

# Loving My Actual Life

AN EXPERIMENT IN  
RELISHING WHAT'S RIGHT  
IN FRONT OF ME

ALEXANDRA  
KUYKENDALL



**BakerBooks**

a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Alexandra Kuykendall, *Loving My Actual Life*  
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.  
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2016 by Alexandra Kuykendall

Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kuykendall, Alexandra, author.

Title: Loving my actual life : an experiment in relishing what's right in front of me / Alexandra Kuykendall.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015049580 | ISBN 9780801007811 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian women—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BV4527 .K854 2016 | DDC 248.8/43—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015049580>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

Scripture quotations labeled Message are taken from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

16 17 18 19 20 21 22      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



For my main cast of characters.

Derek, Gabi, Genevieve, Gracelynn, and Giulianna,  
I thank God you are the people in my actual life.

# Contents

---

Preface: A Letter to You	9
Introduction: The Recalibrating of My Days	13
Month 1: Bring It Down—Quiet	23
Month 2: First Things First—Mornings	41
Month 3: My Peeps—Dates	59
Month 4: Being Kind to My Body—Health	77
Month 5: Unleashing the Wild—Adventure	97
Month 6: Pushing Through the Piles—Home Organization	119
Month 7: Love Is in the Details—Creativity	141
Month 8: Three Times a Day—Meals	161
Month 9: I Am Made to Do Great Things—Passions	183
Conclusion: This One Life	201
Ideas to Love Your Actual Life	209
Acknowledgments	215
Notes	217

# Preface

---

## A LETTER TO YOU

Hi, Friend,

We likely haven't met in real life, but I consider you a friend for a few reasons. First, you're ready to hear my experiences as I journey on a nine-month experiment to appreciate and cherish my life. My actual life. With all its quirks, frustrations, disappointments, surprises, and gifts. This is what friends do, sit and listen and cheer each other on. So thank you for being a willing listener.

And second, I suspect you've picked up this book because we are somewhat kindred spirits, friends in the journey of life. We are both facing days of incredible speed and desiring something different because this pace just doesn't feel right. We know with certainty that we must be made for more than merely tolerating our circumstances; we want to know how to thrive within them. Especially if we don't have a lot of opportunity to change the major things. We want to love *this* life today.

I must also recognize what I don't know about you. I don't know your financial or marital status. Whether you have children, an extended family, or a close circle of friends.

Your emotional or spiritual health. Your age. Your education. Your work, paid or unpaid. Those details all matter because they impact *your* actual life. They shape you, inform you, and influence you as you make thousands of daily decisions.

I find most people are working hard to live life “right.” Whatever our right might be. And then real life gets in the way. Singleness or infertility or underemployment or whiny children may not be what we expected, or hoped for, but here we are. We all have our ideal and then we also all have our reality. They rarely match up. This is a book about savoring the reality.

The last few years I’ve been following my friend and mentor Karen’s advice. “Do what only *you* can do,” she told me during my fourth pregnancy as I struggled with work-family decisions. She emphasized *you*. I was the only one who could be Derek’s wife and my girls’ mother. Other responsibilities could be shared, even totally discarded on my part. It helped me say no to some obligations as I realized there were many things I *could* do, but didn’t *need* to do. But even with that intentional decision-making matrix, I sensed I was still not living my best life. I needed a fresh start. And that is where the experiment was born.

In this experiment we’re going to hang out in the element that *is*. Not what we could be, should be, or wish were true about our lives, but what actually *is*. To find a contentment that doesn’t merely resign itself to circumstances we wish were different, but appreciates the daily routine we’re in right now. Because God gave us each one unique life. Meant to be lived out in our *actual* situations. I don’t want the gifts he’s offered to go unnoticed nor the opportunities wasted. I want to live into where he’s called me and me alone.

Looking at life from a global perspective, through the eyes of someone whose physical needs aren’t being met, I

recognize that I am living a pretty comfortable, even charmed, life. I don't want this experiment to simply be a list of first world pains. But the truth is my reality *is* embedded in the first world and there are barriers preventing me from appreciating God's gifts right around me. I want to identify and overcome these barriers so I can truly relish the goodness that surrounds me.

You'll be reading along as I stumble through the experiment and discover what helps me in the relishing. Some findings surprise me and change how I approach my days. At the end of each month I share what I've learned and the practices I'll most likely continue in my daily rhythms. You'll also find some questions to get you thinking about how you are doing in the given area of your own life. And a verse or two from the Bible that you can meditate on or even memorize as you consider God's unchanging nature and desire in the midst of your "crazy busy."

My process is not always pretty or neat. But truly my hope is that my stumblings will stir questions in you about what it means to love your actual, unique life. That it might be an impetus for you to consider the question, "What if my fresh start started right here?"

I'll close this letter with an invitation for you to join me, maybe even with your actual friends, in this experiment of relishing the goodness that is here and present. Consider the questions at the end of each chapter, do your own version of the experiment for a month, a week, or a day at a time, to discover what works in helping you love your actual life.

Your friend in the experiment,  
Alex

# Introduction

---

## THE RECALIBRATING OF MY DAYS

### The Need

The alarm on my phone sounds. As my hand searches the top of my hamper for the source of the church bell chimes alarm, my thoughts are already at yesterday's unfinished to-do list. Despite the prior day's frenzied efforts, I hadn't checked everything off the list and had fallen into bed with part of me feeling as though I'd failed. I awake to a lingering feeling of urgency from unfinished work. As I swing my feet to the floor, I feel my jaw tighten and my heart rate speed up. Back to yesterday's crazy-busy speed in a matter of seconds.

And now the whirlwind of the day: the waking of children, feeding them, throwing clothes (any clothes!) on their bodies, having an argument (or three) about them making their lunches, dropping them off at various schools, clicking in and out of car seats a thousand times, bringing not-yet-in-school children home, putting them in front of the television while I try unsuccessfully to get just a little work done, counting down the hours until I need to begin the school pick-ups, throwing two loads of laundry through the cycles so they can move from the dirty pile to the



equally huge clean pile in our laundry room, getting the littles (as we call the two youngest in our house) back into the car, school pick-ups for the bigs (you guessed it, the older two), realizing we have nothing for dinner, scouring cupboards for something that will qualify (because it's too late in the day to consider freezer options), waiting in my minivan in the driveway for my husband to pull in so I can pull out and head to soccer practice with one of my older girls, yelling some type of dinner instructions at him over my shoulder as I peel out, trying to cram another hour of work in during soccer practice, coming home, eating, putting girls to bed, checking emails one more time, and collapsing, knowing tomorrow will hold another, almost identical agenda and pace.

A typical day in the recent span of my life, and it is where this story begins.

I was living day after day crammed full with no foreseeable end to the crazy-making. Ever. With a three-year-old as our caboose child, it could be roughly fifteen more years of this kind of crazy-making. I was operating in perma-exhaustion, which, I'm sure you can imagine, made me a sweet and lovely person.

When I started speaking to people in bullet points rather than complete sentences to maximize efficiency, I knew I wasn't living as I should. And yet when I considered all the elements of my life, all the things that took up time and attention, I recognized they were *all* good things. My family, for sure. My work offered me an outlet and greater purpose, not to mention income. My church kept me grounded. My friends offered sanity. My kids' activities were limited because, believe it or not, I truly was trying to have some semblance of control over our family schedule. On their own, all good things, but compounded they became more than 24-hours' worth of commitments. It was simply impossible for one woman to do all the things I was attempting. I was not living a sustainable life.

This whirlwind of an existence collided with a catalyst. A life event that grabbed my attention and told me my time to fully live is now: I toured middle schools. That's right, my eldest daughter was leaving the childhood years of elementary school, where everything felt safe and the future felt long, to start middle school, and that triggered something in me. Part nostalgia, part fear, part panic that I would wake up the next day and she'd be fully grown and gone. I knew I needed to be paying better attention to today.

And then Derek came home from work and reported a conversation he'd had with a man a few years ahead of us in parenting (those kinds of conversations are either hopeful or horrifying). This is what that man said: "From zero to eleven the years are long, from eleven on they fly." Derek and I looked at each other and knew we were headed toward free fall.

Something drastic was in order. A recalibrating of my days. Of my time. So I could appreciate this one life that I've been given. (Oh yeah, and I turned forty this year too, which means I'm due for a midlife crisis of sorts.) And when I looked around at my friends as we sped by each other in the school pick-up line, I felt I was not alone in this plate-spinning life.

My friends Rob and Erica just took a year off and moved their family of five to Argentina for twelve months. I watched on Facebook as they tried new foods, made new friends, and took adventures that felt daring and reminiscent of my globetrotting childhood. And yet I knew that wasn't the type of drastic move that would be a reality, or really even a desire, for our family. *There must be a way to create a fresh start right here*, I thought. To love the life I actually have and not one I fantasize about because it's an escape from my reality. Could I make small tweaks to be more present?

But how does one fully savor the right here when there seem to be barriers in the way? The "if onlys" and the "whens." If only I had

*I needed a  
reordering,  
a restart, a  
recalibration  
of my days.*

more money or more time, I could . . . When I have this in place, then . . . I couldn't wait for the perfect life to arrive to enjoy it. I could wish my current circumstances away for days on end, but the major things were unlikely to change. I needed to work with what I had right in front of me. I needed to learn to love my actual life.

I needed a reordering, a restart, a recalibration of my days.

## The Experiment

Once I decided a change was in order, I looked for the prescriptive formula for loving my actual life. Online, in books, talking with friends. But not for long, because I knew if there was a universal, magic way to make all this happen, everyone would be talking about it. The only glaring finding was that different approaches work for different people. There had to be that mix that was just mine, that would look different from my friend's or my sister-in-law's. I needed to do an experiment that would help me figure out how to better manage *my* actual life. An experiment, because trial and error were sure to be involved. My days would be the laboratory. What I did needed to be different from the way I'd been doing things up to this point, and it needed to be tailored to *my* circumstances. My aim was the right here, the right now. I was not working toward some long-term goal; I wanted to relish the immediate. Today.

But what could I change? Leaving my family wasn't an option; they were here to stay and so was I. My marriage needed more attention, not less, if we were going to be anything more than carpool partners. I'd sorely neglected some friendships because I was just "too busy" to spend time with people. It all sounds rather pathetic, doesn't it? All that meant the big item on my daily schedule that could be reworked was work.

So I did what any sane woman would do—I quit my part-time job. Okay, that sounds more drastic than it actually was. But I did

significantly shift things around at work, including pulling back on my time commitment and moving my employment status to contractor so I could have more control over my schedule and workload. I wanted to be able to drop off my girls at school and pick them up from school. But I also wanted to feed them dinner and offer them clean underwear on a regular basis. (Not to mention I found it a bit ironic that I worked for one of our country's largest mothering organizations and I was exploding at my children at every turn because I was unraveling from stress.) And when I mapped out the years in front of us, with our eldest moving into middle school, I figured out we'd have three girls at three different schools from this point forward. That meant six (yes, six) trips to a school every day (with no school buses involved, just Mom's taxi). For years on end! Confirmation I couldn't continue with the frantic status quo.

I was afraid if I stepped away from some work opportunities, I would be missing out somehow. And that's when it hit me: I was already missing out on my life. I was stretched so thin I wasn't enjoying any part of it. And then God spoke. Okay, I didn't hear a Charlton Heston-like voice, but I did feel that heart nudge I know to be a holy whisper, which said, *We can do better here*. After all, Jesus is the one who says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."<sup>1</sup> I was weary for sure, and it was as if he was saying, *Just stop for a minute and let's reevaluate. And while we do that, why don't you take a load off?*

From what I know of God (both from my past foibles and what it says in the Scriptures), he is in charge of second chances. In fact, it's kind of his specialty. So even though my exhaustion was predominantly self-created, I knew I wasn't a lost cause. I knew he would be gentle with this weary woman. "Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> Yes, I could

unabashedly recognize I needed a change and I knew God would be gracious and patient with me in the process.

Derek and I were able to tighten the already tight budget belt to give me more flexibility. But that opening up of the schedule wasn't enough. I could quickly (and we're talking very quickly) begin to fill my freed hours with more commitments that I wasn't

that . . . well . . . committed to. I needed to say no to good things that came up to say yes to even better.

So with the schedule as cleared as this working mother of four could make it, I was ready to begin my experiment to love my actual life. I added some intentionality back into my days with one singular focus, one month at a time, for nine months. Each month I chose an area that would feed my heart or make my routines operate more smoothly so I could fully enjoy the gifts I'd been given. I focused on elements I felt were missing altogether or were sorely ignored in my list of priorities. Places where small changes could be made. I alternated my months between more practical areas and more overarching topics that permeated all areas of my life. Whatever the focus, I made it my top priority for the month.

Knowing my own limitations, I looked at each month independent of the others. I simply couldn't make all the changes all the time. Whether it was my morning routine or adding adventure to my day, all negotiable elements of my schedule were planned around making this one area a priority. I wanted to know if these areas of intentionality indeed made a difference. This was an experiment, after all. I couldn't judge their effectiveness in helping me love my actual life unless I truly made the changes in question a priority.

From what I know of God (both from my past foibles and what it says in the Scriptures), he is in charge of second chances. In fact, it's kind of his specialty.

Some months the experiment tended to be more introspective, and in others, more functional. Some elements were more specific to a time of day or task, and others permeated my schedule from morning till night.

And I did this for nine months because I tend to think of life in terms of nine-month blocks. The school calendar never really got out of my system before it began all over again with my own kids starting their “year” in September and ending in May. Fall is my favorite season, in part because I loved the beginning of school and the potential of what could be. And then of course there were babies grown in the darkness, who finally saw the light after nine months. The development of fingernails and internal organs and brain tissue, formed and refined until something beautiful and miraculous came from nothing, at least nothing I could see. It seemed appropriate the experiment would be nine months in length.

Although the experiment was about me, the things I can control and my own satisfaction, other people were involved because my life is intertwined with others. In fact, I have a whole cast of characters. They’re varied and imperfect and beautiful. They are my actual people. The ones who laugh and cry with me. Who tell me what I’m good at and not so good at. It’s a big cast and impossible to name them all. So I’ll give you the lowdown on the main cast of characters: me and the ones I live with.

## My Main Cast of Characters

**Me:** 40 (and fighting it as evidenced by the amount of money spent on coloring my hair)

**Likes:** City living, coffee with cream, *Downton Abbey*, thrift store finds, MOPS,<sup>3</sup> Nutella on anything edible, and fall (oh yeah, and cozy sweaters)

**Most likely to be found:** Standing in my kitchen

## Introduction

**Derek:** 40-plus (and rockin' the gray sideburns and halvesie reading glasses)

**Likes:** Home improvement projects, barbecue, Colorado, *SNL*, basketball, and his job

**Most likely to be found:** Driving Denver's streets in his truck

**Gabi:** 12

**Likes:** Her iPhone, soccer, puppies, Chevron pattern, the color turquoise, basketball, and Chick-fil-A

**Most likely to be found:** At soccer practice

**Genevieve:** 9

**Likes:** Lego Friends, soccer, basketball, swimming, Denver sports teams, Taylor Swift, and Roald Dahl books

**Most likely to be found:** Reading in the bedroom loft her daddy built for her

**Gracelynn:** 5

**Likes:** Makeup phones,\* My Little Pony, the color pink, fashion coloring books, and writing her name

**Most likely to be found:** Playing "moms" with Giulianna

**Giulianna (aka Lalo):** 3

**Likes:** Cake pops, snuggling, the color blue, Power Rangers, Sunday school, and her sisters

**Most likely to be found:** Asleep in her mom and dad's bed

This cast is my motivation to be more intentional. To be more patient, more present, more satisfied. To be a better woman. I love them with fierce intensity and yet I operate out of depletion, which prevents me from being able to appreciate them in the ways I want to and know I can.

\* For those who may not be familiar: girls' makeup stored in a case that looks like a cell phone. Yes, they are a thing. Usually decorated with lots of rhinestones, sparkles, and sometimes the picture of a Chihuahua. I know.

My fresh start starts right here. I don't need a New Year's resolution or nine months of perfect timing to get it started (because we all know that will *never* happen). I need to start relishing my life today. One intentional moment, day, month at a time.

New neighbors moved in across the street this year. One day they strung a back-and-forth zigzag canopy of lights across their backyard. We have similar lights hanging over our back patio. Because that's what you do when you are expecting good things to happen, for parties and friends and celebrations to take place. A small detail, but one that says expectation for the beautiful that is going to occur. And that is how I see this experiment, setting the stage of expectation to relish what is right here. To discover what is right in front of me in a new light. And like this string of lights made up of one small bulb after another, this experiment is about one small change after another creating a cumulative effect of loving my actual life.

My fresh  
start starts  
right here.

---

## Questions for Reflection

---

1. What is motivating you to make a change to love your actual life?
2. What would you like to get out of this experiment?



## Words for My Actual Life

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matt. 11:28)



MONTH 1

# Bring It Down

---

Quiet

See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. . . . We need silence to be able to touch souls.

—Mother Teresa

## The Need

I am a multitasking maniac whose life pace makes NASCAR drivers jealous. The backdrop to all that busyness is constant noise. Both around me and in my head. I don't have space to think. I frequently tell my children to stop talking so I can remember why I walked over to a certain spot in the kitchen. I am at capacity. No, I'm past capacity, and I need to bring the noise level down to hear my own thoughts. To even remember who I am.

I know I will miss the people noise someday, but practically speaking, I make phone calls in my laundry room just so I can hear the person on the other end, and I hide in my basement office for some alone time.

But as I'm trying to create some quiet space, what am I actually doing down there in my mom cave? I'm back on my computer, taking in all kinds of mental noise. Along with the constant audible noise is the virtual clamor that is at minimum a nonstop chatter. Email, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is, of course, insta-crazy.

To top it off, I am an introvert. I need quiet time to refuel, and I have a life where I am *never* alone (unless you count when I am driving to and from my dentist appointments, then, yes, I am alone twice a year). So purposely creating quiet is essential to my sanity. I've read that noisy surroundings decrease short-term memory<sup>1</sup> and something as small as a cell phone ringing can increase your blood pressure.<sup>2</sup> No wonder things feel off.

I know I have to start the experiment by stopping. It feels a bit counterintuitive to start with a stop, but my natural tendency when I'm overwhelmed is to do more, not less. I need to be more efficient. Get more things done in an hour, in 24 hours, in a week, than I did yesterday or the day before. I'll get up earlier, stay up later, and multitask more resourcefully, whatever it takes to solve this problem. That's what's gotten me into this predicament in the first place; instead of pulling back, I tend to jump in. But perhaps the key before tackling everything with *more* is to stop. And so that is what I'm doing. Stopping the noise to be able to breathe and let my mind rest.

## The Experiment

I intentionally add quiet to my days. To achieve this, I focus on two areas: actual quiet and virtual quiet.

### My Actual Approach

Add thirty minutes of intentional alone time daily.

Eliminate social media use.

Set Sundays apart for a quieter routine.

#### DAY 1

Just to simplify things, I've decided to turn my life upside down with this experiment right in the middle of Christmas. Because nothing else is ever going on this time of year. The truth is, it's like any life change: there's never a perfect time. Besides, this experiment is about enjoying my actual life and that is always right now.

And to complicate the timing even more, a few days ago Derek bought me an early Christmas present, a fancy new phone. Three hours at the Apple store on a Saturday during the Christmas shopping season and he came home to me, a mess of a woman because while he was getting schooled on all things "i," I took four children

to the mall to look for basketball shoes that cost the equivalent of a down payment on a house.

He handed me the new phone and we promptly started to argue. It was all too much—the noise, the crowds, the salespeople who, bless them, were barely older than the child I was shopping for and unable to explain why the shoes or the phone cost so much!

In the middle of the argument, I held the phone in his direction. “Take it back. If it’s going to cause this much conflict, I don’t want it.” Not a great start to my new fancy phone, nor was it very gracious of me considering the time and money he just spent to put it in that very hand of mine. Within an hour of receiving this gift, I already had the impulse to turn it off.

The truth is, I need my phone with me. Especially when my children aren’t. If the school wants to let me know a child is throwing up or a coach needs to tell me practice is rained out and my girl is standing in the downpour, they need to be able to track me down. So I tend to keep my phone within earshot. But what I don’t need is the other noise this device constantly offers: Facebook telling me how awesome someone’s week in Hawaii is going or the newsfeed offering all kinds of fascinating stories on the latest trends in handbags.

So Gabi moved my social media icons off my main phone screen to minimize temptation (because my oldest child tends to be my tech support). I gave a little shout-out on Facebook and Instagram that I’d be off through the holidays (just in case anyone desperately missed me, because I was sure, or rather hoping, they would) and closed my computer. And my family cheered.

## DAY 2

I’m a cheater. That’s all there is to it. I wanted to see how many, if any, responses I got to my farewell proclamation online. That’s as pathetic as a person can be, I believe. Day 2 and I’ve already hit bottom in that I’ve realized I have almost no self-control, and I

care too much about what is happening in a virtual world to keep my own self-imposed rules.

And guess what! My heart sank a little because, though a few people wished me a Merry Christmas, no one begged me to keep posting my witty observations of everyday life. Reality bites.

DAY 4

We went to the mall to see Santa. We being the littles (the ones who still believe), along with Nonna and Grandpa (my mom and stepdad), who treated us to lunch. Two girls with party dresses and shoes and hair brushed. The three-year-old even had a red velvet dress trimmed with white fur (her sister wore it as a Mrs. Claus costume for Halloween).

And of course we had a schedule to keep. Because that's how our life works. I needed to pick up big sisters from their schools in a few hours. So when the elf working Santa's village pulled a rope across the path into the entrance and declared, "Santa is going on a milk and cookie break"—the lady elf pointed to the sign that showed the disclaimer that this was indeed allowed—"and he'll be back at two!" my heart stopped.

Because 2:00 was in forty minutes! I quickly assessed the situation: if we saw him at 2:00 we could make it back across town and to our first school pick-up in time. And then I felt the line already forming behind us. We were *not* giving up our prized place of second in line. So I did what the woman in front of me did: I sat down. On the mall floor. And made my own mama-elf declaration. "I guess we'll just have to wait."

Then I felt the urge. To pull out my phone. And begin the perusing. The surfing. The mindless wandering and time wasting. My mom decided this was the perfect time to sneak away to do a Christmas errand. And my girls pressed their noses against Santa's fence and I watched them. And they came and sat next to me on the floor. And we played rock, paper, scissors. They'd

get up, run around a bit, come back to home base, and do a few more rounds. The five-year-old trying to remember what beats what, that scissors cut paper, and the three-year-old littlest sister following along, happy to form her chubby hand into a fist and pound away. All the time I was aware of the itching to pull out my phone to fill this space with noise. But I didn't.

There I was, not on my phone, playing with my girls. Recognizing I wasn't going to make the time go any faster by checking the clock on my device every ninety seconds. So Grandpa sat in his wheelchair and closed his eyes. Nonna shopped. And I played and watched and prayed I would always remember two girls standing on their tiptoes, trying to peek into Santa's workshop to catch a glimpse of the magic.

#### DAY 5

It's Sunday and in our house that usually means church. Not as a rule, but as a practice. We don't go to school or to the office. But that doesn't mean lots of work doesn't happen the rest of the day. It's a time when we often catch up on housework and homework. When emails can still be written and chores done.

There is a tradition in the Christian church to observe Sunday as a day of rest. A mirror of God's rest on the seventh day after he made everything. We call it the Sabbath. And yet so many of my Sundays are crammed full with all the things that wouldn't fit into the six other crammed-full days of the week. The day might feel a bit different because everyone's home, but it's still work.

But not this Sunday. I wanted to add in some quiet. Besides, our church routine was already mixed up because Derek took Genevieve to a soccer event that morning. Because sometimes the rest of the world does things on Sunday mornings and we want to raise our children in the spirit of the Sabbath, not the rule of it.

So I took the other three to church, came home, and worked on Christmas cards all day long. Cutting, addressing, stickering. As the snow fell, the Broncos game played in the background.

Though the sportscasters' voices sounded through our living room, there was a sense of quiet. A “do things you enjoy instead of things you should do” kind of day. Those chores I knew I needed to get done, laundry and grocery shopping, don't feel restful to me. Besides, I knew they would be there tomorrow. I was going to be intentional about letting today be a different kind of day in my week.

*I was going to be intentional about letting today be a different kind of day in my week.*

As a bonus, I did something I rarely do (mostly because I'm cheap and our family is nice-sized by most standards and eating out more than every once in a while kills our budget). I ordered take-out. As my children's jaws dropped when I announced I was headed to the Mexican restaurant a few blocks from our house to get our dinner, I felt as though I was giving myself a mini-vacation. I think I caught the spirit of the Sabbath.

#### DAY 7

My constant urge to pick up my phone is showing me that my default during the pauses in my day is to grab for this device. To check email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. It doesn't really matter what it is I'm checking, because it's mindless. And every time I look down I'm missing what's right in front of me. Those beautiful faces. But also the mess. By temporarily eliminating that diversion, I'm recognizing I use that “noise” to distract me from things I want to avoid as well. The uncomfortable in many forms.

I can now see I'm bored. I pick up my phone. I have ten minutes and don't want to do the dishes. I check my email for the third time that day. I think of a phone call I should make, but would rather not, and I peruse the virtual headlines. From practical to emotional, I have been unknowingly using virtual noise to avoid

loneliness, dissatisfaction, jealousy. And in turn it's simply making me more lonely, dissatisfied, and jealous.

DAY 8

Today I couldn't deny this new self-awareness, something about me is discontent with the moment and I want to escape. And what am I escaping to? Well, the beautifully edited lives of those I know and those I don't. Which of course rarely makes me feel more satisfied with my own circumstances. How can my dirty house compare with a ski vacation? Or a beautifully decorated table all ready for great food and great conversation?

I'm recognizing I use that "noise" to distract me from things I want to avoid as well.

I realized today I was viewing real-life moments as potential posts or photo ops. Matching Christmas jammies. The annual pageant with three angels and an innkeeper. Decorating a gingerbread house. Because there is apparently something in me that wants to shout, "See! I *am* a good mom! My kids *are* all that! Agree with me! Validate me! 'Like' me!"

My girls are growing up with this as their normal, the eldest about to get her own Instagram account, and I remembered an article I read last summer about a mom who realized her teenage daughter was never getting a break from the social noise. The constant texting, Snapchatting, or whatevering didn't stop on its own. The mom needed to be the one to quiet it for her daughter's emotional sake. Years ago, when I came home from middle school, I could close my front door and not return to that social scene until the next day. I had quiet.

I need this comparison noise to stop as a woman, so how can I expect my children to self-regulate when I'm practically tearing my eyeballs out to not check Facebook?



DAY 12

It's Sunday again and there we were, all six of us, ending our quiet Sabbath watching *60 Minutes*. Doing our part to bring the average age of viewership down a notch. The Broncos game had just ended and we were too relaxed to turn off the TV. We went right into Anderson Cooper with these words: "Our lives are filled with distractions—email, Twitter, texting, we're constantly connected to technology, rarely alone with just our thoughts. Which is probably why there's a growing movement in America to train people to get around the stresses of daily life."<sup>3</sup>

He went on to tell us that the movement sweeping the nation is "mindfulness." As they showed a retreat where Silicon Valley execs turned in their cell phones and devices for a weekend of quiet, my family all turned and looked at me.

"Mom! That's just like you!" Except I'm not at a retreat and I don't make a gazillion dollars a year for being our family executive. But in some ways, it was like me.

Anderson interviewed John Kabat-Zinn, a longtime practitioner of mindfulness, who explained staying present in the moment, or mindful, can start by focusing on the sensation of breathing in and out. As my family and I lay sprawled on our sofas in front of our TV, we watched people eating together, but in silence, so they could fully taste their food, and sitting legs crossed to focus on their breathing so they could fully focus on the space they occupied. It started to feel a little wackadoodle.

Derek's focus shifted from the screen to me, his eyebrows raised. "What do you think?"

"I don't think it's that different from what people have been doing for a long time. It sounds like meditation to me."

DAY 13

I woke up thinking about meditation. Not something I've ever really practiced, but I know Christians have for centuries. So I dug

out my *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun—a book my church gave us a few years ago and I’ve had good intentions of reading, but you know the whole over-busy life. As I looked through the table of contents, I found “Breath Prayer,” a chapter about a simple prayer structure that follows our breathing pattern. We pray a name of God as we inhale and a desire of our heart as we exhale.

This short repetitive prayer frees you from linear thought and allows you to begin to pray in your body, not just your mind. It is meant to be a lived, breathing rhythm of surrender. And it is a constant reminder of the One in whose presence you stand.<sup>4</sup>

Okay, when put that way it did sound a lot like mindfulness, but with a focus on God. And I was right about people doing it for a long time. Calhoun says the church, especially the Eastern Orthodox arm, has been practicing breath prayer for “millennia” to live out the command to “pray without ceasing.”<sup>5</sup>

I tried it. Breathe in. *Lord Jesus*. Breathe out. *Have mercy on me*. There was so much more I wanted to say, so I could check prayer off my to-do list and move on to the next urgent matter. Breathe in. *Lord Jesus*. Breathe out. *Have mercy on me*.

Even my prayers are noisy, rushed, filled with everything I need to say to God in as efficient a way as possible. And I rarely sit in quiet. Sit. Quiet. Breathe in. *Lord Jesus*. Breathe out. *Have mercy on me*.

#### DAY 15

I had a rare hour alone today, driving to and from a work Christmas party. Drive time is usually multitask time. I either use it to try to connect with one of my older girls if she’s sitting in the front seat next to me or I make phone calls. So there I was, two half-hour blocks of time, perfect to check a few calls off my intensifying holiday to-do list. But I stopped myself. The phone stayed in my purse.

I considered a little seasonal music might put me more in the Christmas spirit. The radio stayed off.

Quiet.

I let my thoughts wander. And then I remembered breath prayer. Why not now? Not exactly pure meditation as I drove down the freeway—I couldn't close my eyes—but as I drove, Breathe in. *Emmanuel*. Breathe out. *Be present*.

DAY 16

It was a difficult night at the Kuykendall house. The kind when the chaos of Christmas and all the extras caught up with us. And one girl in particular fell apart at the seams. If you're wondering what that looks like, it involves screaming and crying. It was an exhaustion-induced meltdown. They happen to the best of us. And as a mom, I wanted to pet her hair and help her fall asleep.

So that's what I did. A bit of snuggling in my bed with a girl wrapped in my arms. And as I tried to create space and quiet for my daughter who desperately needed them, I remembered something I'd read that day in Adele's book: you can teach breath prayer to children to take with them to school as a tool to remember and experience God's presence. Instead of walking her through the prayer, I prayed it for her. Silently, no sound coming out of my mouth, but fully audible to the One who hears our prayers. Inhale. *Lord Jesus*. Exhale. *Have mercy on her*. Inhale. *Holy Spirit*. Exhale. *Comfort her*. And as I often do in prayer, I stopped praying words and prayed feelings. Pushing into the core of what I wanted without articulating it in my head. Inhale. Exhale.

There in that  
dark room,  
I created  
some quiet for  
someone else.

There in that dark room, I created some quiet for someone else. A space to settle her spirit. To breathe in God's love and breathe out her need for him. And in settling into the darkness and

stillness, her body pressed against mine, her heart still pounding and her breath going strong, my prayers for her settled my own heart. Inhale. Exhale.

DAY 19

Today was the Sunday before Christmas.

My friend Kathy, whose love language is unquestionably gift giving, handed me a basket of treats at church with a note thanking me for helping in Sunday school during the year. The biggest gift in the basket was a book, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*, with a note about how we care for little souls but we must not forget what *we* need.

As I flipped through the book on the way home (Derek driving, of course), I tried to ignore the typical backseat noise of fighting over who got to sit where and a thousand “I’m hungry” cries, quickly followed by “Do we have anything for lunch?” questions. I looked to see if there was something about quiet. What I found was a chapter titled “The Soul Needs Rest.”

Whether with an entire day, or periods of time set aside every day, your soul needs rest. Not a change of scenery or a spiritual retreat—those are fine and may *contribute* to rest. But to remain healthy, our souls need solitude with no agenda, no distractions, no noise.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast of the clamor inside the car with the suggestion of being alone with no distractions (no dishes to wash or emails to answer) and no noise (not a single other person, at least awake person, near me) was strong. A retreat sounded as likely as being on a reality TV show. Of the singing variety. In other words, never.

That kind of miracle doesn’t just happen on its own.

DAY 21

Determined to make that miracle happen, I set the alarm for 6:00 a.m., my normal time to start getting our household ready

for a Monday. But I had the benefit of winter vacation on my side. Kids would be sleeping in.

And I sat in the quiet. No agenda. And really no significant thoughts as I let the silence and the caffeine take over.

Sometimes for quiet to be prioritized, it must be scheduled.

DAYS 24-25

Christmas. No quiet happens for a mom on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Food to make, presents to wrap, guests to host, and packing to sleep over at grandparents'. Amid the added chaos, I tried to make a significant moment of quiet and reflection happen on Christmas Eve. I picked a children's book from our basket to read aloud to my crew in the glow of the tree's lights. No one cooperated. Santa was coming and the manger was no match.

As I sat yelling the Christmas story over the heads of children running around the sofa and a husband who was telling everyone to get to bed, I realized I was the one who needed the moment, the quieting of my soul in the middle of the wrapping paper tornado that had hit our house. Breathe in. *Lord Jesus*. Breathe out. *Be present*.

Sometimes  
for quiet to  
be prioritized,  
it must be  
scheduled.

DAY 26

The white Christmas we always hope for in Denver, but rarely get, happened. Now the night after the big day and the preparing and executing the machine of Christmas had come to an end. I realized so had all the meal planning. It was the day after Christmas and my family still needed to eat. So I walked to the grocery store by myself in the remains of the snowstorm.

As I walked home, it was dark, the cold hurt, and the snow fell. And it was quiet. I'm always surprised that everything seems quieter when it snows in the city. For two long blocks I was suspended in

a winter fairyland with the silent flakes falling in front of me. I could see the Christmas lights on our front porch—the two strands that were working, anyway—beckoning me home on my two-block respite. And though the cold was fierce and my bags were heavy, I stopped in front of my house and watched the silent, lit-up scene inside. Because there was movement, I knew there was also noise, but I couldn't hear it. It was like a silent movie playing out in front of me.

And when I opened the door from the garage into the house, the noise hit. Quiet no more.

DAY 28

We went to church a few days ago, and my friend and pastor Jill shared about Simeon waiting for the Messiah.<sup>7</sup> And we talked about comfort in the long waits of nothing. Waiting for God to answer prayers. And often in the wait there is silence.

And I thought of the argument Derek and I had Christmas Eve as we were up too late putting out gifts for our kids. Only a few days later and I already didn't remember what the argument was about, but I did remember I went to bed not wanting to talk to him. Thinking, of course, how ironic it was that we were celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace while having our own home-front battle. I'd draped a blanket of silence around me as a way to punish him.

Of the arguments I've had in the past, the most painful ones have involved silence. Because they imply giving up. Or worse, *You're not even worth my breath*. I would much rather have yelling, which at least shows passion. But silence always feels like a dismissal, a shutting out.

So as we had our signature “open mic” time at church after the sermon, when people are welcome to share how the topic of the morning is working out in their lives, I was reminded of the pain of silence from God. Sometimes quiet feels like you've been forgotten.

Whether in a marriage, or from a child who is estranged, or with an unanswered prayer. I needed this reminder that though I crave quiet now, there will be a day when quiet is the last thing I want. It will be an indication of an empty house, of my flock having flown the coop, of maybe even feeling forgotten. So as I cherish the quiet, I must learn to cherish the noise because I cherish from whom it stems.

DAY 30

Flipping through the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* again, I discovered another discipline: unplugging. Wait, what? Unplugging as a form of spiritual discipline? You mean this is a thing? Adele (as I like to refer to her these days) says, “Unplugging recognizes that personal beings are created for personal interaction by a personal God. We need to be in the presence of each other. Digital connections aren’t enough to keep us healthy. We need to be touched. We need nonverbal signals. We need uninterrupted spaces in our lives for the presence of God and the presence of others.”<sup>8</sup>

And I thought of Jesus. Who had to retreat from the people he did life with, his disciples, to have some quiet. After he fed a crowd of five thousand, he was tired. And he set himself apart. “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.”<sup>9</sup> And what I see here is that prayer is his replenishment. Not Instagram, the mindless TV, YouTube. It was speaking and listening to God.

I often feel like Jesus. Okay, not in the “God made flesh” way, but in the “everyone needing me” kind of way. The “exhausted crowds pressing against me, telling me they’re hungry” kind of

As I cherish  
the quiet, I  
must learn to  
cherish the  
noise because  
I cherish from  
whom it stems.

way. The “I need to go to a mountain retreat and pray to replenish” kind of way. It’s no surprise that an unplugging is a spiritual discipline with a modern twist for the wired.

No matter the circumstance, we need space for quiet and prayer. Breathe in. *Holy Spirit*. Breathe out. *Your peace*.

## What I Learned

Forcing quiet did force me to stop in many ways. There is no question cutting out social media made me more aware of my surroundings, the people and details right around me. I was able to lift my head from the screen, I had more free time (scary, in fact, how much more time I had), and I wasn’t in a constant, low-pressure comparison game. For sure a win. But one I expected.

No matter the  
circumstance,  
we need space  
for quiet and  
prayer.

What surprised me was how adding quiet increased my ability to tune in to what God was doing right around me. And more than anything how available he is moment by moment. I included a quote at the beginning of this chapter from Mother Teresa. Right before she said those words, she said, “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.”<sup>10</sup> Meditation and prayer

were unexpected gifts that allowed for a continued conversation with God that wasn’t full of me talking, as is typical of my prayer life, noisy that it is. But rather, gentle and continuous. Helping me to, yes, love my actual circumstances in the moment.

This was almost like my own little vacation or retreat from the world swirling around. Wait, I can control my environment some? I don’t have to allow life to just happen, I can make some intentional decisions with the end in mind. And it worked. In fact, it makes me excited for the next month’s experiment too.



## Practices I'll Continue

- Wake up while the house is still quiet.
- Limit social media, especially on my phone.
- Breath prayer for me and my children.
- Turn off background noise.
- Capture unexpected quiet.

## Questions for Reflection

---

1. How much quiet (both literal and virtual) do you have in a typical day?
2. What challenges do you face when trying to implement quiet?
3. Does increasing silence impact how you experience God? If so, how?



## Words for My Actual Life

Be still, and know that I am God. (Ps. 46:10)