

celebrate  
every day

seeing the  
extraordinary  
in the  
ordinary

SHAUNA  
NIEQUIST

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*Celebrate Every Day*

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# Introduction

It's a cool gray morning in New York, and as I write at my beloved child-sized desk-slash-nightstand, I'm looking out the window at scaffolding. New York City is obsessed with scaffolding. Put simply, scaffolding is the structure put up around a building that, for whatever reason, needs support. Maybe it's old and needs to be repaired. Or maybe it's mid-renovation. Or maybe it's new construction, and the scaffolding is less for the building and more for the safety of the people walking by, so nothing falls on them mid-construction. Scaffolding provides safety and support while a building is being transformed in some way.

Here's something I've learned the hard way: what we do every day matters far more than what we do once in a while. The daily routines and rhythms that we build to scaffold our days do more to shape who we become than the grand gestures of once-in-a-while ever could.

Especially when we're in the middle of transformation of any kind, it's the things we do every day that build a meaningful support along the way. I've had to learn, in

tough seasons, how to build my own scaffolding, and one of the most important ways I do that is by reading every morning. Reading gives me a place to sort through all the wild ideas I collect in the night, and it helps give perspective and clarity for the day ahead.

My dream for this book is that it would be a grounding and clarifying way for you to begin the day. Reading and considering a few meaningful thoughts or questions is a beloved part of my morning routine, and I'd be honored if these pages became a companion in your own routine. It would bring me so much joy to think of you in your cozy quiet moments before the day starts whirling at full volume.

I began my writing life with a handful of deeply held beliefs: that our daily lives matter so deeply, that they're all we have, and that if we learn to look for beauty and divinity and magic right in our own living rooms and kitchen tables, we'll begin to see those sparks of beauty more and more often. That's what this book is about: being the kind of people who see.

What a beautiful image: all of us in all our homes—in our tiny city apartments or farmhouses or dorms, all of us choosing to begin our days with the belief that those days are worth loving, worth investing in, worth savoring, worth holding with both hands, and more than anything, worth celebrating.

## What Matters Most

I believe that everyday life as it's unfolding on our plain old streets and sidewalks is the most extraordinary thing most of us will ever experience. I believe that daily life is where our lives change, where we learn to love, where we learn from our mistakes, where we sense God's presence, where we learn to tell the truth and make things right, where our hearts are broken and our wounds are laid bare and healed up. So many of the lofty concepts of faith and truth and meaning find their value and grounding not in conceptual spaces but in kitchens and living rooms and subway stations and in the silence between words and while you're folding the laundry. This is where life is. This is where everything is.

For me, it's all about daily, ordinary life. It's all about being a noticer, as a spiritual act. I notice as a way of saying thank you, as a sacrament almost, as a way of bearing witness to what's lovely and good and meaningful in the world.

I love to cook, and there are a few people in my life over the years who've been my favorite people to feed, and what I love about feeding those people is how much they notice—they eat with passion, full mouths, full plates, and they notice

color and flavor and texture. They ask questions and close their eyes while they're chewing, trying to taste even more deeply. As a cook, as the person who chose the flavors, who chopped and sautéed and thought about color and texture and scent and plating, I love feeding people who notice.

I want to be a noticer. God made this world, made people, made flowers and honey and the Hudson River. The people he made with great love and in his image have written poetry and built buildings, and they perform surgery and bake bread and play the violin, and one of my most deeply held spiritual practices is noticing it all.

At the end of the day, this is what matters most to me: bearing witness to the unfolding miracle of everyday life.

Right now, notice as much as you can—what do you see? What do you smell? What are you hearing, touching, noticing around you?

## DAY 2

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# Shameless Celebration

I know that the world is several versions of mad right now. I know that pessimism and grimness sometimes seem

like the only responsible choices. I wake up at night and think about war and pesticides and global warming and fundamentalism and disease and crime. I worry about the world we're creating for my baby boy. I get the pessimism and the grimness.

And that's why I'm making a shameless appeal for celebration. Because I need to. I need optimism and celebration and hope in the face of violence and despair and anxiety. And because the other road is a dead end. Despair is a slow death, and a lifetime of anger is like a lifetime of hard drinking: it shows in your face and your eyes and your words even when you think it doesn't.

The only option, as I see it, is this delicate weaving of action and celebration, of intention and expectation. Let's act, read, protest, protect, picket, learn, advocate for, fight against, but let's be careful that in the midst of all that accomplishing and organizing, we don't bulldoze over a world that's teeming with beauty and hope and redemption all around us and in the meantime. Before the wars are over, before the cures are found, before the wrongs are righted, Today, humble Today, presents itself to us with all the ceremony and bling of a glittering diamond ring: *Wear me*, it says. *Wear me out. Love me, dive into me, discover me*, it pleads with us.

The discipline of celebration is changing my life, and it is because of the profound discoveries that this way of

living affords me that I invite you into the same practice. Celebration is a tap dance on the fresh graves of apathy and cynicism, the creeping belief that this is all there is, and that God is no match for the wreckage of the world we live in. What God does in the tiny corners of our day-to-day lives is gorgeous and headline-making, but we have a bad habit of saving the headlines for only the scary.

There are a lot of good books about what's wrong, what's broken, what needs fixing and dismantling and deconstructing. I read them, and I hope you do too. But there might be a little voice inside of you, like there is inside of me, a voice that asks, "Is that all? Is this all there is?" And to that tiny, holy voice, I say, "No way, kiddo, there's so much more, and it's all around us, and it's right in front of our eyes."

To choose to celebrate in the world we live in right now might seem irresponsible. But I believe it is a serious undertaking, and one that has the potential to return us to our best selves, people who choose to see the best, believe the best, yearn for the best. Through that longing to be our best selves, we are changed and inspired, able to see the handwriting of a holy God where another person just sees the same old tired streets and sidewalks.

The world is alive, blinking and clicking, winking at us slyly, inviting us to get up and dance to the music that's been playing since the beginning of time, if you bend all the way down and put your ear to the ground to listen for it.

What can you do to intentionally celebrate small things this week?

## DAY 3

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# On Waiting

I have always, essentially, been waiting. Waiting to become something else, waiting to be that person I always thought I was on the verge of becoming, waiting for that life I thought I would have. In my head, I was always one step away. In high school, I was biding my time until I could become the college version of myself, the one my mind could see so clearly. In college, the post-college “adult” person was always looming in front of me, smarter, stronger, more organized. Then the married person, then the person I’d become when we have kids. For my entire life, I have waited to become the next version of myself, because that’s when life will really begin.

And through all that waiting, here I am. My life is passing, day by day, and I am waiting for it to start. I am waiting for that time, that person, that event when my life will finally begin. John Lennon once said, “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.” For me, life is what

was happening while I was busy waiting for my big moment. I was ready for it and believed that the rest of my life would fade into the background, and that my big moment would carry me through life like a lifeboat.

But this is what I'm finding, in glimpses and flashes: this is it. This is it, in the best possible way. That thing I'm waiting for, that adventure, that movie-score-worthy experience unfolding gracefully. This is it. Normal, daily life ticking by on our streets and sidewalks, in our houses and apartments, in our beds and at our dinner tables, in our dreams and prayers and fights and secrets—this pedestrian life is the most precious thing any of us will ever experience.

I believe that this way of living, this focus on the present, the daily, the tangible, this intense concentration, not on the news headlines, but on the flowers growing in your own garden, the children growing in your own home, this way of living has the potential to open up the heavens, to yield a glittering handful of diamonds where a second ago there was coal. This way of living and noticing and building and crafting can crack through the movie sets and soundtracks that keep us waiting for our own life stories to begin, and set us free to observe the lives we have been creating all along without even realizing it.

I believe that if we cultivate a true attention, a deep ability to see what has been there all along, we will find worlds within us and between us, dreams and stories and

memories spilling over. The nuances and shades and secrets and intimations of love and friendship and marriage and parenting are action-packed and multicolored, if you know where to look.

Today is your big moment. Moments, really. The life you've been waiting for is happening all around you. You have stories worth telling, memories worth remembering, dreams worth working toward, a body worth feeding, a soul worth tending, and beyond that, the God of the universe dwells within you. And you have been given today.

What are some daily things in your life that you might be missing out on, waiting for that Big Moment?

## DAY 4

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# Spark

I went to Westmont College, two thousand miles from my hometown. My decision to go there was partially out of heartbreak and desperation, having been rejected by my dream school, and partially out of a strange, deep feeling, a feeling I believe was God's urging.

During that season, all I could see about faith were the

things that offended me, the things I couldn't connect with. But even then, there was this tiny hope inside me, like a lighter that's almost out of juice, misfiring, catching for just a second, this tiny hope that maybe there was a way of living this faith that I just hadn't found yet.

I thought about God, even though I didn't talk about him. I didn't have big questions on the nature of the Trinity or the end of the world. Essentially, I wanted to know if there was room in the Christian world for someone like me. Because it didn't always seem like there was.

The journey back toward faith came in flashes and moments and entirely through pain. I wanted to build my life on my own terms. I felt like having faith was like having training wheels on your bike, and I wanted to ride without those training wheels even if I fell. For a while, I loved it. I felt creative and smart and courageous.

And then everything unraveled over the course of a year. I was heartbroken and confused and very much alone, and I started doing the craziest thing: I dug out my Bible. I have no idea why, really. I sat alone on my bed on a Saturday afternoon with the light slanting through my window. I was a literature major, so my room was crammed with books, and underneath a tall stack of books on the windowsill, I found my Bible. I just held it. I don't think I even read it that day. I just held it on my lap with both hands, like it was a cat.

I wanted to connect with God somehow, so I decided that I would go to the beach every night at sunset. It was the most sacred thing I could think to do. I wasn't ready yet for church, but I was ready for God, and I have always believed that the ocean is one of the surest places to find him. I started praying a little bit more honestly and listening a little bit more closely.

There was something inside me, some hopeful, small, faltering voice that said, "There's room for you." I don't know why, but I trusted that voice.

And against all odds, here I am, deeply, wholly committed to God and to his church. Looking back, I loved those years. Those years made me believe in the journey and respect it, the way you respect deep water if you've ever swum out too far and been surprised by the waves. I know what that journey can do in people. I know what it did in me, and I don't take it lightly. I have some very sobering scars and memories that I carry with me as reminders of that season. They remind me how dangerous that path is, and how beautiful.

I'm thankful for God's constant flickering and sparking flame inside me, planted in me years ago and fighting to keep burning. I know that tiny flame is the most precious thing I have, and that it can ignite a forest fire inside any heart and can burn away a lifetime of apathy and regret and distance.

What sacred space do you go to connect with God?  
When have you felt the spark?

## DAY 5

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# Becoming Family

Aaron and I were married on a hot August night on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, near the lake and Buckingham Fountain and the Art Institute. I walked down the aisle to a Beatles song, and we danced and ate crab cakes and chocolate cake from Sweet Thang in Wicker Park, and lots of our friends sang along with the band. We watched the fireworks over Navy Pier blend in with the sizzle of the city sky. It was both sweet and a little bit wild, like the best parties are.

One of the things I said to Aaron in our wedding vows was, “When I am with you, wherever we are, I am home.” It was, I thought, a beautiful and romantic thing to say, and I really felt it. Aaron has a way of settling me down and making peace in me when everything feels crazy and alien. The more time I spent with him when we first met, the stronger and more peaceful I felt, like I had eaten a delicious and nutritious breakfast.

I didn't actually think, though, that I would have to put our vows into practice quite so quickly. We met and dated in the town both our families lived in, and when we got married, we lived in that same town, near old friends and cousins and siblings. And then just a few months after our first anniversary, a friend of ours asked us to think about moving to be a part of his church, three hours away, for Aaron to be a worship leader there.

We drove up to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to talk to our friend about the church, and when we got back into the car, I started to cry, and continued crying most of the way back to Chicago. Aaron, I could see, was very excited about the prospect of the move, and very puzzled by the tears. It was an honor that they would invite him into this job. And all I could do was cry. I think I could feel, right then, the inevitability of it, that I knew somehow that we were moving, and I had already begun to mourn.

When I said to him on our wedding day that when I was with him, I was home, I did not mean, "Let's move to Michigan and see if I'm right, okay?" I meant, "I love you so much, and let's stay in Chicago where my parents and my friends are, how about that?" I had thought that we became a family the day we were married. What I have found, though, is that the web starts as just one fine filament on that day, and spins and spins around us as life presents itself to us day by day. And on some days, the strands spin around

us double-time, spinning us like a top and binding us like rubber cement.

A wedding didn't make Aaron my family, or a honeymoon, or grudgingly giving him one half of the storage space in the bathroom (let's be honest—one quarter). Family gets made when the world becomes strange and disorienting, and the only face you recognize is his. Family gets made when the future obscures itself like a solar eclipse, and in the intervening darkness, you decide that no matter what happens in the night, you'll face it as one.

What big or little moments have built your sense of family?

## DAY 6

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# Puppies

In my early twenties, I began leading a group of ten girls, quite by accident. We were short on volunteer leaders for a weekend retreat, so I said I could take a group. Somehow, it was communicated to the girls that I would be their leader forever and ever, and when they found out, they pounced on me and hugged me and jumped up and down, and in that

moment, I didn't have the heart to say that I had really only agreed to love them for a few days.

We made it through that weekend, although I called them by the wrong names most of the time. About half of them had almost the same name, and they had the adolescent habit of wearing almost identical clothes. They were a blur of bright tank tops and carefully ripped jeans, and I always felt like I was in the middle of a tornado or a high-speed chase. Ten sophomore girls in one room multiply somehow, and you could swear there are a hundred of them.

We then started meeting every week. I'd prepare a discussion, and then they'd want to spend the whole time talking about tampons. I'd invite them to my house and find one of them going through my cupboards and another going through my trash. They called at all hours of the night and day and stopped over at my house and my office constantly, and apparently never had anywhere else to be after their visit. They sometimes got so excited to see me that when they hugged me, they knocked me down, even though it was never more than five days since I'd seen them last. Sometimes one of them would tell me something that was really true and important about her life. Or one of them would ask me something about life with God that really mattered to her.

Somehow they burrowed into one of the deepest parts of my life and my heart. They became something between

friends and little sisters and extensions of my younger selves. They became a central part of my world, my thoughts, my prayers. My schedule became more and more wrapped around their term papers and proms and problems, and my home became more and more the safest landing spot for this group of girls.

I began to love them because they were mine, because we were us, because of the funny and sweet and strange things they did and said. They're smart and honest, and they make big mistakes and dream gorgeous bright dreams. Sometimes they tell me everything, and sometimes they try not to tell me things, but then the other girls tell me anyway.

When I think about how God made us to live, when people talk about true community, I think of them, this lovely, bizarre group of teenage girls who came over unannounced and never left when they were supposed to, who let me into their fears and their secrets, and cared about my fears and my secrets. They loved me with a force that I think only comes with youth, a wide and fierce and expressive force, and I loved them with that same love, because being with them let me live like I was young.

They uncovered something good in me and gave me all the permission in the world to love with that wide-open love, unmeasured and uncalculated, like a puppy in a box with all of her puppy-friends, right up close to them, feeling warm and safe.

What have your unexpected friends made you realize about yourself?

## DAY 7

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# Old House

I've always thought of myself as an old-house person, a person who appreciates character over perfection, who likes the bumps and bruises of an old home. So when we moved to Grand Rapids, we bought an English Tudor built in 1920 with a Hobbit-house sloping roof. I fell in love with its arched doorways and hardwood floors and funny little corners and built-in cabinets. We moved in and started fixing it up, painting, and putting in new outlets and new fixtures.

And then when I went over to a friend's brand-new house, I was overcome with jealousy, not because it was fancy or big, but because the toilets didn't run, and none of the windows were painted shut, and none of the doorknobs got stuck. When I got back to my house, all I could see were the imperfections, the things that were not yet fixed up. The uneven floors and cracked tiles and squeaky drawers. The funny-smelling basement with big pieces of the basement ceiling on the floor.

While I think of myself as an old-house girl, I guess there's still a lot of new house in me. I want to love the imperfections, but in a weak moment, I want central air and new countertops so bad I can't take it.

And it's not really about the house, is it? It's about me. I can't handle any more things that are not quite right in my life, because I feel like that's all I've got. I feel like every single part of my life has bumps and bruises and broken pieces. I want to be all shiny and new, all put together, and I just can't get there. The things I try to forget don't go away, and the mistakes I've made don't go away, and I'm a lot like my old house, cracked and mismatched and patched over.

On my worst days, I start to believe that what God wants is perfection. That God is a new-house God. That everything has to work just right, that I need to be completely fixed up. But many of the best stories in the Bible, the ones where God does sacred, magical things through people, have a cast of characters with kind of shady pasts, some serious fixer-uppers.

In my best moments, I practice believing that God loves me as-is, even if I never do get my act together. I put my hand on the plaster wall, nubbly and textured, and I think thankful thoughts about the walls. Then I put my hand on the floor, and I think thankful thoughts about the floor, even though it's scratched and ridged and you can see where one of my black heels lost its little cap and the metal part left

tiny round divots in the floor. I imagine that God does that to me, puts his hand on my head, on my heart, on my savage insecurities, and as he does it, he thinks thankful thoughts about me: “I didn’t ask you to become new and improved today. That wasn’t the goal. You were broken down and strange yesterday, and you still are today, and the only one freaked out about it is you.”

Little by little, my funny old broken-down house is teaching me that good enough is good enough. Maybe we’ll take the home-improvement next step, whatever that might be, and maybe we won’t, but my house will keep me warm and dry until then, and I’ll try to be kind and gentle to my house and to myself in the meantime.

What messy parts of your life are you making peace with?

## DAY 8

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# Island

For years, our family has been going to a tiny little island for our vacations. The island is four miles long, and there are more stray dogs and chickens than cars, and the water

is the palest aqua you can imagine, dazzling and surreal. Everything is slightly damp and smells like salt and rum and french fries, and the roar of the sea against the island lulls you and makes you feel a million miles from home. We leave the windows open so the sea air can blow through the little house we stay in, and we ride around in a golf cart and keep an open tab at the grocery store, so we can just run in for a package of English ginger nut biscuits or a six-pack of Coke. There's a small shop that sells us fresh lobster if we go right when they're bringing them off the boats for the day and another shop that has gorgeous, gooey baked goods.

There are a million reasons why we love it there. It's the jumble of the waves and the sand and the goats tied to stakes in people's yards and the shimmering green-blue of the water. It's the chill in the air at night, and the way the clouded sky on the bay looks at sunset, and the mangroves and the stars that are clear and shining.

It's all those things, and something else, the something that our family becomes when we are there. We're the best version of our family there, relaxed and connected and without agenda or schedule. We have conversations that unfold lazily and resolve over days instead of minutes. We're irresponsible, and we make up plans as we go, and we've been going there long enough to have patterns just like worn spots in carpet, patterns that have become traditions, things you do without thinking, that feel familiar and meaningful. The

sound of the wind and the barking dogs and the steel drums seem like our sounds, and the taste of conch fritters and rum punch and coconut bread and lobster are our tastes, the taste of vacation, the taste and smell and sound of our family.

We sleep hard because the roar of the waves on the reef keeps us sleeping like babies, and we wake up early, each finding our own spots to read and write and drink coffee before the mildness of the morning burns into the blaze of the day. We eat breakfast on the porch, the screen batted by branches and stalks in the wind, the sun glinting off the water.

We rent a boat every year, and each year it varies from slightly well-loved to downright battered. We snake through the shallow areas, holding our breath, hoping we don't bump the bottom, and we tumble over the side to snorkel when we see a school of fish or a promising reef. It's hot until the sun goes behind the clouds, and then we're all fighting over a few soggy towels because we're covered with goosebumps. When we get back, we take long, hot showers and watch movies and eat strange dinners, cobbled together out of whatever we can find at the tiny island store.

We've invested that small island with as many memories as we can make, crammed it full of love and conversations and stories and long walks and meals and boat rides. Vacations are the act of grabbing minutes and hours and days with both hands, stealing against the inevitability of time.

What are some traditions you have with your own family or close friends?

Where are you the best version of yourself?

## DAY 9

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# Swimming

In the summers during college, I worked at a summer camp. It was shockingly hot and humid, like living in a hair dryer, and smelled like wisteria and swamp water and soap. All day we zigzagged from our cabins to the dining hall to the archery range to the soccer fields to the zipline to the pool, always running, letting screen doors slam with a smack.

At the end of the term, before taking their kids home, the parents came to watch them compete in a swim meet. The swim meet was the first time that they would see their kids after having been away from them for a month, which is a really long time if your kids are eight. The pool is decorated with streamers, and the sky is always blue and cloudless. The parents sit in the bleachers and start yelling and waving and taking pictures when the kids walk over, waving their tanned arms like windmills on high speed.

All the counselors have jobs for the meet, and some of us are comforters. What that means is that we're assigned to a lane, and we're wearing silly costumes, and our whole job is to cheer for whichever girl is in our lane and help her do great in the race.

For one swim meet, I was the comforter in lane five. It was a long race, several lengths, and the camper in my lane, Jessie, was getting tired. "You're doing great, Jessie," I yelled. "You can make it. Keep going." She had just left the wall on her last lap, and I could tell that she was tired and the expanse in front of her seemed way too far. She went under for a second, not like she was drowning, but like she was going to give up and turn around. "You're so close, Jessie!" I called, "You can make it!" She shook her head and then got scared and started to panic and swallowed a big gulp of water, so I jumped in and swam toward her. If she touched me, she would be disqualified, but if I stayed next to her, so she knew that I was there if she needed me, she could make it to the end. She didn't need rescuing. She just needed someone close enough to keep her from getting scared again. I swam next to her, without touching her, and as we swam, I talked to her in a quiet voice. "You're tough, Jessie. I'm right here, but you can make it." When we got to the end and she touched the wall, I pulled her out of the water, and she was so tired, floppy and teary, but the first thing she did was look up at her mom and wave.

After the meet, I was soaking wet and exhausted, still wearing a crazy wig and a soggy tutu. Jessie's mom came to find me and looked right into my eyes. "As a mom, all I wanted to do was run down the bleachers and jump in with my clothes on to finish that race with my daughter. Thank you for caring about my child the way I would have."

Maybe some of what we're doing here is representing the goodness and love of God in tangible ways. You're showing that love to the people in your life and then sometimes they're showing it to you, and when your friend isn't going to make it to the edge of the pool, you jump in with your clothes on and swim next to her.

When has someone showed up for you in an unexpected way?

## DAY 10

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# The Bookstore

Last year, I was at my favorite bookstore because I was feeling sort of fragile and overwhelmed, and one of the things that usually makes me feel better is a bookstore. I was looking through the cards, the ones that have quotes on

the front, and they're all big, inspirational, "seize the day"-type quotes, from people like Eleanor Roosevelt and Albert Einstein. If you read them on a good day, you're like, "I will, Eleanor Roosevelt, I will change the world one tiny moment at a time!" But on kind of a cranky, bad day, you read them, and you think, "Well, that's why you people are famous, because you do wonderful inspirational things, and all I do is try to get through the day without crying or losing my mind." So I was looking at all these cards, and usually I'm just a sucker for them, but on that night, I felt worn out and hollow. I looked at this whole big wall of cards, and each one was making me feel more broken down and scraped away inside, so far from inspiration and hope. Then I saw one in the corner, in black and white, and it said, "You too? I thought I was the only one."

And it hit something inside me, and in the card aisle at Schuler's, I started to cry. Really cry, like the kind of tears that have been waiting to come out for a long time. That night I didn't need big, great, beautiful words from important people. I just needed to know that I wasn't alone. "You too? I thought I was the only one."

True friendship is a sacred, important thing, and it happens when we drop down into that deeper level of who we are, when we cross over into the broken, fragile parts of ourselves. We have to give something up in order to get friendship like that. We have to give up our need to

be perceived as perfect. We have to give up our ability to control what people think of us. We have to overcome the fear that when they see the depths of who we are, they'll leave. But what we give up is nothing in comparison to what this kind of friendship gives to us. Friendship is about risk. Love is about risk. If we can control it and manage it and manufacture it, then it's something else, but if it's really love, really friendship, it's a little scary around the edges.

Friendship is acting out God's love for people in tangible ways. We were made to represent the love of God in each other's lives, so that each person we walk through life with has a more profound sense of God's love for them. Friendship is an opportunity to act on God's behalf in the lives of the people that we're close to, reminding each other who God is. When we do the hard, intimate work of friendship, we bring a little more of the divine into daily life. We get to remind one another about the bigger, more beautiful picture that we can't always see from where we are.

When have you experienced comfort knowing that you weren't alone?