

**START**  
**WITH**  
**HELLO**

(And Other Simple Ways  
to Live as Neighbors)

**SHANNAN**  
**MARTIN**

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to Live as Neighbors)

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For Cal, Ruby, Silas, and Robert.  
My favorite first hellos.

When it is all too much . . . and a single life feels too small a stone to offer on the altar of Peace, find a Human Sunrise. Find those people who are committed to changing our scary reality. Human sunrises are happening all over the earth, at every moment.

Alice Walker

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## CHAPTER 1

# Awake > Asleep

We stay awake, believing attentiveness is our road map to meaningful community.

I AM SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD IN A TINY, working-class town in Ohio. It's a school night, but my friends and I can drive so we do, tracing back roads like our five-year-old hands on construction paper in Miss Beam's kindergarten class. We've been together for thirteen years, fated by birth dates and a zip code, connected by shared experiences and the place we call home. Parents split, innumerable basketball games won and lost, physics tests crammed for and (mostly) passed, snow days and trampolines and square pizza in the same cramped cafeteria. One more month and we'll disperse. One of my friends turns up the radio as Tim McGraw croons and I say, again, that I have no respect for country music. But this time loss sinks in my chest like a rock tossed into a river. My body knows what my heart can't

comprehend. This sort of easy, uncomplicated belonging is a memory I'll spend decades chasing. My eyes well up in the dark as I sit squeezed in the back seat of someone's dad's Dodge. Everything is about to change. (This is the night I secretly start to like country music.)

I AM TWENTY-THREE, living in a basement apartment in a complex nicknamed "Stabbin' Cabins" because of the disproportionate incidence of, well, homicide. I'm barely married. My husband, Cory, spends his weekdays living out of town, finishing a college internship. I work sixty hours a week at a car rental company, washing SUVs while wearing a business suit, and spend my free time wondering how I let it happen. My parents are three hours away but it might as well be thirty. I'm adrift, a misfit. It turns out marriage, even on its best days, can't erase my longing for a wider web of attachment. I'm an adult but also a child. I still like country music because I'm still sort of sad.

I AM TWENTY-FIVE in Washington, DC, taking the Red Line home from work and picking up the pieces of a marriage spun sideways. We live near the sort of wealth and power that smell like Italian shoe leather and the butane flame of catered lunches. Here, adults seem somehow *more* adult, happy and at ease, as if they really do hold the keys to their futures. I feel glaringly out of place. Shockingly Midwestern. There's a Pottery Barn (the height of sophistication) and a Chipotle (I mispronounce it for the duration)

across the street, but *my* shoes are from TJ Maxx, and Cory and I have just one friend between us.

I AM THIRTY, the mom of two babies born in one year, in love with my unexpected family. I try wrangling purpose from our broken-record days by way of sleep schedules and library books. I'm grounded and unmoored, never alone and always lonely. I start a blog one night and find solidarity on the internet. My world cracks open like a geode, new friendships across time zones shimmering in my hands. Who knew my laptop screen could be a portal to belonging? Real-life connection remains mostly out of reach. My closest neighbors are soybeans and corn. Life on a farm is what I thought I wanted, but long lanes don't lend themselves easily to the clash with ordinary people I crave.

I AM THIRTY-FIVE, brand-new to the neighborhood, a shy introvert yet desperate to be known. I catch a glimpse of what life could look like if we all took one step closer to each other, unbothered by our differences. Slowly, I stop wishing to receive an invitation to belong and start writing my own. Unsure of where to begin, I set out to be the neighbor I long for.<sup>i</sup> This begins a decade of catch and release, where I take turns reaching out to the people close to me and they do the same. On paper most of us have little in common. But

i. I use the term *neighbor* with every ounce of flexibility it affords. These are the people whose homes surround my own but also anyone whose path crosses mine, at any given moment and in any manifestation. What I'm trying to say is, Hi, neighbor!

on sidewalks and along alleys we discover we want the same things: to trust and be trusted, to be seen and believed, to be generous. We want the security that comes with knowing we aren't alone in this disorienting world.

I AM FORTY-FIVE with miles to go, but I have learned some things along the way. I've learned to depend on a hot cup of black tea every single morning. I've learned there's more than one way to build a family. I've learned to heed my tears and take advice from peonies. I've learned to value listening and learning and to allow space for growth in the hearts of everyone, myself included. I've learned almost everything is some shade of beautiful if viewed from the right angle.

I have learned we're all aching for connection.

To *be* connected.

It's not just us. It's not just here. There is no zip code, no cul-de-sac, no apartment complex, subdivision, or stretch of dirt road that isn't pulsing with possibility. The question is, How do we do it? Where do we start?

## **How, Indeed?**

It's not unrealistic to want the easier connection of childhood in the thick of adulthood. It's not asking too much. It's remembering what we've forgotten. It's recognizing, again, how we were built and what we were made for. It's waking up to a dauntless, kid-size vision for friendship and holding hope that it's out here, waiting for us.

It's attainable. And worth fighting for.

We have pastors and priests and spiritual advisors to guide our faith. We have doctors and therapists to care for our bodies and minds. We have teachers to show us how to write sonnets, form hypotheses, and drive a car.

But no one teaches us that community has to be built with our hands and our tender hearts and our precious time. No one breaks it all the way down. No one gives us the tools. From the outside looking in, it can seem like community just happens for the lucky few. It's easy to assume we're the ones getting it wrong.

I'm not here to tell anyone how to fix their life. That's not what this book is about. I never get enough sleep or exercise. I haven't figured out how to inspire my kids to do their chores without reminders or brush their teeth without being told. My husband and I still argue about who should be scrubbing the bathroom. And we recently took out a loan to buy a used minivan, even though we were taught to pay cash.

What I *can* tell you, with confidence, is that living in close connection with other humans has made my life brighter, weirder, and better. This is among the truest truths of my life. Learning to live with “neighbor” as part of my DNA has changed the way I see the world and myself. It has changed who I am and what I believe in.

In some ways this learning process has taken me back to my childhood roots, where I fully expected the quirks and disappointments of myself and the people around me.

In other ways it burned the book of loneliness, that age-old tale, and opened for me a basic spiral notebook—the

freshness of fresh starts (just-sharpened pencil smells, free of charge).

I've also collected my fair share of mistakes. In hindsight, most were made when I retreated too far inward, overthinking things and trying too hard. I've lost my way when I forced connection out of a sense of obligation rather than surrendering to the simple fact that my well-being depends on the solace and safety a network of other humans provides.

We take what we learn and till it into the soil. Imperfections make for good fertilizer, but we have to root them out first. Unflinching honesty will be helpful along the way; so will humility and humor.

More than anything, we'll need a hearty dose of childlike imagination. Do we believe there's a better option than the one we've been given? Like, *really* believe it?

## **Baby Steps + Popsicle Sticks**

If you're like me,<sup>ii</sup> you might be skeptical that life could be brighter with the added complication of other people and all their tangled messes. Maybe you're afraid I'm trying to trick you into doing things you're not ready to do. Or maybe you've read other books that talk a lot about table settings and charcuterie (pass the salami!) but don't quite fill in the gaps on how to get from *right here* (picture frumpy feelings, two-day sweatpants, an aversion to small talk) to the rest of it.

Let me be clear—this is not a hospitality book, though we will talk about what “home” means for us as regular,

ii. Naturally wary, a bit grizzled at the edges, slightly jaded. Take your pick.

frazzled people learning the value of togetherness amid jobs and toddlers and roommates who oppress us by never closing the cabinet doors.

This is also not a shame-on-you book. Shame builds walls, and when it comes to walls, we're good. (Sigh.)

This is not a "me" book. It's an "us" book.

I'm laying out the simplest path between us with the promise that when we meet in the middle, we'll find ourselves breathing easier. Our struggle, if anything, will be to trust the process, though that sounds a bit clichéd and overearnest.

Let's try this. Remember the movie *What About Bob?* I managed to live well into my forties before my psyche was forever pierced by Bob's enduring-if-bizarre wisdom. My kids howled through it, and now Bob's "baby steps" remain a somewhat intrusive source of perspective when life feels daunting in the Martin house.

Baby steps to each other. That's what this is about.

We could also think of my son Silas, who came downstairs with his professional-grade hot glue gun and told me his class was finishing the school year with a "passion project." The project he envisioned was to build a replica of his beloved school out of popsicle sticks. (He'd already secured permission to bring his own tools.)

When it comes to his passion, every single popsicle stick serves a purpose. When it comes to ours, there will be no step or stick too insignificant to mention. We can't risk not getting granular enough.

How do we fix the vexing cultural diagnoses of isolation, division, and despair? By making (and sustaining) contact.

I've got one foot in a rip current. You're throwing me a life preserver. Everything hinges on whether the rope is long enough, whether we are strong enough, to make contact.

The strength we need is not the typical kind, thank God. I say this as a woman who has never been strong of body and has been too strong, at times, of will. Stubbornness has its place and muscles are great for moving things, but the brawn we need is of the heart and soul.

We need grit.

We need resilience.

If we're ever going to make it to each other, we need to swim in the current of empathy for a while. We need to learn to really *see* each other.

Because until we do, our attempts at meaningful connection—the kind that transcends all we've been taught (which honestly isn't much)—will not have the relational muscle to sustain us.

Until then, our efforts at hospitality will ring hollow. I'm reminded of the terrorist-turned-preacher who once wrote that, without love, our efforts are a “clanging cymbal.”<sup>iii</sup> Which is another way of saying that without true connect-  
edness, our cheese boards are just random lumber and fancy raisins.

## Vision School

How, then, do we wake up to each other? I'm thrilled you asked.

iii. 1 Corinthians 13:1.

Remember our agreement that when it comes to building the future of us, there's no stick too small? Here's what I'm asking you to do.

Start paying closer attention to the sky. For me, this happened accidentally.

As poets, theologians, and anxious parents of teenagers have said, we become what we love. Our influences shape us and so do our habits. Prior to ten or so years ago, I didn't give the sky much thought. I went about my business each day without considering that the earth, my flesh-and-bone body, and the connected life I longed for were inextricably woven together.

There are plenty of ways to split a worldview open. For my family it meant selling our farmhouse and moving to an overlooked, underwhelming neighborhood tucked behind some railroad tracks. The first time I stared out at our new city lot with its lopsided, postage-stamp yard, I told Cory, without a shred of irony or charm, "I guess I'll have to adjust to a life without beauty."

(I can't type that sentence without cackling. I'm just here, reporting the facts.)

I lacked imagination back then. I didn't yet know that beauty lives everywhere, calling from the sky and the earth below for us to notice—to be curious, to let ourselves feel small, and to see how we all fit into a bigger picture.

I have so much compassion for the woman I was then, but *mercy*. How was I so confused about this stunning world, where not a single corner is untouched by the buzz of wonder?

Courtney E. Martin writes that our attention “is spent one small, seemingly mundane choice at a time.” She continues, “Ensure that your tiny choices reflect your grand ambitions for how people experience you and how you experience the world. It’s all you’ve really got.”<sup>1</sup>

I didn’t know how to see differently. I hadn’t learned to love past the familiar.

Paying attention to the sky taught me to bear witness to the present moment and my particular place, regardless of what they might hold. Life carries on, but *this* moment will never exist again. Creating a rhythm of attentiveness awakens us to possibility and tunes our hearts to the key of wonder. The sky belongs to everyone—the longest-living art installation.

*But what do clouds have to do with people, Shannan?*

I don’t entirely know. It’s just that the more intently I watch the sky, the more I behold the unflinching beauty around me. Inescapable. Everywhere. Not a day passes that I’m not struck by the grace and soul of this living treasure hidden behind the tracks.

The ground is our teacher. The sky is our guide. We exist against a backdrop of uncompromising artistry. I know that sounds woo-woo, but it doesn’t have to. In an interview with radio host Krista Tippett, Irish poet and self-described agnostic Michael Longley said it like this: “For me, celebrating the wildflowers or the birds is like a kind of worship.”<sup>2</sup>

Why would we want to take these things for granted when instead we could open our eyes and simply accept their invitation to vision school?

## Start with Hello

I was taught it's good to love my neighbors, yet for a long time I assumed not *hating* my neighbors was enough. I didn't really know them but I definitely didn't hate them. Cool?

This new craving to get to know the people near me initially came with a few hurdles.

- I am an introvert. Deeply. Wholly. I could survive for many days without human contact of any kind. (Please make me prove it!)
- I am emotionally allergic to small talk.
- In the vibrantly diverse place I call home, there exists a language barrier between myself and some of my neighbors that my 2.5 years of distracted high school Spanish cannot overcome.
- I'm awkward. Just, in general.

On the one hand, I was lonely.

On the other hand, was it really necessary to talk to anyone who lived outside my home, ever?

I wanted to know people and to be known. But I felt like I'd been preloaded with the wrong personality. Just the thought of it was overwhelming and nerve-racking.

I fell into a plan of sorts, based on zero research or best practices. Enticing, right?

It worked.

Here's what I (accidentally) did and now stand by as an Official Plan.

## **Take Walks**

I started to walk my kids to school every day—rain, snow, or shine.

These walks were a commitment to spending unhurried time in my place. This new rhythm pulled me from the shadows of modern living, where cars are swallowed up by garages and we could, realistically, go weeks without physically being seen.

Practically speaking, walking to school was about a more peaceful start to the day for myself and my kids. The shift I felt when we quit driving<sup>iv</sup> was profound and immediate. For once I was prioritizing connection over efficiency, and the effects were clear. Even when one of us was off to a rocky start we were in it together, sometimes even holding hands. It was the tiniest of rituals but it stuck.

My trip back home had a different focus. I was heading back into the meat of my workday. There are no faster hours than from 8:00 to 3:00 for a work-from-home parent. But for ten minutes I was alone in the quiet. Not doing but just *being*.

My neighbors made the same round trip. I started to recognize where some of them lived. They grew familiar to me, without us ever sharing words. I imagine I became familiar to them too.

Fall turned to spring and we rounded the corner from basic familiarity to smiles and hellos.

Confession: along these slow, small steps, I began harboring

iv. I'm too ashamed to tell you how close we live to the school and how ridiculous it is that we drove even once. Fine, the school is 2.5 blocks away. Bless my heart.

fantasies. I imagined inviting a particular woman over for tea. I daydreamed about us taking walks together, her pushing her baby in a stroller. Maybe we would become best friends. Maybe it would all play out like a charming TV show. Maybe!

Alas, none of those dreams materialized. Not a single one. Maybe I waited too long. Maybe (probably) I stepped back in fear, believing the timing was never perfect enough or being afraid I would put her on the spot. It's within the realm of reason that I missed opportune moments along the way.

It's also possible that *hello* and *good morning* were always exactly enough. We aren't meant to become BFFs with every single person we encounter.

But it was a comfort to begin to recognize some of the faces around me. I still see their homes every day—lemon yellow, beige, gray with blue trim—and wonder how they're doing. Maybe one day I'll learn more. For now, it feels good to look from east to west and have a solid awareness of my place.

My family is past the elementary-school years now but we still do our best to carry this practice with us as we drive across town to the middle and high schools. On one morning commute, Cal pointed out the Amtrak train blazing down the tracks. Ruby, the Martin least likely to offer commentary, mused aloud, "I'll bet the passengers are thinking 'Goshen looks like a pretty place.'"

Affection is infectious. In the words of philosopher Simone Weil, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."<sup>3</sup>

Whether we're walking kids to school, riding the same bus each morning, or braving the same crowded break room

each evening, connection awaits in the dust and crumbs of our daily lives.

Revolutions are grown from the soil of common longing, but we'll never know what we don't see.

### ***Look Alive!***

The best news is that we actually have plenty of time.

Earlier today, over red curry and drunken noodles, my friend Holly told me about the neighbor she finally met. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the chips were nothing but down, they were there for each other, offering help and basic human contact. "It only took us seventeen years!" Holly laughed.

Seventeen years.

That's the thing. There's no expiration date or deadline for forging authentic, enduring relationships. We are free to take it slowly. We live our lives trusting that the tiny moments will not be wasted.

There is no such thing as a trivial connection. You might never bake that peach coffee cake with the perfect crumb and serve it to *her* in your living room at 8:00 a.m. on a Thursday.

But it might happen that one day you'll meet your son's classmate's mom. A few weeks later you might notice her driving by as you walk home. You'll wave. She'll wave back.

One day she'll pull up to the curb and ask a question. Eventually she'll come inside and sit at your table, and you'll swap stories of struggle and success.

After another year has passed she'll invite you into her home. You'll sit at her table and wrap your hands around



her mug. She'll spread your toast with butter and sprinkle it with cinnamon. You'll talk about sorrow and motherhood until the tea grows cold.

You will have made an actual friend, slowly, over time. (And you will tear up, retelling the story.)

None of this would have happened if you hadn't decided to be the sort of person who looks people in the eye and says hello.

## **The Order of Things**

I'm ten years into trying (and failing and regrouping and struggling and sometimes actually winning) at living awake and available to the world I'm in. What I'm still learning is that there truly is no space between us. My place, this neighborhood, is my training camp for connection. What I learn filters out past the geography of the Chamberlain neighborhood in Goshen, Indiana. These lessons bleed into my city, into my deeper, local friendships, into my real and meaningful online relationships. Even into my family life.

I used to get this backward. I assumed I could spend my efforts where I was most comfortable, in my own home, with my closest friends, and maybe in trusted, comfortable spaces like church. I could grow as a human behind closed doors, then carry the lessons out into the world around me, a steadier, more compassionate citizen.

The problem is, this work requires practice. Discovering a path toward closeness means stumbling about and trying

again on the other side of that closed door, steadier and more comfortable over time.

Additionally, it's easy to get sidetracked and stuck. The circus of home-life and work-life and everyday-adult-life will always take over, if we let it. In two weeks alone, my family juggled birthdays, baseball tryouts, an illness, a couple of migraine headaches, a larger-than-normal marital spat, an emergency run for tennis shoes the night before they were needed, and a tsunami of tears as is commonplace in a household with three teenagers. This doesn't take into account jobs, school, and the fact that everyone starts sniffing around for dinner each night at 6:00.

Without some real intention, it wouldn't cross my mind to carry my relational scraps out into the world. Immersed in familiarity and sameness, I wouldn't know what I was missing, the swirling seas of contrast and creativity. I would miss out on that inexplicable *ta-da!* feeling that lands when I meet someone who challenges my tired ideas, making me feel hyperalive.

If I allowed myself to operate from a “mine first” mentality—my family, my home, my preferred social cliques—I would collapse each evening in a heap of fleece and tortilla chip crumbs, certain my time and bandwidth were exhausted by the daily grind, nothing left over to give.<sup>v</sup>

I'm a big fan of the fleece-and-crumbs liturgy, and nothing will change that. But I have more capacity than I often

v. The real goal of this project is to begin to see connection as interwoven into our regular lives, which means it can—and should—exist even when we're at our fleeciest. But I'm getting ahead of myself! Just trust that I'll never try to wrangle you out of your easy britches, and I believe in the comfort and quiet of home at the end of a long day.

think I do. When we orient our identities around community, the “all in this together,” we see there is enough for everyone. Enough time. Enough attention. Even for me. This doesn’t mean abandoning the duties and loves of my life. It means being thoughtfully aware that a connected life offers abundantly more.

In those small, fleeting moments when a hello leads to some delicious pan dulce, I gain entry into a wider web of inclusion. I get out among people and learn to *see*. I collect more data on what it means to be fully alive in this particular chaos and in the precise brilliance that is *now*.

For many of us this is soul-stretching work. We might feel rusty after long stretches of quiet. For some of us the compounding divisions associated with just being alive have left scars. We’re guarded. Skeptical. Cynical, even.

Just remember: baby steps. I’m not asking you to take a girls’ trip with anyone or spill your guts to the next person you encounter. I’m just nudging you to admire the sky, take a walk, and say hello.

Here’s the thing. If my sample size only includes me, Cory, the kids, and our dearest friends, my theories on life will be simple but skewed. When I widen my lens, bringing more into view, gathering and sorting and placing it all beneath the microscope of compassion and care, the results are more complicated.

That’s where the magic is.

Those are the ambiguities and question marks and clap emojis I bring home with me—because no matter what, home is always waiting.

If I were a politician or an economist I might call this “trickle-down connection.”

Alas, I am just one woman, a citizen of today, a friend, a wife, a mom. A neighbor. I’ve seen the way shared bonds make humans a little more whole. From the sky to the ground, from our bodies to our hearts, into our homes and back out to the streets, this is the circuitry of us.

We awaken and awaken and awaken ourselves because the world outside is not scary or separate. It’s what holds us together.

We face it with arms linked and eyes wide because *we* are the electricity we don’t want to miss.

## **A Glimpse of Possibility**

It’s a Saturday morning in the last dregs of August, cooler than normal, the sort of late summer day that signals a season’s end.

I’m up at 6:00 a.m., unusual for me on a weekend, but there are cinnamon rolls to cut and bake for my family and our out-of-town guests.

I wash the flour from my hands and drape the pan with a towel, hoping the second rise comes quickly.

I settle into my favorite spot on the couch with my mug of Earl Grey and a book. The sun begins its ascent over Main Street, over the tops of the walnut trees behind our house, over us. *Wake up, wake up.*

I inhale the steam from my tea, waiting until the temperature is just right, glad for the quiet. The doorbell rings.

I pull my cardigan tighter. There on the other side of the screen door is one of our neighbors: Mack, sixteen and still sleepy. He half-whispers, “I’m sorry if I woke you up. I was just wondering if you guys are coming to my football game at ten? Your company can come too.”

“We’ll be there,” I say, pressing my palm against the screen as he reaches up and holds his against it, an odd high-five.

This is the flow. Can you feel it?

These are the moments that make up our lives.

There’s no relationship or friendship or bonus-parentship that doesn’t start somewhere thimble-size. A hello. A shared laugh. A quick helping hand. Viewed through the lens of enduring friendship, these aren’t throwaway pleasantries. They are seeds.

Mack was eleven when we first met. He was twelve when he first came inside our house, thirteen when he ran the summer streets with Cal and his brothers, fourteen on our back patio and restless as his mom and I chatted too long, fifteen when he missed the bus and I drove him to school. Sixteen when he hoped we would be there cheering in the stands.

It matters, to my family and to Mack’s, to know that we are just up the street from one another. Our connectedness poses no inconvenience. Having each other’s backs takes nothing from us. We see each other. We notice. We wake up ready to care.

This is what makes us more human.

## ONE SIMPLE WAY to Live as Neighbors

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Here's my favorite "waking up" practice, which conveniently converges walking, sky-staring, and noticing the inherent beauty of my place.

Once a month I walk to the same little corner of my neighborhood and take a photo. Because I'm a woman of the times, I usually post it on Instagram with a hashtag I created, #shannans8thspotalley. People seem to enjoy following along but I honestly do it for myself. This small practice helps ground me to my place as I notice what changes and what stays the same.

It helps me to see more clearly, which helps me love more authentically.

Want to join me? Choose your own favorite corner and begin documenting it each month. After a handful of times you'll start to see subtle changes emerge as time and nature and life carry on. Take it another tiny step forward and jot some notes about what's going on in your life each time you take the picture. Things change and things stay the same. We change and we stay the same. But through it all we can stay awake to the wonder and possibility around us.