

Gentle. Loving. This tender book asks us to listen to our pain, lean into our discomfort, and trust that we can be lifted back on our feet by God and each other.

Kate C. Bowler, *New York Times* bestselling author of *No Cure for Being Human*

There are so many ways you can lose the only life you know how to live. When that happens—as it will for all of us sooner or later—the number of people willing to walk through it with us can fall into the low single digits. With this book, Shauna Niequist becomes one you can count on, no matter what. She won't lie to you about anything. She won't offer you a spiritual bypass. Instead, she will keep reminding you that what you don't know about where you're going is what oils the hinge to new life.

Barbara Brown Taylor, author of *Learning to Walk in the Dark*

This book is a masterpiece. It is a journey and an invitation and a joy and a heartbreak and all the things you need to read to be reminded that hope can still be found.

Annie F. Downs, *New York Times* bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

A seminary professor of mine once asked our class to ponder the question, “What is the good life?” for an entire hour-long period. I never found the perfect answer to that question, but this book may be the closest I've come. Shauna Niequist reminds us that the abundant life isn't gained by striving or winning, but by mustering enough courage to forge ahead when our lives fall apart. She offers us the tools we need to build resistance in an age of trauma and to manage the perils of human existence in a world that is changing at warp speed. When others may preach or lecture, Shauna wonders and imagines. *I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet* is a 240-page invitation into a life where change is anticipated, evolution is embraced, and *learning* is just another word for *living*. If that's not the good life, then I don't know what is.

Jonathan Merritt, contributing writer for *The Atlantic* and author of *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*



i guess
i haven't
learned
that yet

Other Books by Shauna Niequist

Cold Tangerines

Bittersweet

Bread & Wine

Savor

Present Over Perfect

i guess
i haven't
learned
that yet

DISCOVERING NEW WAYS OF LIVING
WHEN THE OLD WAYS STOP WORKING

shauna
niequist

New York Times bestselling author of *PRESENT OVER PERFECT*

 ZONDERVAN
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet
Copyright © 2022 by Shauna Niequist

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-35559-5 (international trade paper edition)
ISBN 978-0-310-35558-8 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Niequist, Shauna, author.

Title: I guess I haven't learned that yet : discovering new ways of living when the old ways stop working / Shauna Niequist.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2022. | Summary: "New York Times bestselling author Shauna Niequist writes about unexpected loss, change, faith, midlife, and a move to New York City with her signature depth and vulnerability. In this book, she invites us to practice curiosity and self-compassion, to become beginners again, and to rediscover resilience and courage in our own seasons of change"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021047936 (print) | LCCN 2021047937 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310355564 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780310355571 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Niequist, Shauna. | Christian life. | Christian biography.

Classification: LCC BR1725.N525 A3 2022 (print) | LCC BR1725.N525 (ebook) | DDC 277.308/3092 [B]—dc23/eng/20211221

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021047936>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021047937>

Scripture quotations are taken 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. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

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—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

Cover design: Lindy Martin / Faceout Studio

Cover illustration: h.yegho / Shutterstock

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 /LSC/ 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For General Theological Seminary,
Good Shepherd New York,
and the city of New York
for welcoming me home
to myself*



Contents

Catching the Light: An Introduction 1

PART 1: Gravity of Love

1. I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet 7
2. Shoulders Down, Heart Open 12
3. Finding a New Way 15
4. On Crying in Church 18
5. She 22
6. Corpse Reviver 25
7. Kicking 29
8. Hello to Here 32
9. Living Lightly 35
10. Gravity of Love 40

PART 2: Unbelonging

11. Buzz the Beach 45
12. The Best Mistake 48
13. Waiting for Daylight 55
14. Healing in the Trying 60
15. Unbelonging 63
16. Learning to Let Go 66
17. Enchantment 69

18. Our First New York-iversary	73
19. Parenting Ourselves	77
20. The Speed of the Soul	83

PART 3: *Cold Moon*

21. A Midlife Move	91
22. Put Yourself in the Path	94
23. The New York Way	98
24. Grief Is a Kitten	101
25. On Prayer	106
26. Delete/Unfollow/Unsubscribe	111
27. On Having a Body	117
28. North Fork	122
29. Pink Folder	124
30. Cold Moon	130

PART 4: *Bloom*

31. Magic Desk	135
32. Energy in the Air	139
33. On Resurrection	142
34. On Painting Badly	145
35. A Movable Feast	147
36. Living Lightly Redux	153
37. Rooftop	155
38. Never Too Late	159
39. Bloom	162
40. How to Stay	165

PART 5: *Still Yes*

41. Recovering175
42. Abundance178
43. Keep Going.....182
44. Greenport.....188
45. One More Song192
46. Try Softer195
47. Twenty.....200
48. Welcome Home205
49. Next Self.....211
50. Still Yes216

Acknowledgments.....219



Catching the Light: An Introduction

I'm sitting at my desk, looking out at the Close—that's what they call the green space in the center of the seminary where we live. Our apartment is on the third floor, our bedroom windows face south, and I've wedged a tiny child-sized desk between our bed and the bookcases, because catching the light is always my priority.

This morning, Aaron and Henry took the subway to Henry's first morning of high school orientation. Henry is tall, broad-shouldered, handsome. He's funny and kind and wears dress pants and has fabulously long, shaggy hair that he's forever sweeping out of his eyes. The week I was offered a contract to write my first book was the same week I found out I was pregnant with him, and this morning I'm feeling the full circle of this—these books and stories, the writer I have become inextricably entwined with the mother I became when Henry was born.

This book you're holding is one I've been writing and rewriting for years, and as much as I've struggled with it, the struggle has healed me, helped me, and forced me to make sense of my story and our world—as much as anyone can. Being a

I GUESS I HAVEN'T LEARNED THAT YET

writer means being committed to paying attention, to walking through the world as a noticer. It means finding language for the seemingly unspeakable, using words to bridge the divides between us, telling stories that narrate and renarrate who we are in the world and what the world means to us.

One of the challenges of this book was defining the edges. Can it be about this too, and also this? How far can it stretch before it's just a junk drawer? But looking back, I've pushed the edges in this way in every book I've written—a book about cooking is also about babies and friendship and prayer; a book about celebration is also about losing your job and forgiveness and Paris. Because that's how life is—interconnected and multifaceted. We carry around our whole selves—our past and our parents, our loves and our limitations, our dreams and our grocery lists and our wounds. That's how it always is.

It may seem chaotic or like a disparate mishmash of topics and themes, as I try to write a book that encompasses faith and curiosity, compassion and self-compassion, learning to let go and learning to be a beginner again, midlife and menopause and moving. But this is how I think the world works, how our minds and spirits and conversations work—or at least how mine do.

When I walk with a friend or call my mother, or when we meet our neighbors in the courtyard for a glass of wine, we talk about God and *The Crown* and what's the name of that French place down on Hudson? We talk about how our kids are doing and *Ted Lasso* and biscuits and hard conversations with family and doctor's appointments and shoes. We talk about politics and our work and where to get good dumplings and why no one's sleeping well these days and how much we miss things like dance floors and weddings and reasons to dress up.

CATCHING THE LIGHT

As I'm writing this, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic. We know that the world has been and is being altered—that much is clear. But so much, too, is unclear—altered how?

At the very least, it seems that two core myths are being handily dismantled in the face of this pandemic: first, the myth of control, and second, the myth of independence. There are things that can run through our lives, ravaging them, leaving them unrecognizable, and there's nothing we can do to prevent them—like a virus. And our choices affect one another every day, all the time. Control and independence have been exposed, at this point, for the mirages that they are, pipe dreams, vestiges of another world.

So what do we do? We pay attention. We accept the world as it is, not as we wish it was. We practice—we build rhythms of health and faith and grounding, ways of living that allow our best selves to emerge and our worst selves to recede as often as possible. We help each other. And we discipline ourselves to stay on the lookout for signs of hope, for sacred moments and divine fingerprints even in a desolate and quiet landscape—especially in this desolate and quiet landscape.

This is in no way a comprehensive overview of spiritual practices—or a comprehensive anything, really. I'm a forty-something mother of two, a Midwesterner living in Manhattan. I'm sometimes tired and sometimes afraid, sometimes hopeful and sometimes despairing. I would not call myself an expert in almost anything, except possibly Kennedy trivia and last-minute dinner parties. I am certainly not an expert on spiritual life.

But I am, just as you are, living in a world that feels dry as a desert some days, like the very spirit has been leached away, leaving only bone and outrage. And I'm longing for life, living

I GUESS I HAVEN'T LEARNED THAT YET

water, nourishment, and direction. I want to live a faithful, meaningful life. I want to feel God's presence, bring about his kingdom, tell his story in every way I know how. And these are, quite simply, the things I've learned along the way as I travel the path of faith.

This is not a to-do list. This is not a prescription for success or a road map to spiritual perfection. This is a love letter, a handful of treasures, a lifeline, a hand reaching out in the darkness and offering hope and respite. I am old enough to have learned a few things that sustain us when the night is long, the sky dark, the journey rough, and I'm offering them to you. My prayer is that they will be useful and helpful—for your soul and spirit, for your breath and body—on the journey home.

This is the book I wish someone had written for me when I was in a season of near-constant untethering and unbelonging, wandering and fumbling, and ultimately discovering a million beautiful surprises after a couple of very dark years. There are seasons for tidy prose, and this is decidedly not one of them. This is everything I know—wild and messy, accompaniments for the hardest stretches of the journey.

This is not about what I've been through; this is about what remains, in all our lives, when the deals and agreements and myths and illusions have been washed away by pain and loss and years. This is about a search for grounding when nothing feels stable, the yearning for peace in a raging storm.

It's about curiosity and compassion, and it's about spiritual practices to weather the rough passages, but at the center it's about leaving behind what needs to be left behind, accepting the spirit of the age. It's about learning to stand alone, leaving behind the identities you believed you could never live without.

part one

Gràvity of Lové



one

I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet

My husband, Aaron, and I and our boys, Henry and Mac, are lifelong Midwesterners, but three years ago we moved to Manhattan.

We made the move from a house in the suburbs of Chicago to an 825-square-foot apartment on the third floor of a beautiful neo-Gothic redbrick building in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. A few days later, the kids started school—Mac at a primary school just a block away, and Henry at a middle school down in the West Village. These were great schools, and our kids had come from great schools, but inevitably there were gaps—things that our boys hadn't yet covered in their old schools, things that felt unfamiliar or frustrating.

About six weeks after we moved, in an extremely low-budget decorating move, I wrote one sentence on a piece of printer paper and taped it to our living room wall with bright blue painter's tape: *I guess I haven't learned that yet.*

I put it on our wall because it seemed like our boys were coming home from their new schools every day with the same question: *Why do they know this and I don't?* They kept running into places where the curricula from their old schools and their

GRAVITY OF LOVE

new schools didn't quite match up. At Henry's old school he took French, but at his new school Spanish is mandatory. At Mac's old school they learned guitar, but at this new school everyone takes piano.

The boys were doing great, but they had a lot of questions, and what I realized was that there were deeper questions under their questions—they were asking about piano and recess and buses and lockers, but what they were really asking was, *Have I failed? Have I fallen behind? Am I dumb?*

I said, Oh my darlings, you're not dumb—you're new. We're all new. And we're not failing. But we're learning, and it's exhausting and humbling and fun and hard. You know how my success rate on the subway is around fifty-fifty? And you know how I always have to text Dad to meet me on Ninth Avenue because I bought too many groceries and can't carry them all the way home, because I'm used to having an SUV, and now all I have are my arms?

I guess I haven't learned that yet. I wrote that sentence because I wanted us to have a common language for what it means to be a learner, a beginner, to be curious and make mistakes and get back up. To ask questions and figure it out as we go.

I told the boys that each of us was going to say that phrase every single day about something, and that it was a good thing, not a bad thing. Not knowing something already doesn't make you bad or dumb; it doesn't mean you failed. Not knowing something doesn't mean you're falling behind or fundamentally flawed. It just means there's more to learn.

We used that phrase over and over, intentionally, as a way of reminding ourselves that this is part of moving, part of being a rookie again. And as the weeks and months passed, I felt something shifting inside me. Instead of this beginner label

I GUESS I HAVEN'T LEARNED THAT YET

being a balm over a wound, a corrective measure against shame or blame, I began to like it, to try it on and wear it around, not just when I got off at the wrong subway stop, but as often as I could. And I started liking how it felt to be a beginner in more than just city living. It's changing my writing, my marriage, my parenting. It's bringing curiosity and freedom and peace.

Because without realizing it, I had been wearing an expert hat for a long time—as a parent, as a writer, as someone who had lived in her hometown for a long time. I was the expert. The answer person. But I don't have all the answers anymore. I have to ask for help or direction every single day, and you know what? I like it.

We're talking about curiosity and freedom, but under those things, what we're talking about is self-compassion—treating yourself with the same care and kindness you'd show to someone you love.

This does not come naturally to me. I have a long history of saying things to myself—about my body, about my feelings, about my failures—that I would never say to another living human.

Self-compassion is letting yourself off the hook, letting yourself be human and flawed and also amazing. It's giving yourself credit for showing up instead of beating yourself up for taking so long to get there.

A friend of mine is a researcher and therapist, and we were talking about self-compassion recently. He reminded me that the research on this topic is overwhelmingly clear—the energy of self-compassion fuels so much more lasting change in our lives than shame or guilt or self-loathing ever could. We find the courage to change when we feel loved. It unlocks our ability to move forward and grow.

GRAVITY OF LOVE

The best way to start practicing self-compassion is to tap into the kindness you show other people. So many of us are voices of love for the other people in our lives, and it's when we learn to speak with that same voice of love to ourselves that we're able to make meaningful change. Self-compassion is learning to say, *I guess I haven't learned that yet.*

Earlier this spring, I was on the phone with my mom. Probably I was crying—please tell me I'm not the only one who still starts to cry the second she hears her mom's concerned voice on the phone. My mom said, "Hey, I wanted to tell you something. I've been going through my old journals, and it made me think of you. When I was in my midforties, I wrote this line: 'Every single thing that used to work has just stopped working, all at the same time.'"

"Whoa," I said. "I know," she replied. That was exactly what I had been saying—or a teary, more dramatic version of it—for months.

Since my fortieth birthday, almost every part and pattern of my life has shifted in a major way. Some of those changes have been intentional; many of them have been changes I didn't choose. There have been stretches in the last few years when I've been surprised I could still recognize my own face in the mirror, my life having been so profoundly altered in so many ways.

My eyes see the world in ways I didn't before—less naivete, more compassion, more awareness of the suffering many people have been carrying for years, even when I was unaware.

I've moved from being the mother of little boys—all snuggles and wiggles—to parenting middle and high school boys, other animals entirely. I've weathered a stretch of heart-break and grief deeper and darker and more volatile than

I GUESS I HAVEN'T LEARNED THAT YET

anything I'd ever experienced before. I've struggled with my health, struggled in my body, struggled to make sense of and find solutions for chronic pain and insomnia. I've ended some friendships, which is so hard. I've had some end for me, and that's even harder. I've learned to live in a smaller, quieter world, and I've been surprised at how much I like it.

After a lifetime in the suburbs and small towns, I'm a city dweller now, and a delighted one. Even after a few years, I'm still enchanted by New York, still enamored with its beauty and quirks and challenges and gifts. I have a little cart for my groceries, a decent grasp of the subway system, and strong feelings about the best pizza in the city.

There are things that remain, through lines I've held to like lifelines in this season of compounded change and chaos. Our marriage, my faith, my work as a writer, and my love for the table remain constant, although even those things have been refined—altered as a result of all the other altering.

That's how it works. The changes connect and cascade, and the only way through it, it seems to me, is with curiosity and self-compassion, one in each hand, the tools for the journey. I'm not a natural at either one, although I'm learning to practice both with increasing regularity. There's so much I don't know, so much I've gotten wrong, so much I still want to learn and experience and understand as life unfolds. I keep moving forward, keep putting one foot in front of the other, holding tightly to the greatest gifts I've been given in recent years—curiosity and self-compassion. Apply as needed, over and over and over.

two

Shoulders Down, Heart Open

I tend to scrunch my shoulders up around my ears more often than not. I'm doing it as I write—such a bad habit—and once again I have to consciously force myself to roll my shoulders back and down, to propel my chest open by filling my lungs, to spread my shoulders wide and low.

A woman named Blue gave me a massage once, and afterward I asked her if there was anything unusual about my muscles and bones, anything she noticed that I should pay special attention to. She answered right away and told me what every massage therapist, chiropractor, and doctor I've ever asked has told me: Your shoulders are a problem. Lots of people have problems with their shoulders, but you have bad problems.

I asked her about a solution, and she said less time in front of a screen, more stretching. And then she asked, "Do you want to hear my theory? I mean, I made it up, but it makes sense to me. When you lift your shoulders all the way up, what happens? Like, what is your body trying to do when you do that? Seems to me it's trying to cover your ears and cover your heart at the same time. And that makes me wonder. What is it that you don't want to hear? What is it that you don't want to feel inside your heart?"

SHOULDERS DOWN, HEART OPEN

“Here’s another thing,” she said. “And again, this is just what I see, what I figure—when you were really young, did someone ever make you feel like you should be smaller than you were, or bigger than you were?”

There were so many things I didn’t want my heart to feel. There were so many things I didn’t want my ears to hear. And all my life, I’ve tried to be smaller, smaller, smaller. I was still reeling from a terrible season of leaving home and leaving a church that felt more like a home than any actual home I’d ever lived in. I was grieving the loss of relationships, the loss of the world as I knew it, and the pain was emotional, of course, but deeply physical too.

The chronic physical pain that I asked Blue about was ratcheting up in intensity with each passing month—the muscles along the tops of my shoulders felt like bone or rock, and by the end of the day, I’d alternate between too much Advil and too much wine, trying to deaden the pain. I was going on year three or four of unexplained stomach pain and IBS-like symptoms that came and went, and after being a champion sleeper for most of my life, I was cycling through stretches of insomnia that were absolutely crazymaking.

It was physical and emotional both, certainly, but I wasn’t having any luck finding solutions on either side—not conventional medicine, not chiropractic care, not dietary changes. For a while I was carrying around a pillbox that looked more like a tackle box, filled to the brim with every manner of natural supplement and enzyme. They didn’t help. During an extreme IBS flare-up, I spent one trip to New York extremely attached to an app that maps every public bathroom across the city. I told a friend that my body had lost its mind, and I couldn’t find anything that helped—or at least anything that helped for long.

GRAVITY OF LOVE

I kept coming back to Blue's words, and when I did, I practiced rolling my shoulders down, opening my heart, over and over. I began asking questions I wasn't at all sure I wanted the answers to.

There wasn't a solution exactly, but more like a befriending. I started listening to the pain instead of trying to cover over it. A friend recommended the work of Dr. Sarno, and Aaron came home one afternoon to find me lying on the living room rug, staring at the ceiling. "You okay?" he asked tentatively. I stayed on the floor but told him about Dr. Sarno's findings, that some of us who experience chronic physical pain need to learn to feel our unfeeling feelings and think our unthinkable thoughts.

Dr. Sarno's work features story after story of people who have suffered in terrible ways for years, unable to work or parent or live the lives they want because of crippling pain, and then when they learn to welcome those thoughts and those feelings, the pain finally begins to recede. It reminded me of Blue's words to me: *What is it that you don't want to hear? What is it that you don't want to feel inside your heart?*

A million things, at least. I needed to change my life, but I didn't want to. The life I'd imagined for our family and our future no longer existed. That was a lot to feel, certainly, a lot to open one's heart to, and so it was much easier, for a while at least, to keep my shoulders up, my muscles brittle like bones.

I started to welcome it all, feel it all. Some days I couldn't, but most days I tried, and the practice is changing me, the questions are changing me, the feelings and thoughts I've tried not to feel for so long are changing me from the inside out, opening a heart that's been fighting to keep itself safely closed for a long time.

three

Finding a New Way

Aaron and I lived in a hometown with a serious number of roots, a subterranean tangle of generations and relationships. We grew up in neighboring suburbs—his high school played ours in sports, and we had a million mutual friends. His family had lived on the same property since the 1940s—a piece of land that his grandpa bought when that area was still rural, not yet suburban. His dad and uncles are chiropractors at the same clinic his grandpa started in the fifties.

My parents started a church the year I was born, and for nine years before we moved to New York, Aaron and I lived within walking distance of it. Our kids were in the school district I was raised in, and their Little League coaches were guys I went to high school with.

Every single day, I saw cousins and friends from high school and neighbors and people from church I'd known all my life. Familiarity, history, roots driven down so deep it was like one of those underground parking garages that corkscrews down so many stories you think you must be nearing the earth's actual core.

And I loved it. I loved that web of relationships, that sense of being known and taken care of. Of being in the center of an impenetrable circle of safety and history. I reveled in it.

GRAVITY OF LOVE

Aaron had joined the world I lived in, but it wasn't the world he wanted. It was my family, my church, my town, my dream. And I gave him a lovely little corner. But he didn't want it—not the corner, not the life. He never did. He wanted the two of us to be a separate unit, explorers, adventurers, out on our own, connecting occasionally but warmly with that old world.

Aaron had always been close to his family, and those relationships were important to him, but increasingly the tight circling of our church and my family and the expectations and requirements of that way of living chafed him.

His faith was shifting, and so was mine—but for better or worse, my family loyalty was a higher priority to me than finding a church that matched my evolving spiritual perspective, and also, I wasn't the one who worked there. I traveled a lot and had all the creative freedom and autonomy in the world—meanwhile, Aaron was working at my family's church, feeling distinctly less creative freedom and autonomy. It's all so clear now in ways it should have been then—one of the things I regret most acutely is my habit of seeing only what I wanted to see.

I was blinded by what I wanted—the church and our little family and my extended family to find its center point at my kitchen counter three nights a week. I wanted to wrap our life in layers and layers of familiarity and cozy blankets, and there was only one problem with that: it was not in any way the life Aaron wanted.

When he left his job at our family's church, Aaron wanted to visit new churches. This was not an unreasonable request in general, except that it tapped into one million feelings of family loyalty.

Looking back, I see it, of course. He wanted freedom and autonomy so badly, and I kept trying to sell him on things he

FINDING A NEW WAY

fundamentally didn't want. Because I had no desire for that kind of freedom and autonomy and was pretty afraid of it, if I'm honest.

For one of the first times in our married life, it felt like the lives we wanted weren't just different, but mutually exclusive. Like any two people who feel like what they're longing for doesn't matter to the other person, we both got louder and more afraid. We sometimes yelled and sometimes cried.

We sometimes flew to other cities, other churches. We sometimes felt like Goldilocks, looking for a new life, but we definitely weren't finding "just right"—was it because I really wasn't as open as I promised I was? Entirely possible. Or was it something else? Something calling us or keeping us in our hometown? I hoped so. It felt like we knocked on a thousand doors that didn't open, and in the meantime, our kids were thriving in good schools, benefiting from lots of time with all four grandparents and loads of aunts and uncles and cousins. That was enough to stay, right?

We got into complicated trades: You can decide where we go to church if we can keep the kids in their schools. We can try to get Cubs season tickets. I don't need that farmhouse after all—just don't ask me to move to this city or that town. No, we don't have to do every vacation with extended family. It wasn't great, but we inched back toward each other and out of the terrible all-or-nothing, what-I-want-or-what-you-want tug-of-war.

We cobbled together a plan to find a new way to live in the same town, separate from my family's church. We'd maybe move that summer, but within the same school district. Maybe we were finding a new way.

four

On Crying in Church

On a Sunday morning in February, in a small white-steeped church, the oldest in our hometown, a brilliant African American preacher named Zina gave a sermon that unraveled something inside me, pulled back the curtain on what I'd been trying so hard to hide, even from myself—maybe especially from myself.

She talked about loss and change and suffering and how we don't yet know the end or the meaning or the moral of the story, the tidy conclusion. But we keep going in the middle, the long, difficult middle, knowing we'll know later. She talked about Joseph and his brothers and how you just don't know the whole story when you're in the middle of it.

We were sitting in Zina's church because we no longer attended the church my family started. The process of leaving was painful, and those early visits to new churches were terrible. I cried in the car and sometimes in the pews. I was thankful for the hospitality of church members, but I never knew what to say. *No, we're not new in town. No, this isn't the first time we've ever been to church. Yes, you can take my picture to show your daughter.*

Aaron and I and our family were in a wilderness of sorts, having left behind something that had been stable and stabilizing for many years and now staring at a blank space where the

ON CRYING IN CHURCH

future used to be. I was feeling lonely, disconnected from the tradition that raised me, the songs that were my soundtrack, the rhythms that felt more familiar to me than my own hands.

We're living in a time of such deep loneliness, vitriol, disillusionment. So many of us are breaking away from the things that used to tether us, whether that's a political party, a church, a marriage, a denomination, a family. Many of our treasured connections have been severed in this season as the middle ground evaporates and the cry of us versus them becomes deafening.

A dear friend wishes she knew another married couple who disagrees about politics as deeply and painfully as she and her husband do. Another friend left her church because her beliefs have shifted and there is no room for that shift at her church. Another friend feels torn between his marriage and his family of origin, blamed for not being there enough in either relationship.

The shifts feel tectonic right now. Maybe they always do, in every generation. But this is the first time in my lifetime that so many of us are distrustful of the systems that have held us stable for so long. And when we disconnect from those systems, we find ourselves profoundly lonely.

I still believe in God—in his goodness especially. In the centrality of forgiveness, confession, prayer. I believe he is present in our lives, that he offers comfort and wisdom, that the way of Christ is the best possible way to live. I still believe in religion as a meaningful way to gather and organize our lives, although I don't believe it's a stand-in for emotional health or self-awareness or character, and I don't believe a devoutly religious person is necessarily any of those other important things.

I've shed many illusions. But I am still deeply devout, possibly more than ever. Christ has not failed me. There is no

GRAVITY OF LOVE

shield against suffering. But there is comfort. And there is presence. And there is healing.

The world is changing faster than we can keep track of it. It's exhausting and scary, and it's tempting to check out, numb out, escape into whatever we can. But our kids need guidance. Our friends and neighbors need support. We have to do this together.

You may, like me, find yourself in midlife—or maybe you're twenty or sixty or eighty—and all of a sudden, the life you planned is gone. And the world you thought you lived in is gone. And the assumptions and beliefs that carried you through up to this moment have dumped you unceremoniously into a foreign land. You don't speak the language. You don't know anyone.

But the sun keeps coming up every morning, to your surprise. Life is still happening, here on the other side, here on the distant planet you live on now. And you realize that your old life is gone. And also you notice you're still alive, very much so. You're still raising children—beautiful, silly children who need you to make their toast and sign their forms and tuck them in at night, even here in this other universe.

Everything has changed and also you still have work to do and dirty dishes in the sink, and where your future used to be, now there's a blank nothingness and you realize you have to build a new life. You have to paint the canvas of your future, because it used to be such a well-developed, very specific image and now it is blank. This is terrifying. At some point—I promise—it will be a tiny bit exciting, this blankness.

But right now, you might be crying in church the same way I have dozens of times. You're not alone. We never are.

The pain and isolation are very real, and the tears streaming down your face are valuable, sacred, holy. If anyone tries

ON CRYING IN CHURCH

to tell you that walking away from a church you've loved or a tradition you've loved or a community of faith you've loved is an easy thing to do, they're lying to you. For me, it felt surgical. Sometimes it still does.

But also sometimes there are glimpses of hope and healing, there are memories that flood my heart with joy, there is a flutter of hope for the future, not just my future, but all our futures. Things break and then they heal, stronger for the breaking. But it's absolutely okay to cry along the way.

five

She

Just when Aaron and I had made a tentative, fledgling step into a new way of living, in our marriage and in our town, something truly terrible exploded into our lives, and at the center of it were my dad and our church. While it's not my story to tell, it completely shattered me.

I didn't know how to talk about it, and mostly I still don't. There are things in our lives that carve us so deeply, language fails. This one did that to me, for several reasons. One, I didn't understand it at the time, but my own identity—not my public identity but the inner one, the set of beliefs I carry internally about myself in this world—was unhealthily braided together with my dad and our church.

I understood myself almost entirely in the context of their stories and identities, not my own. Again, this is a weird thing to talk about publicly, especially because I had at that time a public identity and voice of my own—I hadn't used my maiden name for nearly twenty years.

But what this crisis revealed was the extent to which my inner architecture was built on the story of our church and the story of my dad. There are all sorts of reasons for that, and certainly it's not uncommon for the children of parents who have notable lives in some way to become absorbed into that narrative or identity.