, staying. Showing up again. Coming clean again, being seen again. That's how love is built.

And if you can wean yourself off the drug of quick charm—whatever it is you do to avoid the scary intimacy required for a rich home life—that's when love can begin. But only then. It's all in here, not out there.

*Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.* Proverbs 31:30

Do you ever choose easy charm over true connection? Is there one opportunity today for you to choose difficult, unglamorous, true love?

# DAY 14

In recent years, I started to sense that I was being run by something other than my own voice and calling, something other than God's vision for my life. And I talked and talked about it, but unfortunately, mostly kept doing things the same old way—out of habit and fear and that crazy sense that just one more would be okay, now just one more, now just for him or her, for an old friend, to help someone out. But sometimes you need to say *not one more time*. I won't get this wrong again.

*'And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'* Acts 22:16

What do you need to say no to today--what tangible thing or an actionable decision?  
What do you need to turn away from so you can say yes to what really matters?

# DAY 15

Sometimes being brave is being quiet. Sometimes being brave is getting off the drug of performance. For me, being brave is trusting what my God is asking of me, what my family and community is asking from me—even if it's totally different than what our culture says I should do.

Sometimes, brave looks boring, and that's totally, absolutely, okay.

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9*

What does being brave look like for you? Does it fly in the face of what our culture pushes?

# DAY 16

If perfect is plastic, present is rich, loamy soil. It's fresh bread, lumpy and warm. It's real and tactile and something you can hold with both hands, something rich and warm. Present is a face bare of makeup, a sweater you've loved for a decade, a mug that reminds you of who you used to be. It's the Bible with the battered cover, the journal filled with scribbled, secret dreams. It isn't pretty, necessarily—it isn't supposed to be.

Present is living with your feet firmly grounded in reality, pale and uncertain as it may seem. Present is choosing to believe that your own life is worth investing deeply in, instead of waiting for some rare miracle or fairy tale. Present means we understand that the here and now is sacred, sacramental, threaded through with divinity even in its plainness. Especially in its plainness.

*This is God's work. We rub our eyes—we can hardly believe it! This is the very day God acted—let's celebrate and be festive! Salvation now, God. Salvation now! Oh yes, God—a free and full life! Psalm 118:23-25*

When was the last time you were truly present? What did that moment feel like? Sound like? Smell like?

# DAY 17

For years, I hadn't often prayed to a God who says, "We got this; we'll do it together. Your failure doesn't rattle me. Your limitations don't bother me." But I do now, little by little. Because now when I step out of that boat, I'm starting to see a man with love in his eyes, a man who will rescue and rescue and rescue, and then bring me to safety, despite my faithlessness, despite my failure. How much more beautiful is our God when we free him from own wounds and tired narratives.

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"* Matthew 14:29

Do you ever slip into thinking that you're a bother to God? That your failure and limitations will be met with disgust instead of love?

# DAY 18

Addiction to motion—or faking or busyness or obsessive eating or obsessive dieting or whatever it is for you—builds just a tiny, luscious buffer between you and...everything. So words that would hurt you when you're stone-sober just don't bother you after a glass or two of wine, or after you've lost three more pounds, or as long as chocolate or pizza can keep you company, keeping you safe and distant. But you take away those things and all of a sudden, you find many of your relationships very different than you originally believed. You feel everything. Everything.

That's how it is when you leave these things behind— busyness, exhaustion, codependence, compulsive anything—you can see the cracks and brokennesses in your relationships for what they really are, and you realize that you can't move forward the way you have been, that you have to either fix the cracks or let the connection break—those are the only two honest ways.

*Don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need to fear for I'm your God. I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you. Isaiah 41:10*  
*The Message*

What do you need to burn down in your life, to make space for a new way of living? What expectations, roles, addictions seem immovable until you start to move them, and find that when you do, everything changes? Trust that God will hold you and keep you in the burning down and building up.

# DAY 19

It seems to me like most of us were taught that jealousy is bad, and so when we feel it, we should push it away from ourselves as quickly as possible, get rid of it fast. But I'm learning that envy can be an extremely useful tool to demonstrate our desires, especially the ones we haven't yet allowed ourselves to feel, and so I committed to learning from my jealousy toward her. I circled it, picked it up, turned it in my hand like a prism. *What are you?* I asked. *What do you have to teach me?*

*God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change. 2 Peter 3:9 The Message*

What makes you say, "must be nice"? What longing might your jealousy lead you to, if you're brave enough to listen to it before you push it away?

# DAY 20

I'm learning to silence the noise, around me and within me, and let myself be seen and loved, not for what I produce, but for the fact that I have been created by the hands of a holy God, like every other thing on this earth, equally loved, equally seen.

It seems to me that some people got the hang of this early in life, that they're just deeply fine and don't have to push or prove or earn or outrun. These people, I'm finding, are unicorns—rare and lucky. Most of us are trying to fill a wound, trying to outrun something, turning up the volume to drown out a song that's been haunting us all our lives.

*The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.* Exodus 14:14 ESV

What noise do you need to silence within you? Do you find that silencing outside noises helps to silence the internal noises?

# DAY 21

I used to be afraid that I was hollow somehow, that I only existed if someone could see me and hear me, like a toddler playing peek-a-boo. My whole life was an elaborate attempt at never having to be alone with myself. But the invitations kept coming, grace upon grace, to leave things behind, shed old skins, release long-held brokennesses, and when I finally walked away from all those things, there I was, alone with myself, and what I found astounded me: I wasn't afraid at all. More than that, instead of being afraid, or hollow, or nothing at all, what I found was strength. I found an unshakable core of love and passion and desire to make the world better. I found focus and a sense of power I'd never known.

This is the great anomaly of it: we cling to these structures because we think they are what keep us safe—as if we're bugs who need exoskeletons, shells outside of ourselves to protect us. But when you start to understand how strong you are, you realize that you don't need a shell at all. The inside is strong and secure, and doesn't need to be shielded by all those other things—performance, proving, busyness. There is nothing left to be shed, and at the center is strength, gratitude, Jesus.

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*  
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

What have you been using as a protective shell? What kind of life can you imagine if you were to drop the shell?

# DAY 22

It's been said a million times that the most important things aren't things. But if we're not careful, it seems, many of us find ourselves overwhelmed by all the stuff we have to manage, instead of focused on what we're most passionate about—writing or making or painting or connecting with people.

I want the stuff in my life to be light, easily managed, simple, so that the best of my energy is free for people, dreams, creativity; so that we can make memories around the table, eating meals served on those white plates; so that I can run after my kids in one of a half-dozen striped shirts; so that when you want to borrow a book, each one on my shelf tells a meaningful story.

How we live matters, and what you choose to own will shape your life, whether you choose to admit it or not. Let's live lightly, freely, courageously, surrounded only by what brings joy, simplicity, and beauty.

*And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Luke 12:15 ESV*

What would it mean for you to surround yourself only with what brings joy, simplicity, and beauty? What would you need to let go of?

# DAY 23

I'm making peace with medium. And choosing to be happy. Rested, not exhausted, not afraid, not wired and panicky all the time. This is countercultural. This is rebellious.

What I want so deeply, and what I want to offer you: grace and nourishment. And those are the exact opposites of what I've been practicing for so long: exhaustion and starvation.

This is hospitality at its core. This is the beat of my heart: to experience grace and nourishment, and to offer it, one in each hand, to every person I meet: grace and nourishment. You can rest. You don't have to starve.

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:13-14*

How can you offer yourself grace and nourishment? How can you look at yourself as fearfully and wonderfully made?

# DAY 24

So much of adulthood is peeling off the layers of expectation and pressure, and protecting those precious things that lie beneath. We live in a culture that shouts, that prescribes rather narrowly what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a success, what it means to live a valuable life.

But those definitions require us to live on a treadmill, both literally and figuratively, always hustling to fit in, to be thin enough and young enough and sparkly enough, for our homes to be large and spotless, our children well-mannered and clean-faced, our dreams orderly and profitable. But that's not life. That's not where the fullness of joy and meaning are found.

The snow is only meant, created, commanded to fall. The rain only meant, created, commanded to pour down. You were only meant, created, commanded to be who you are, weird and wonderful, imperfect and messy and lovely.

*God's voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding. He says to the snow, "Fall on the earth," and to the rain shower, "Be a mighty downpour." Job 37:5-6*

What do you need to leave behind in order to recover that essential self that God created? What do you need to walk away from in order to reclaim those parts of you that God designed, unique to you and for his purposes?

# DAY 25

If this journey has been the peeling of an onion, layer by layer, or the un-nesting of Russian dolls, shedding external selves like skin, it seems we are reaching the center.

The center is reached, once again, through silence, time, honesty, loss; by leaving behind all the voices and expectations, all the selves and costumes of other times, things that worked then but don't work any longer.

This is, I realize, middle age. But here's the thing: every new season of life is an invitation to leave behind the things of the season before, the trappings and traps that have long expired, right for then, no longer right for now.

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

What season are you in right now? What deeper change is God calling you into?

# DAY 26

Saying yes means not hiding. It means being seen in all your imperfections and insecurities. Saying yes is doing scary things without a guarantee that they'll go perfectly. Saying yes is telling the truth even when it's weird or sad or impossibly messy. Saying yes is inviting chaos, and also possibility. Saying yes is building a new future, regardless of the past. Saying yes is jumping in anyway.

*For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 1:19-20*

What do you need to say yes to? What would it look like to be seen in all of your imperfections and insecurities? What is one thing you can do today to say yes?

# DAY 27

The soul's worth doesn't come from earning or proving. Image doesn't matter. Outrunning the emptiness doesn't work for long. Each soul, every soul is worthy, because God made every soul, and because his love, his Son came to earth and walked among us, because God's love for us is so deep and wide and elaborate that he wants to be with us, to walk with us, to teach us how to live in that love and worthiness.

It is only when you understand God's truly unconditional love that you begin to understand the worth of your own soul—not because of anything you've done, but because every soul is worthy, every one of us is worthy of love, having been created by and in the image of the God of love.

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:18-19*

What is your initial reaction to God's unconditional love? Do you find your soul's worth there, or do you try to hustle your way to worth?

# DAY 28

The bad news is that there is no finish line here, no magical before-and-after. Probably you will not always live in this new, brave, grounded space. Let me be clear with you: I don't. I still get pushed off center, thrown into fear and proving, wound up into a tangled mess of expectations and opinions of who I should be and what I should do.

But there's good news, too: if we just keep coming back to the silence, if we keep grounding ourselves, as often as we need to, in God's wild love, if we keep showing up and choosing to be present in both the mess and in the delight, we will find our way home, even if the road is winding, and full of fits and starts.

*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**

Take a moment to reflect on God's immense and wild love for you. Reread the verses above and rest in the knowledge that the God of all love is inviting you deeper into his love--to smell, touch, taste, feel, and see the goodness already present in you.