

CYNTHIA YANOF

LIFE IS

Messy

GOD IS

GOOD

SANITY FOR THE CHAOS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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Books for Courageous Women
from David C Cook

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Introduction

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A couple of my dearest friends and I decided to go to a “healthy eating” class several years ago.

Scratch that.

Let’s agree from the get-go to be brutally honest and call it what it is. I’ll start over.

A couple of my dearest friends and I decided to go to fat camp several years ago. A local church was offering a health-based Bible study on Thursday nights where we would examine food in light of biblical principles. It seems I hadn’t been examining food based on any principle, hence the need to go to the class.

Somewhere about three weeks into our twelve-week study, I arrived at our round table a little bit late (literally it was round, not a reference to the shape of the participants). I quietly shimmied into the chair my sweet friends had saved for me and pulled out my book, ready to set the world on fire with my newfound resolve to eat better.

I sat across from one of my dear friends who made me promise I wouldn’t mention her name in any context, much less in a literary work. So I won’t. But it rhymes with Karen and starts with a “Sh.”

It was a cold day at fat camp (literally and metaphorically), and my friend Karen was wearing a cute little scarf with her outfit. Just as I was admiring her fashion prowess, something caught the periphery of my eye. What was on her scarf—possibly an accessory on her accessory?

On further inspection—well, there’re just no words. I lost it with one of those “I can’t believe I’m laughing at a funeral” kind of laughs. The one when your spouse slips on the very tiniest patch of water on the bathroom floor, and you’re giving it everything you’ve got not to laugh when he falls but just can’t hold it in?

Or maybe that's just me.

Turns out my sweet friend was sitting there fabulously unaware she had a French fry stuck in her scarf.

A French fry at fat camp, God bless her.

Please don't miss the visual of this dear friend sitting there with readers on, diligently taking notes in an "I can do all things" kind of journal, completely oblivious to the fact she was harboring a fugitive French fry.

Oh, and for clarification, it was not a small sliver of a fry one might get at McDonald's. Nope, it was an honest to goodness Chick-fil-A waffle fry hanging out on her stylish scarf.

She later explained how she made the decision to go out with a bang and hit the drive-through as a pre-diet, dash-and-dine kind of thing. Let's be clear: there was absolutely no judgment from me other than the fact she didn't invite me to join her. After all, who of us hasn't eaten their way through a "pantry cleaning" all in the name of kicking off a diet tomorrow? Not to mention I live most of my life camped out in these same type of messy places hoping God can shape my mess into His greater message.

But if you aren't getting the humor of this, I'll have to assume you're either one of those "I forget to eat sometimes" kind of people or you eat only half your plate and claim, "It's just too rich."

I still love you as a sister in Christ, but I'm gonna have to try a little harder to make you my people.

My girls don't do that stuff.

There's none of that ordering the same thing I do and then eating just three bites before declaring "You're gonna have to roll me

out of here,” all the while oblivious to the fact I’ve plowed through the whole plate.

Likewise, my people also don’t throw around weight-loss mantras like:

“Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” (Incorrect, cheese fries.)

“Change begins today.” (Wrong, tomorrow after Tex-Mex works too.)

“Your body achieves what your mind believes.” (My mind believes in carbs.)

“Three months from now you will thank yourself.”
(Whatever, you’re dead to me.)

The three of us lost it that night. It was a tears-rolling-down-your-face kind of laughter that was downright therapeutic. Sure, very few people joined us at our round table in the following weeks (okay, nobody), but we walked away with a much-needed reminder of the value of deep friendships, the healing power of a good laugh, and the need for a little grace in the hard places where we miss the mark.

Can you relate? Have you ever felt like you’re trying to take the next right step only to end up in life’s drive-through craving a French fry more than a Kardashian craves a reality show?

Me too.

Here’s the irony: your French fry always gives you away. I know, profound, right?

But seriously, what's on the outside all too often gives away what's really going on inside. And for many of us, what's on the inside—or lacking on the inside—becomes painfully visible to those with a clear view of the outside.

SO WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Simply put, God created us for great purpose in this life. Long before the earth was formed and before we took even one little baby breath, God knew every single detail of our lives. With great expectation, He laid the groundwork for us to live purposeful lives, drawing closer to Him while also pointing others to Jesus.

In Psalm 139:16, King David says it this way: “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

In other words, God has great plans for us that He put into place before we were ever born. He uniquely created each of us with God-sized plans for our lives and perfectly equipped us to accomplish them with His strength.

Knowing this, can we stop here for one second to consider how our lives might be transformed if we lived each day with even the tiniest grasp of our immeasurable value?

What incredible impact might a series of small pivots have on our families, our workplaces, and even our communities if we would accept nothing less than a life marked by God's greater mission and purpose?

*With great expectation, He laid the
groundwork for us to live purposeful
lives, drawing closer to Him while
also pointing others to Jesus.*

But to do that, we're going to need to name and acknowledge some of the most sacred places where things have become really hard in our lives. Those places that tempt us to move from trusting the One who holds our every breath to questioning His goodness and faithfulness.

Because, just as fast-food habits are a surefire way to thwart our best-laid diet plans, unacknowledged hard places in our lives can thwart God's best-laid plans for us.

So pardon me while I step on some toes for a quick moment, mostly my own:

Perhaps you struggle with insecurity and find yourself always trying to prove you're worthy, even when you know your identity should be in the Lord. You find yourself making decisions based on how they will look to others or if you will be perceived as successful.

You work to maintain certain appearances so people won't see the real struggles below the surface. You feel like it's not obvious, yet it shows up in how you use your finances, how you treat your spouse, how you parent, or how you allow others into your life. You spend time consumed with the need to prove who you are instead of resting in the One who is the I AM.

Or maybe you're overwhelmed with a sin in your past that keeps you from living fully in the Lord today. The enemy's messaging has convinced you that you're disqualified from the God things because of wrong decisions, past mistakes, and even current sin. You feel certain that if people knew the real you, they would scatter. God's blessings and kingdom plans are for "better" people—so you're living with the weight of disqualification instead of living in the freedom of God's forgiveness.

For many of us the issue may be pride. We feel like we've done things mostly right in life and we deserve the opportunities afforded us. We struggle with a lack of empathy for others who share their vulnerabilities because, after all, if we can get it done, why can't they? Yes, everything belongs to the Lord, and it's by His blessing we have what we do, but deep down we believe we deserve the blessings we have.

Or maybe it's jealousy, comparison, bitterness, self-sufficiency, anger, complacency, unmet expectations, or withheld apologies? Are you getting it?

Like my friend Karen, we all have places where extra baggage is clouding our decision-making, and we're left discouraged and striving for more when God just wants us to rest in His grasp.

Life is messy. Yes, it's messy, unpredictable, painful, sloppy, emotional, slippery, and oftentimes unbearable with hard places we could never have fathomed when we started this journey.

But God wants to use these very same messes to shape us and develop His greater message in us. He's not surprised by our slipups and screwups. He's for us and loves us, so let's slow down for a tiny second and reframe the hard places we're facing.

Let me net it out real fast: Life is messy, but God is good. Each day we are given the opportunity to live with meaning and significance as we acknowledge our struggles and then surrender them to Jesus. So let's walk through some messy places together and laugh as we do it.

But a warning from the esteemed Ricky Bobby: "Hang on, Baby Jesus, this is gon' get bumpy!"¹



*A Little Oil Goes
a Long Way*

MESSY TRUTH



Nothing we strive for in this life will
last if God has not anointed it.

When you're facing a crisis, it's always good to have someone who is levelheaded and rational on your side. A person who knows when to speak, when to be quiet, and who's loaded with wisdom that spills out at just the right moment.

~~I'm totally that person.~~ I mean, I've always wanted to be that person. Although most people would say I'm pretty levelheaded in tense situations, my kryptonite is awkward silence. Even as I'm writing these words, when it feels like there's a slight pause I desperately want to type randomness like: "My roots are getting grayer by the minute, but my hair girl says 'You know what I mean' at the end of every sentence, and if I go to her again, I'll gouge out my eyes."

You know what I mean?

It's a serious problem. I mean, not as serious as the health conditions in underdeveloped nations or NATO's struggles with foreign relations, yet it's still a problem. What's most troublesome is that I don't fill the silence with great wisdom or quotable quips that send people running for a pen and Grandma's Bible; instead, I blurt out randomness.

Like when my daughter was having trouble ordering at an Italian restaurant a few years back, and we all sat there awkwardly waiting. The waiter was growing increasingly impatient, so I jumped right out there with "She's got a weird lactose issue that bothers her, especially with pizza. She's thrown up at most of the middle-school sleepovers she's been invited to the last few years. We haven't tested her for allergies or anything like that; it's just a rogue puke and then she's good to go."

I know, it's rough.

Or there are those situations where my uncomfortable goes into full panic, and my attempts to be funny are anything but. One of those foot-in-mouth, fill-in-the-silence moments happened at a Halloween party we hosted years ago. I didn't really know the couple coming through the front door, so I nervously commented that the husband's mask was perfectly disgusting for a kids' Halloween party. His wife kindly let me know he had undergone a dermatological procedure that morning, and it wasn't a mask.

TO ANOINT OR NOT TO ANOINT—THAT IS THE QUESTION

My friend April called me several years ago with some devastating news. She had been diagnosed with a brain tumor, which was most likely malignant and difficult to treat. After a quick consultation with Dr. Google, I understood the gravity of this diagnosis and wanted to help her walk through this health crisis the best I could.

April and I have been good friends ever since we were college roommates. We're opposites in almost every way possible, but it still works. She's a CPA who is understated, calculated, and deliberate in how she does life. In college, she delicately balanced working part-time with exercising, eating well, and focusing on her studies. (I did not.) She has also known what she wants to accomplish from an early age and has purposefully and linearly worked toward her goals. (Again, I have not.)

So with more than twenty years of friendship under our belts, we agreed that it only made sense for me to be there for her family

during this critical brain surgery. Or maybe I agreed to it and she would have preferred I stayed my five hours away but—tomato, tomahto—I was going.

The night before surgery, I overheard April and her husband discussing a call they'd received from their church elders asking to come over to pray for her and anoint her with oil. April and Rob had never been part of an anointing of this sort, and they were discussing their comfort level. Darn the awkward silence that resulted in me suggesting that one about to undergo a ten-hour brain surgery might have nothing to lose in accepting a little prayer and anointing.

They agreed to the request, and a short time later their church showed up. I mean *really, really* showed up. What I assumed would only be a few people turned out to be more than sixty believers standing shoulder to shoulder—literally and metaphorically—with April that evening. And what I anticipated to be a few dabs of oil and a quick prayer became so much more as the evening played out.

Ointment AND OTHER WORDS I HATE

Before we continue, I feel it's necessary to say that I struggle with the word *anointment* because it sounds like *ointment*. And it's not that I'm wholly against creams that treat itches and other precarious needs better left unspoken—it's more that ointment is on my banned-words list. Yes, there are certain words I will not tolerate, like *humongous*, *chunky*, *satchel*, *pubic*, and *ointment*. Now knowing these words are heinous and strictly off-limits, my friends attempt to use them as often as possible and typically in one sentence. I'll

spare you examples of such immaturity, but let's move forward with an understanding that *anointment* and *ointment* are a little too close for comfort.

Now I'm no anointment expert over here, but I've read a lot about it in the Bible through the years. In the Old Testament, it was a ceremonial process signifying God's blessing or call on a person's life. Anointing with oil was reserved for priests, kings, or prophets who were set apart for a special purpose or some next step God was asking them to take. I think of God telling Samuel to go anoint David and formalize his calling as king.

Rick Warren describes anointing with oil as “an external anointing by people of an internal anointing by God.”¹

Of course, there are also the New Testament examples of using oil to anoint the sick or even a woman who was criticized for using expensive oil to anoint the feet of Jesus. But I always thought of anointing as an antiquated concept until I realized Jesus has anointed us even today (1 John 2:20; 2 Cor. 1:21–22). Practically speaking, that means we don't have to be named a priest, a prophet, or a king to be anointed because Jesus' personal calling on our lives is just as significant as any of those given in the Old Testament. What God was doing through anointment back then, He's still doing today with real and powerful purposes for our lives.

FOOTPRINTS ON THE HARDWOODS

After everyone left April's home the evening of the anointing, I noticed something unusual. You know how cooking oil is hard

to get off your hands because it leaves a residue behind? Well, the anointing oil from April's head made it down to her feet. As she walked around the house, she left footprints everywhere she stepped. Her visible footprints on the hardwood floors forced me to joke that she might not want to rob a bank pre-op because she'd be easy to track.

#AwkwardSilenceProblems

But watching April walk around that night with oily feet taught me something important about my faith: *People who have been anointed by Jesus should be leaving footprints everywhere they go.*

Are you with me? God has anointed us to do important things that He planned for our lives long before we were ever born. Just as a priest, a king, or a prophet was anointed in the Old Testament to do big things, we too are anointed as parents, teachers, friends, accountants, and attorneys.

Our anointing is so much more than a little oil on the brow—it's the unmatched power and supernatural ability to do the things God has orchestrated for our lives. When we do what God has anointed us to do, people and circumstances around us are changed. Our footprints, like April's, are visible long after we've moved on because God is using us to change hearts, resolve conflicts, heal brokenness, and accomplish ministry.

But living in this way doesn't just benefit those around us; it changes our lives too. It's easier to extend forgiveness, offer second chances, and keep short accounts when we're wronged because it's no longer all about us but about God working through us.

*When we do what God has anointed
us to do, people and circumstances
around us are changed.*

Speaking of keeping short accounts, it reminds me of our early marriage finances. Mike and I dated for a small eternity before we got married (like seven years), so we already had jobs, bank accounts, 401(k)s, and all the adulting kinds of things. Once our nuptials were finalized, we began the process of combining households.

About six months into our marriage, we noticed that every month our joint bank account was overdrawn and pulling money from savings. Month after month we didn't have enough to cover our bills, and we couldn't understand how we had been financially stable as singles but financially strapped once married.

A few months later we clued in that, in our newlywed bliss, we had both set up auto-pay to cover our bills. That was real cute until month after month, we double paid our cars, our house, the electricity, the water, and so on. Yes, I realize the fact that it took us months to figure this out is a bit perplexing; that's why those who stink at math (and common sense) oftentimes go to law school.

But I'm reminded of how prone I am to live each day double paying debts that have already been covered on my behalf. Jesus paid our debts and gave us unmatched value, which allows us to live each day free from the expectations of this world. As we do so, we're able to focus on the things that are uniquely ours to accomplish while drowning out the noise of distraction, discontentment, and comparison.

This brings freedom.

This brings hope.

Even so, sometimes in the middle of doing the things God has anointed for our lives, we can get tricked into thinking they're mundane, irrelevant, or even insignificant in comparison to what God's doing in other people's lives. We start to feel ripped off when we're called to make dinner for a neighbor instead of influencing two million Instagram followers.

But I've found that God tends to wrap our greatest callings into the most common things of everyday life. And because of this, Anne Graham Lotz (Billy Graham's daughter) says we should make it our goal each day to simply "be faithful in our highest place of influence."²

The world as we know it would be totally unrecognizable if we would stop looking around at others and instead focus on living faithfully in our own highest place of influence.

What would this look like, practically speaking?

If my highest place of influence today is in my home, then I'm going to leave footprints teaching my children how to live humbly, follow God, and love other people well.

If my highest place of influence is on the PTA board this year, my footprints will model kindness and inclusivity, prioritizing people over programs no matter the cost.

If my highest place of influence is in my work, I'm leaving footprints of integrity and uncompromising ethics regardless of the impact on my finances or future.

Why?

Because nothing we strive to accomplish is significant if it's not from God.

Nothing we strive to accomplish will bear success without God's hand.

Nothing we strive to excel in will last beyond us if God has not anointed it in our lives.

SECOND CHANCES

I learned a lot from April's anointing all those years ago. I learned that the miracle of anointing is rarely in the oil but in the footprints that come after the oil. King David's legacy didn't magically happen because Samuel dabbed a little oil on his forehead; it happened in the moment-by-moment faithfulness of doing what God planned for his life, called him to do, and empowered him to accomplish.

Thankfully, April came through her ten-hour surgery remarkably well the next day. A few weeks later—to the surprise of the top neurosurgeons in the country—her brain tumor was benign. So, with a clean bill of health, April was free to go back to her normal life.

Well, kind of.

Turns out that normal looks different on the other side of a second chance. What mattered yesterday seems to hold less significance today. The calculated, balanced life before seems inconsequential when faced with the reality that our days are limited and they are not our own.

I want to live each day as one given a second chance. I want to revel in my spiritual clean bill of health while seizing the Old Testament-sized anointments God has given me to accomplish.

Don't settle for anything less than God's plans for your life. Refuse to be hoodwinked by comparison or feel disappointed by the size of God's call on your life. Ask God to renew His anointing for your life (like, really do it right now). And then watch carefully and wait patiently as the anointing oil leaves unmistakable footprints everywhere you go.