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live
slowly

A Gentle
Invitation
to Exhale



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When Sea Breeze and Road Rage Collide

*The cost of a thing is the amount of life which
is required to be exchanged for it.*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

IT WAS EARLY ON A SUMMER MORNING, and I was barely awake. Sunrise was imminent. I was twenty-seven years old and holding tight to my fresh dream of moving to Murrells Inlet, a small South Carolina coastal town we had just returned from visiting. Little did I know how many of my dreams would vanish that day. I ran out of our bedroom to call 911 at my husband Brian's request. A kind voice answered at the other end, but at the sound of Brian's body crashing onto the floor, I left the phone dangling. I quickly retraced my steps to find Brian dying. His aorta had ruptured, and he bled to death in less than two minutes, with me by his side.

The sound of breath, of life, leaving his body was louder than I had expected. It was a literal soft whooshing sound. The closest thing I had ever experienced was when I was fifteen. A thirty-foot whale shark surfaced right next to where I drifted with my friend in a small sailboat. Both situations were terrifying and yet beautiful

in inexplicable ways. Both caught me by surprise and formed a lump in my throat. But that morning, as I felt bewilderment, fear, and disbelief, I wondered if I was caught up in a nightmare.

Two years prior, on a summer afternoon, coming around the bend in the road on Interstate 85 near Atlanta, Brian was riding as a passenger in a work truck that inadvertently found itself in the middle of a road rage incident. Brian had nowhere to go; he was crushed under a semi truck in this most horrific accident. Life came to a standstill that day. Due to the actions of strangers, Brian hovered between life and death. That day turned into nine months in the hospital, four of them in a shock-trauma ICU where my island heart saw human suffering so tragic it remains hard to explain.

Thirty-three surgeries and almost two million dollars in medical bills later, Brian eventually made a full recovery. We were settling into our own happy version of a slow and settled life in our quaint Georgia town—only to have those dreams vaporized that summer morning when Brian unexpectedly died. His aorta ruptured due to the infection and trauma near the site of his tracheostomy from two years earlier.

My grieving was intense that season. It was layered from the trauma my mind and body went through during the months when Brian had so many close calls in the hospital. It feels unbearable when you watch someone endure agony, and you can't prevent their pain and suffering.

Maybe it's a good thing we don't write our own stories. Sure, we make decisions, we plot a course, and go full steam ahead with our hopes and dreams—but we don't actually write our story.

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God does. Our story fits into his Story and is woven in with other stories so big it's hard to imagine we are part of them. And yet we are. I still don't know the "why" of my story. I suppose I don't have to. You, too, may have a story that has left you wondering why. Maybe the unthinkable has happened to you. Maybe, what you had hoped *would* happen didn't.

Looking back as an adult, it sometimes seemed that my years as an island child were like living in the Garden of Eden. Such a beautiful, pristine dot in the world—a theology of slow living in the making. After college, I thought I would bring my peaceful, slow-paced island life with me as I got married and moved to Georgia. Sixteen years of slow island living in my formative years laid the groundwork for my life; but as often happens, a shattering life moment, like a crashing wave, threatened to tear apart the life I knew.

To Feel or Not to Feel

For so many years after this double tragedy of Brian's accident and later death, my biggest fear of slowing down came because I knew I'd need to sit with the hard stuff. I knew that I might not get answers. But mostly, I didn't want to *feel* the feelings. Those things I refused to think about, relive, question why, or deal with. There was a loneliness in knowing that many people around me either couldn't fathom my experiences or had moved on from them. My heart could bear reliving trauma only so much—which is probably why I put off important therapy for eighteen years after that.

There looms this underlying fright and agitation in not wanting to pause, not wanting to let time and stillness carve out things you cannot name. It's a universal fear because we all know that

control very often slips out of our hands like sand. On her Instagram, Tutu Mora writes, “Feeling the need to be busy all the time is a trauma response and fear-based distraction from what you’d be forced to acknowledge and feel if you slowed down.”

For most of us it’s easier to plan a busy weekend of constant social obligations than it is to make space to talk to our partner or our parents about that looming difficult thing. We might even tackle a big project so we can avoid dealing with siblings bickering or teenagers’ attitudes. However, not wanting to face God and admit that we aren’t sure if we even trust him—even though we are leading the women’s Bible study at church, serving on a

mission board, or volunteering at the soup kitchen—is a whole ’nother thing, as we say here in the South.

If you’re like me, there are times when it’s easier to keep busy: head down, putting one foot in front of another. Until we can’t. When we burn out from the busyness and we are forced to stop, this is our invitation to take inventory of all

the unsaid, the undone, the unobserved. This divine pause creates time to reflect and gives us the opportunity to shift. It opens up a whole new world if we only let it. Our bodies and our minds were not meant to keep up this wild pace. What we desperately need is a shift, a collective exhale as we find our way again.

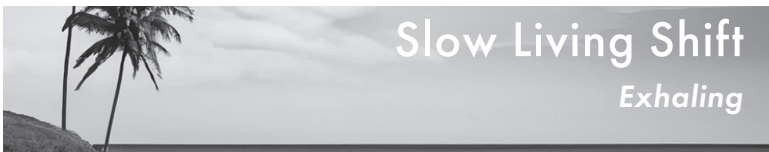
After Brian’s death, I started an internal journey, wrestling with trusting the God I had known my whole life. I would have to

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unlearn some things in the years ahead and begin anew to believe that I was truly held by God. The same God who breathed life into Adam when he formed him from dirt. The same God who walked the garden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.

The Bible says: “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7 NRSV). The name God reveals for himself in Exodus, “I AM WHO I AM,” is spelled YHWH in Hebrew. When I pronounce it, it only comes out as a breath, a soft whooshing sound.

Breath. Life. Death. I am in awe.



Slow Living Shift

Exhaling

Shifting the way we do things, the direction we are going in, and the way we are trying to hold it all together is imperative when intentionally slowing down. We will find freedom in naming our pain, our stories, and what we need. Do you need to shift your direction in order to turn a fresh page? Do you need to exhale, pausing to catch your breath from the last few years? We simply cannot keep holding our breath, wondering where the next disappointment or demand will come from. When we do, we are being robbed of time in our right-now, precious life.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes God seems really slow? The day my pastor, Kenny, asked that question from the pulpit, there was a sweeping wave of agreement in the nods, weary smiles, and sighs of our little congregation. As I sat there in the old wooden pew, looking up at the brass lanterns hanging high above

me, I had one of those slow-drifting-out-to-sea moments. It was Advent. As I pondered Pastor Kenny's words, I saw the paradox. The golden glow lit up the space where the tiny crosses were set in our old church lights hanging from the high rafters. With little beacons of hope shining through, I felt an exhale, a relaxing of my shoulders. And yet, the stark reality of the hustle and the pain in the world was right outside our doors, a busy world we no doubt would all immerse ourselves in throughout that Advent season.

But for a while now, I have sensed a shift beginning—a collective pushing back on the social norms, expectations, and traditions of a life of hurry. We are starting to see that hurried living is a coverup when all along, throughout the generations, we have

had God's gracious invitation to humankind. That is the invitation to breathe easier again. Jesus himself gives us the most beautiful invitation to slower living with rest for our

We simply cannot keep holding our breath.

wearry souls. Come linger with me in these words:

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 MSG)

We Don't Have the Control After All

We are free to rest in the fact that we do not have as much control as we would like to think we do. We don't have to run away from

our pain by staying busy. Fear can drive a lot of what we don't do. It's no secret that anxiety is rampant in our society: in our schools, our homes, our work, even in our leisure activities. And we also know that what goes unnamed goes undealt with. Carl Honoré, author of *In Praise of Slow*, says, "This is where our obsession with going fast and saving time leads. To road rage, air rage, shopping rage, relationship rage, office rage, vacation rage, gym rage. Thanks to speed, we live in the age of rage."

Pastor Kenny's Advent invitation that Sunday was a balm in a busy season as he offered these thoughts:

Words are very important to God. Do not be afraid. Give God the recognition of your fear. This includes things you might need to finally change, a new kind of "casting all your fear" kind of trust that's rooted in these words from 1 Peter 5:7. It includes giving up control, and giving up what others will think of you.

It's perfectly fine to tell God you are tired and weary and need to exhale and rest. He wants to guide you.

I am more settled these days. I finally accepted that grief and joy do hold hands throughout life—when sea breeze and road rage collide. I understand that God kept me rooted in a nourished space. I was held in those rough waves. On the island. In the hospital. In my sunroom now. Like the curve out on I-85 in Atlanta, we will have unexpected pain ahead with new bends in the road we travel. However, you and I are being invited to walk with God. Every day. As if we are in the original garden again. A slow, lingering pace. Being present. Being attentive. Being in true community. Being at rest in a crazy world.

We get to gently, purposefully, and intentionally shift gears and fall into a rhythm that is more sustainable—that gives us room to breathe, keeping company with God, ourselves and others. This is a never-ending theme and a never-ending need in my life. I know it is in yours too, because you picked this book up. May you be empowered as you do the hard, sacred work of shifting and exhaling. Let's recover our time. We don't have to miss our one, precious life.

For Reflection and Discussion

Why is catching your breath important to you? What difference would it make?

What kind of experiences have disrupted your routine and your life, possibly bringing pain or heaviness along with them?

Are you afraid to slow down? If so, what do you think might be behind that fear?

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