

An aerial photograph of a small white boat moving across a deep blue ocean. The boat is leaving a large, circular, white wake that fills much of the frame. The water's surface is textured with small waves and ripples.

JOHN ELDREDGE

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

get  
your  
life  
back

EVERYDAY PRACTICES  
FOR A WORLD GONE MAD

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life  
back

# get your life back

EVERYDAY PRACTICES  
FOR A WORLD GONE MAD

JOHN ELDREDGE



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*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.



## INTRODUCTION

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 (!).<sup>1</sup> We talk about unplugging, but we're enchanted—by the endless social media circus of love and hatred, the rapid, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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.

## INTRODUCTION

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."<sup>4</sup> This isn't just an intellectual problem; it's a spiritual crisis. It's pretty hard to hear "deep calling unto deep"<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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



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."<sup>2</sup> 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:

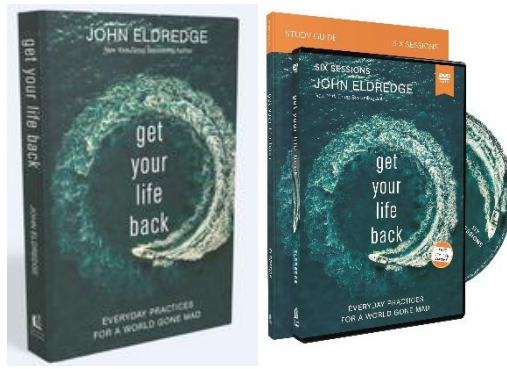
Pick one or two moments in your day when you know you are least likely to be interrupted. One of those for me is when I pull into the driveway at the end of the day. I don't have to leap from the car; I can take a moment. I turn the engine off, sometimes lay my head down on the steering wheel, and just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

## GET YOUR LIFE BACK

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 to help you practice the Pause; 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.



# get your life back

by JOHN ELDREDGE

## A refreshingly simple guide to recover your life.

We live in soul-scorching times. The mad pace of life, the number of demands on our time and energy, and the overwhelming torrent of information coming at us 24-7 has left us ragged, wrung-out, and emptied. This isn't the life we want; but how do we get off the roller coaster?

In *Get Your Life Back*, John Eldredge provides a practical, simple, and refreshing guide to taking your life back. By practicing a few wonderfully simple practices—or what John calls “graces”—you can begin to recover your soul, disentangle from the tragedies of this broken world, and discover the restorative power of beauty.

John's graces include:

- learning to insert the One Minute Pause into your day;
- practicing "benevolent detachment" and truly letting it all go;
- offering kindness toward yourself in the choices you make;
- drinking in the simple beauty available to you every day; and
- taking steps to unplug from technology-overload.

These practices and others are ready for the taking. You don't need abandon your life to get it back. Begin restoring your life here and now. Your soul will thank you for it.

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