

Foreword by Annie F. Downs

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it's
not
your
turn



what to do while you're waiting for your

BREAKTHROUGH



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It's Not Your Turn

*Much of the war against the devil
is about whether you'll quit.*

BETH MOORE



IN THE BEGINNING, I had to fake it: the happiness, the peace, the congratulations. It all felt heavy to carry over the gap of where I currently was and where I wanted to be. I was a few years into my PhD and couldn't find a job. I applied to what felt like every higher education institution with an opening in my field and kept getting rejected. At some point, it started to feel personal.

For my daughter's first birthday, we planned a huge party. My little girl was turning one, and I wanted to celebrate her. I went to the store to buy food. I had just paid for my groceries when I realized I forgot to get paper party plates. As I



handed my card to the woman on the register, I watched as the gap between me with all my education and her with this minimum wage job evaporated.

“Ma’am,” she said. “Your card is declined.” My face got hot. Paper plates are \$2.50. Y’all. I did not have \$2.50.

How in the world did this happen to me? I had a husband. I had a house. I had a daughter. I had nearly three degrees. *But I didn’t have \$2.50?* I was mortified. My husband and I got into the car with our groceries and drove home in complete silence. I cried myself to sleep that night. I felt like a failure. I remember emailing God a letter (there are actual sites that allow you to do that) and while, of course, I knew this email wasn’t going to God’s inbox, it felt therapeutic to hit send on all my grievances. *I thought God opened doors and windows? I thought God owned the cattle on a thousand hills? I thought God answered prayers? Where was my testimony?*

It felt like God had played me. I had done everything right. I focused on school. I excelled in my teaching. Yet, here I had nothing to show for it. At this same time, one of my best friends Jewel, called me. She had just been hired by NASA as a recruiter for their minority student program. I couldn’t get a job teaching at a community college, and Jewel was now employed by NASA.

“I am so happy for you,” I legit choked.

And it’s not that I wasn’t happy for her, I was. I was just also so deeply sad for myself. That was the moment I learned a lesson in my life that I’ve repeated to myself a hundred times since: *Heather, it’s not your turn.* Sometimes, you show up to someone else’s party. Sometimes you force yourself to clap when you really want to cry because emotions aren’t



always singular. You are allowed to feel sad for yourself while also being happy for what is happening to someone else. I clapped for Jewel because she deserved it. It wasn't my turn, but it was hers. And I had to be the friend she needed.

In today's culture, it's a race to the top of the ladder. According to Pew Research, millennials are the most educated generation.¹ No one does comparison quite like millennials. We have apps for everything, and yet Yale University found people are happier and healthier the less time they spend online.² We are the generation of hashtags and filters. Everything is created to project an image of who we want to be—which is never as we actually are. We try our hardest to be witty in 140 characters or less. We post photos of our nights out, and the scene is always way more intriguing than the night really was.

Once I went to the beach with a friend. She experienced nausea from her early pregnancy. She complained the entire time and never got in the water. Within an hour, she asked to leave. That night, she posted the two photos we took with the caption: "Fun in the sun." That was one of the first times I realized we have totally curated online lives that are almost nothing like what we live. We get dozens of comments, hundreds of likes, and it fuels our need to continue with the charade. Anything for a hit. If only our real lives felt as successful as our cropped ones. I can't think of a single millennial friend who hasn't had some type of struggle with either anxiety or depression. Not a single one. Which means though we may feel alone, we aren't. There are probably thousands, if not millions, of us sitting right now feeling as though it's never going to be our turn.

I think some of this is the reason we often feel unfulfilled. We want everyone around us to believe we have it all together—and we don't. We fear everyone else is living the lives they post and we are the only imposters. And so, the race is on. The race to perfection. The race to instant success and gratification. The race toward fame, promotion, and adoration. But what if life isn't meant to be raced through? What if it's meant to be lived?

My mentor is José Rojas. He was a spiritual adviser for two US presidents. On one of our first phone conversations, he said to me, “What if you'll actually get to where you want to be quicker by slowing down?” I didn't get it, but now I do. What if by rushing through the process, we end up as a rushed product? Jesus, who entered the world as a baby and would need to die as a man, tells us all we need to know about the heavenly value of process. *We* value the product. God values the entire process. What if by slowing down, you get to where you're going faster?

It's Hard to Keep Up

We are always in competition with one another because we have constant access to each other. There was a time when you only competed with your neighbors over Christmas lights and tacky lawn ornaments. Now you can't pee without seeing how much better than you 250 of your “closest” friends are. Newsfeeds are filled with all the awesome philanthropy, money, and stardom your old college roommates have found. Then we look at our own lives and we feel like crap and so we talk crap. I can't tell you



how many group chats I've exited. Friends screenshotting people's posts to poke holes where we can. It makes us feel taller if we can assure ourselves others are small. And so, we keep racing. We race to be better, smarter, happier, healthier, and more successful.

We name our kids things like Apple and Atticus, because we wouldn't dare allow one other kid in their class to have the same name as them (no offense, Karen). Our kids are an extension of us, and we are special. We are different. We are so happy and fabulous. Except studies show our depression rates keep increasing. A study in *Psychological Medicine* found "the prevalence of depression increased from 6.6 percent to 7.3 percent between the years 2005 and 2015 with an even greater increase (8.7 percent to 12.7 percent) among those ages 12 to 17."³

I have unfollowed people I couldn't clap for. I remember that age-old adage, "If you don't have something nice to say, then don't say anything at all." The problem wasn't them; it was me. If someone is milking their work with missions for IG likes, that's on them. But the second I start a text thread scoffing, well, that's on me. Why are we competing with people that aren't competing with us?

I realized I hindered my own prayers by trying to block someone else's blessing. My refusal to just shut up and clap wasn't decreasing their success, but I do think it prevented mine. God isn't as worried about changing your circumstances as he is about changing you. The best thing that ever happened to my faith was watching other people open packages I had ordered. I learned to smile from the bleachers,



even though they wouldn't have noticed if I had walked out. I had to accept it wasn't my turn, but it didn't mean mine wasn't coming.

And so, I faked it. I started to say I was happy for them, even when I wasn't. I would literally say over and over, *Heather, it's not your turn*. And while something inside me started to die, something better was born. I started competing with myself, rather than with others, and in so many ways, started to truly live my life again.

The Focusing Illusion

Bestselling business author Simon Sinek gives a motivational speech called "Understand the Game," where he mentions a study asking people if they would rather have a \$400,000 house on a street where all the other houses are \$100,000, or a million-dollar house on a street where all the other houses are two million dollars. People chose the \$400,000 house, even though it was lower in value than the million-dollar house, because they wanted to be better than their neighbors.⁴ I truly believe comparison is the death of all our joy.

There is a theory that psychologists have described as the "focusing illusion." This theory suggests when we compare our lives to others, we often focus on small details and assume if these small details were different, we would be happier. For example, have you ever been having a fantastic day and then decide to scroll your feed? Suddenly, you come across another picture of Sydney. Sydney is perfect. Her hair is always perfect, her outfits are stellar, and her thighs don't



touch (which honestly just feels unhealthy), but you are jealous, so . . . whatever. Sydney is on another vacation. Greece, hashtag Mykonos. Suddenly your perfect day is spoiled. You can barely afford the Olive Garden, let alone Mykonos.

What does Sydney do for a living anyway besides tag companies on Instagram?

Here you are trying to be faithful, trying to tithe 10 percent of your negative paycheck, and Sydney—who misspells *acropolis*—is in Greece for the fifth time this year.

Really, God?

A once perfectly happy life suddenly crumbles when you stop focusing on what you *do* have and start focusing on what you do *not* have. That is the focusing illusion.

Research into our comparison problem doesn't stop there.

Princeton conducted a study on college students, and the entire study consisted of two questions:⁵

- ▶ How happy are you?
- ▶ How many dates did you have last month?

The researchers found a weak correlation between the level of happiness of the college students and the number of dates they had been on. Then the researchers decided to try something. They flipped the order of the questions.

Now the survey read:

- ▶ How many dates did you have last month?
- ▶ How happy are you?

Suddenly, a strong correlation existed between how happy the college students were, and the number of dates they had been on. What happened? The only change was the sequence

in which the students answered the questions. The second sequence forced them to change their focus. When a perfectly happy student focused on the number of dates they had—or didn't have—they no longer felt so happy.

Millennials are constantly bombarded with images of their successful peers. I can't tell you how many times I have finally felt on track with my life, and then I log onto social media and see my pal Andy Gerard on another trip to Kigali working hard in international development. Here I think I'm doing big things for the Lord, but I'm not in Kigali. I thought I was in the thick of ministry—until I compared myself to Andy.

In her book *Mythical Me*, Richella Parham explains that since social media is always curated content, when we compare ourselves, we are actually comparing ourselves to mythical players in a curated game.⁶ The people we compare ourselves to are the best versions of those other people, not even who they really are. No wonder we struggle so much afterward.

Jodie Gummow, a writer for Salon.com, says social media plays a huge role in lowering self-esteem.⁷ Apparently, two-thirds of people find it hard to sleep or relax after spending time on social networks. Of 298 users, 50 percent said social media had negative influences on not just their self-esteem, but their lives.

Psychologist Sherrie Campbell says, “When we look to social media, we end up comparing ourselves to what we see, which can lower our self-esteem. On social media, everyone's life looks perfect, but you're only seeing a snapshot of reality.

We can be whoever we want to be in social media, and if we take what we see literally then it's possible that we can feel like we are falling short in life.”⁸

Determined to Be Better

Comparison can be a bad thing, but it can also be a good thing. I'm a millennial, so I would never tell you to shut down all your socials and go back to the Dark Ages. I love that I know you had sushi last night even though I know literally nothing else about you. I can't tell you how many times I am cackling and my husband says, "What's so funny?" and I'm, like, "My friend Dave said . . .," and my husband is all, "Have you ever even met Dave?" and I'm like "Don't take this from us . . ."

Social media can be positive. I find it so annoying when people criticize the reality of our culture. Sure, warn me of the pitfalls, absolutely tell me to monitor my time usage, but if you tell me to go dark, I simply can't take you seriously. We should use social media as a tool, while warning people not to use it as a crutch. The same social media that makes me jealous when it's not my turn can also make me want to be better. I want to be more like Andy. I want to be more like my friend Vimbo, who has a nonprofit where she works tirelessly trying to build a school in Zimbabwe. I see the posts of my friends who are active in philanthropy and leadership, and it makes me strive to be better. I am so proud of my friend Jason Lemon (@JasonLemon), who writes articles for *Newsweek* covering our politicians and making people aware of issues overseas. I love watching my friend Scarlett (@ScarlettPosner)

be vulnerable enough to talk about how motherhood carries an invisible load that disproportionately rests on the shoulders of women.

When I was in college, my dad used to say if I hung around three party-chasers, I'd be the fourth. But sit at the table with world changers, and you'll start to believe you can be one too. Social media doesn't just expose us to stupid TikTok videos. It also gives us Bernice King while scrolling Twitter from the couch. It put Steven Furtick on my YouTube and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez making macaroni and cheese on her IG Live. Social media has helped me understand there are Black theological thought leaders and Generation Z members who are willing to take on big business, and LGBTQ Christians who continue to show grace to people who would rather pretend they did not exist. Social media hasn't just given me all of society's ills, it has also given me some surprisingly good answers. It has made people who I could never have met become real human beings. Sometimes all you see are @'s and # signs, but there are people out there making you a better lover of humanity from their cell phones, and I'll never go back.

You must understand how this works. Not only are we comparing ourselves to others, but others are comparing themselves to us. So, who are you? Not just offline, but online?

It's Not Your Turn

Maybe it's not your turn right now. Maybe you've been overlooked and underappreciated. Maybe you have ten bridesmaid dresses but no groom, or enough rejection letters for a bonfire.



Maybe you can't stomach another baby shower or typing the word "congratulations" one more time. What do you do when everyone else gets the move, the relationship, the success, and the accolades?

You show up anyway. At the end of the day, all we have in life is our integrity. Our followers won't get us to heaven, and our success and riches can't come into our caskets. However, a life lived intentionally can make ripples that continue long after you are gone. You can't control your circumstances, but you can control how you show up to them. Suddenly, I realized obscurity was a really safe space to grow, and I could stretch further if no one were watching. If I lived each day walking toward my destination, how would that change the way I went through each step? What if some seasons are temporary, and we can make ourselves better in the waiting room? What if you don't have to wait until it's your turn to live like your turn is coming?

I woke up one day and realized who I am when it's not my turn is more important than who I will be when it is. Anyone can stand on a stage for a crowded stadium. It takes conviction to get up when no one would have noticed if you walked out. I want you to get up. Not for them, but for you. Not to outdo Sydney, but to outdo yourself. Now, I'm not saying that if you manifest hard enough all your wildest dreams will come true. Some people never get the wedding. Some writers never get the book. And some singers never see a stage. There is no magic wand for life that can put bows around all our broken pieces. But what if we commit to the journey anyway? What would happen to who we are as



people if we committed to do the work in the dark with no guarantee of light? What if we don't quit just because we're tired? What if we don't run to win, what if we run to learn? What if we do our best, not for raises, but to grow? Is it possible we can end up with something better than a happy ending someone else gave us? What if we finish our lives with a dignity we could only have given ourselves?

I want to be a real Christian who follows Jesus where he is headed, rather than tells Jesus to follow me where I am headed. That starts when it's not my turn for accolades.

In fact, there's no better place to start, than when *It's Not Your Turn*.

Promise one to memorize in a weary season:

“A good name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.” (Proverbs 22:1 NASB)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What are you waiting on?
- ▶ Talk about a time when you saw God bless the person next to you and you felt jealous.
- ▶ What experience can you lean into where God showed up for you? Could that same God still show up now?