

Good Enough

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40ish DEVOTIONALS FOR
A LIFE OF IMPERFECTION

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PREFACE

If you check your social media feed, the debate has been settled. Yes, you can be perfect. Other people are living beautiful, joyful, effortless lives. In fact, it's embarrassing that you haven't joined their ranks already.

Use this moisturizer. Lose those extra pounds. Smile at the cashier. Did you really give ten percent of your income to charity this year? Your grandma needs a card. I'm not sure you've forgiven your father. Your inbox is out of control. Did you finish that degree? There is a ninety-nine percent chance your children's photos have not been scrapbooked. Wait, what about that credit card debt? Your partner thinks you're selfish. Are you making the most of this?

And then what about the real stuff? You cheated. Or he did. You can't seem to find the person you wanted to be with or become that person yourself. You've been drinking again, and people are starting to notice. The program or job is a complete dead end. That teenager's addiction is eating you alive. Your mom is losing her memory and is miserable to care for. You wanted to be more: happier, healthier, wealthier, more grounded. But you're not.

We are living under the weight of the Perfectibility Paradigm.

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Try harder. Do better. Other people are already at the finish line.

One of the most counterintuitive parts of the Christian tradition is its emphasis on progress when it doesn't believe in absolute perfection. Jesus alone is perfect. But we are asked to try and try and try again. We are required to walk toward God to the steady drumbeat of improvement.

We have entire faith traditions and denominations and institutions who come down on different sides of the debate surrounding how perfect we should expect to become. Some traditions, like Lutherans and Southern Baptists for example, double down on the language of justification, the account of how Jesus's death and resurrection saves us. And I mean, *saves us*. We were nothing. We were getting nowhere. Then *poof*. God rescued us from our innate brokenness. As the North African bishop Augustine said, "*Non possum non peccare*." I cannot not sin.

Other traditions (like, say, Catholics, Methodists, and Pentecostals) have a long practice of saying, "Yes, well, that's only the beginning." Being saved by God starts you on a path of sanctification—being changed by God—and you might even become close to perfect. Conveniently, this is called "Christian perfectionism." Progress is not simply expected but sometimes guaranteed.

Then there are all those who drink deeply from the wells of our modern self-help culture. They take a very

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precious truth about faith—that we can grow closer to God and become more fully human—and transform it into a capitalistic imperative. EVERYTHING is possible if you attend this seminar! Or buy this serum. Or commit to this new series of habits. This form of perfectionism argues that we are capable of anything at the right emotional, mental, and physical price, and admitting to anything else is just “low self-esteem.” We are fine! No, not even that. We are perfect *just as we are*. Look within. We don’t need to be saved at all. Everything you need is already inside of you.

Which one is it? Are we terrible? Perfectible? Already perfect?

We do not imagine that we will settle centuries of Christian debate about just *how* good we are, except that we believe it is somewhere between two poles: everything and nothing. Perfection is impossible, but transformation isn’t. We can change a bit, if we really want to.

This is the choice embedded in every day from the moment we wake up. We will have to find enough momentum to reach for a faith that is never perfect, but good enough.

(Also, dear reader, please know that we have a sense of humor. So we are laughing every time we describe “good enough” as implying a gentle “meh.” We love God. We simply know that we will not be joining a monastic order anytime soon and will have to figure out a

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reasonable spiritual plan given how much Netflix we are watching.)

WHAT KIND OF FAITH IS “GOOD ENOUGH”?

- A good enough faith will establish a sort of rhythm of life to sustain momentum. These are not an effort to ensure 7 Steps to Guaranteed Sainthood™, but rather to remind us that closeness with God is not just a question of belief. It is also in the small actions we can take.
- A good enough faith is not reaching for the impossible. We can't be everything to everyone, or even enough for ourselves. We're human.
- A good enough faith looks for beauty and truth in what's possible. No, not everything is possible. But we will hunt for the places where we can find an opportunity for a little more.

In taking this journey, you may realize that you were more committed to the Perfectibility Paradigm than you thought.



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SIGNS YOU FELL INTO THE PERFECTIBILITY PARADIGM

- You look at others and fantasize about how your future self will also be amazing at [insert magical thing to be admired].
- You are deeply frustrated by yourself when you are not able to “stick with something.”
- You stay too long in the self-help section at the bookstore, wondering if there is a secret to being better.
- You are confused about whether faith is a free solo experience. It is not. You are a group project.



TRUTHS TO START LOVING EVEN MORE

- We are made for interdependence.
- We are fragile . . . and so is everyone else. But we can learn to live beautifully inside of our limited bodies.
- Yes, our stupid, imperfect, ordinary lives can be holy.
- Life will break your heart, and there’s nothing wrong with you if you know that.
- Sometimes joy and laughter and absurdity are the exact medicine we need, but also we need actual medicine. We love actual medicine too.

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When life goes off the rails, we often believe we are the problem. But the reality is that so much is out of our control. You get sick. A friend dies. The baby's heart stops beating. The financial pressures are too much to bear. We have to learn to live inside of a life that may not be *perfectible*.

One way or another, we can't afford the lives we have—emotionally, spiritually, and financially. And guess what? There is no Best Life Now in sight.

So now what?

In this book, we hope to carve out the space between despair and hope, between believing everything is possible and nothing is possible.

We are on the lookout for beauty and meaning and truth in the midst of lives that didn't turn out like we thought they should. We can have lives where God breaks in and surprises us. We can learn to believe that we are blessed regardless of how our lives appear on social media or at high school reunions.

We can begin to feel less alone, more loved, and less judged when good is . . . enough.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

What follows are 40ish entries meant to be read as you sip your morning coffee or wait in the carpool line or while you're ignoring your partner at bedtime. You can read them in order or skip around or use them during

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the forty days of Lent. *Trust us, no one is keeping score.* Each includes a prayer or blessing because we believe in blessing the crap out of people, and you look like you could use it. Inside is also a simple prompt called a Good Enough Step to nudge you toward action. No, not every transformation is possible. But yes, there are some things we can do to inch toward a deeper, richer, truer kind of faith.

Let's begin. But before we do: A blessing for you, dear one, as you embark on this joyfully mediocre journey* toward, well, imperfection.

* We fundamentally hate the word *journey*. Journeys are for Frodo Baggins and that 1980s band who took the midnight train going an-yyy-where.



A Blessing for a Joyfully Mediocre Journey

*Blessed are you
who realize there is simply not enough
—time, money, resources.*

*Blessed are you
who are tired of pretending
that raw effort is the secret to perfection.
It's not. And you know that now.*

*Blessed are you
who need a gentle reminder that
even now, even today,
God is here,
and somehow,
that is good enough.*

REGULA

(Pronounced “reg” like “regular.” Not the way Jessica says it, like a rhyme for green-leafy “arugula.”)

There’s a feeling we get when we want to start something new. A little spark, a tiny flame has been kindled. There is some kind of desire or awareness rising. We start to hope for more, but we don’t always know how to begin.

In our best moments, we notice that this feeling stirs up spiritual hopes. In a quiet moment. In a moment of awe. Sometimes in a moment of aching emptiness. We realize we want more.

Spiritual hunger, like other forms of desire, is fleeting. Hello! And goodbye! Now it’s gone again. If we want our spiritual appetite to stick around, that will require a bit of attention. Our spiritual selves need encouragement. We need community. We need a hot minute alone. And we need a *regula*.

Regula means a “rule of life,” but it is simply a *regular pattern of activities* that becomes more valuable over time because its structure creates a space for good things.

The most common understanding of the term *regula*

evokes images of a strict monastic life, where monks keep to a demanding daily schedule of grunt work and fervent prayer. Their days are divided into regular periods of communal worship, private prayer, spiritual reading, work, and sleep. Not everyone loves the rigors of a heavily scheduled life. Jessica Richie, co-author of this already beloved book, refuses to brush her teeth at the same time every day. Ever. She has to brush her teeth at completely different times each day or else, as an Enneagram Type Seven, she will surely die of predictability.

Sometimes we almost crave a tight regimen of rules only to suddenly lose momentum or decide that the cost is too high. If you have a history of dieting or joining exercise communities—CrossFit, SlimFast, Whole30, Peloton—you know how these moments feel. It is intoxicating until you can't keep up. Excitement quickly deteriorates into failure and shame. Perhaps you, like me, never last until the end of January with your New Year's resolutions. If so, I would strongly encourage you to be comforted by the earliest stories of rebellion against rules in the Christian tradition. In the sixth century, Saint Benedict had high hopes for the spiritual community he founded until his rules were deemed so unnecessarily strict that his followers tried to poison him.

Don't worry. He survived. And simmered down a bit. Benedict's main achievement became a set of rules

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that enshrined a spirit of moderation and balance, saying:

“We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome . . . As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

To be effective, a regula doesn’t have to be hard; it only has to be regular. So don’t worry so much today about whether you *want* to love God or whether you have all the spiritual feelings you think a better person would have. It’s enough to say hello to the idea of trying.

A Blessing for Beginning a New Spiritual Practice

Blessed are we who are trying a new thing, though we can't quite see the whole of it. That's the beauty of the life of faith. We start in the middle, at the heart center of an unspoken desire to live into the glimpse we've had of You and of Your goodness.

Blessed are we who ask You to be the guide as we begin to build from here and create a stronger, more flexible rule of life. Trusting that you are trying to foster life in us.

Blessed are we who remember that we will fall short. We will fail, but that doesn't mean we are ruined. We simply pick up and begin again.

Blessed are we, willing to be beginners all over again.

A GOOD ENOUGH STEP

Regulas are not meant to be hard or heavy. We may have been given a story of what a faithful life is *supposed* to look like. We all know someone who seems to be effortlessly spiritual. I (Kate) had a friend whose morning ritual of thirty minutes of Bible study and silent prayer seemed so utterly natural to her that I always felt unmotivated by comparison. Don't I care about God? Don't I care about God *in the morning*? I got so stuck on the idea of this habit as the only true way to become spiritual that I needed to find an entirely different version.

What is something you can set down or let yourself off the hook for? Something that has made a life of faith seem impossible. Write it down on a piece of paper, then throw it away. Practice letting this expectation go so you can take up something gentler.

We thought it might be a nice reminder for you that not all habits are follow-through-able. Here are some of the things we have tried . . . and failed to do regularly. What would you contribute?

1. Not biting nails
2. Not throwing the alarm clock (or pressing snooze seven times)
3. Losing weight

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4. Not talking about losing weight anymore (because, seriously, we can learn to love ourselves)
5. Flossing (apologies to our dentist friends)
6. Accepting email calendar invites
7. Drinking enough water
8. Canceling subscriptions (because, really, you haven't read that online magazine you subscribed to three years ago)
9. Reading for joy
10. Watching more edifying television (reality TV is just too entertaining)
11. Writing thank-you cards
12. Calling your mom, Jessica

BUOYED BY THE ABSURD

My grandmother was dying. It had been a long haul since her initial diagnosis and brutal treatments, and we were struggling under the weight of another painful truth: although she was not going to get better, she was also not going to face that fact. No late life lessons or awakenings in the face of her own demise for her, no sir. This was going to be hard until the end of the line.

My mom was always hovering nearby, waiting to see what she could do next. This went on for days and days and days.

One hospital day, my mom sat down to crack open her lunch and take a breather from keeping watch, only to discover that the meatballs she was looking forward to eating were frozen solid. She poked at them dolefully with a plastic fork, then nibbled around the edges. Rocks. Delicious frozen rocks. Suddenly the quiet hallways of the hospital were full of my mom's lightly hysterical giggling.

At that moment, one of my grandmother's friends popped her head in to see where the laughter was coming from. Her face tightened with disapproval.

"Is anyone with your mother?" she asked tersely, as if my mom had abandoned her post. Or insulted the sanc-

tity of the space. Someone was *dying*. How *dare* anyone laugh about meatballs?

This is such a common feeling. I have a friend who lives in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, so she refuses to throw her children birthday parties. *How can we celebrate when others suffer?* Another friend lived in South Africa during apartheid and was ashamed to plan her wedding in the midst of such a painful national struggle for racial equality.

Is it okay to laugh when sadness surrounds us?

While all these people have good intentions, they are missing something important. Joy and sorrow simply coexist.

With all the misery at the hands of the Romans during first-century Palestine, Jesus attended a party. He didn't just attend . . . it was at this soirée where he performed his first miracle. The evening had been going so well until the couple committed the social blunder of running out of wine. Jesus could have simply given a rousing sermon: Enough revelry! Be grateful! Indulgence is the enemy! But instead, he took jars of water and transformed them into an even better wine than they had enjoyed to that point. The cheap house red became an expensive bottle of the finest Bordeaux. Even someone with a head cold would have been able to taste the difference. Another time, thousands of grumbling bellies surrounded Jesus. He didn't simply make enough for a small portion, but baskets of leftovers overflowed.

Later, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, the first thing he did when he appeared to the disciples in the upper room was to ask if they had something to eat. This was a man who enjoyed a feast.

Under the weight of our grief, our shame, our pain or that of the world, we can convince ourselves that joy is the enemy. That to celebrate or feel happiness somehow mocks pain. But it is sometimes the opposite. Joy is the oxygen for doing hard things, as Gary Haugen says. He is the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, an organization that frees people around the world from human slavery. The injustice he has witnessed firsthand would make even the sunniest heavy with despair. But Gary is the opposite. His levity is contagious—and exactly what sustains him to do the long, faithful work of justice.

When you are sinking under the weight of grief or falling prey to the fears that stalk your mind, try on joy for a change. Turn on the music and dance in your kitchen. Plan a road trip to the world's largest disco ball, prairie chicken, and chest of drawers for no reason at all. (Yes, I have seen them all and then some.) Bake a cake and have a party celebrating that it's Tuesday. Drop a surprise note and treat on a friend's doorstep. Try a cartwheel in the yard. Watch a show that makes you laugh. Ask friends to send you funny memes. Pull a lighthearted prank on your housemate. (Once Jessica taped the handheld faucet on the sink into the ON posi-

tion so when her mom went to wash her hands, she got soaked. She laughed—the first time. She did not laugh the second or third time.)

Some people will try to tell you to just “choose joy,” as if reframing your perspective will make things hurt less. I wish I could tell you joy was a magic formula. But, no matter how joyful you choose to act, joy does not erase the pain. Some things cannot be canceled out. But you are capable of a whole range of emotions that can coexist. Joy and sorrow. Grief and delight. Laughter and despair. Sometimes, the absurdity even keeps us afloat.

A Prayer for Finding Joy in Sorrow

God, I can't deny it, the way that sorrow catches up with me and forces me to pay attention. There is much to grieve, so much to lament in the world, in my life, in the lives of those I love. You have shown me again and again that I can look sorrow in the face, take its hand and talk things over, because it shows me what I love. It tells me what I don't want to lose.

God, I love that You lead me into that tender space where I can see the sadness for what it is, and I can see also what makes me want to fight hard for what I love. We are in this together, so dance me through it. Let's find some light in this day. Lead me to where I feel closer to You in my sadness and remind me that I never walk alone. Awaken me to the next step toward joy, so that what is a deliberate choice becomes a buoy, carrying me along a river of delight.

Dance with me, God. Show me the pleasures in the everyday loveliness of the world You created. Reveal what delights I can share, and the sadness I can ease. Do it again, Lord. Fill my heart with love for life and for others. That's where it starts, right where joy and sorrow meet. *Amen.*

A GOOD ENOUGH STEP

We are made for joy and delight and whimsy. But there is a discipline to this kind of joy, especially when we're not feeling especially cheery. Kate has been known to go to a thrift store, pick out an old painting, take it home, and paint a monster in the background. Or a dinosaur, if she's feeling extra spicy. Jessica once threw a Taylor Swift party where everyone had to dress up as their favorite Taylor Swift era (there are many to choose from) and lip-synch to her songs. Today, even if you aren't feeling very joyful, pick something absurd. Do it. *How do you feel?*

"I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots.
Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in
rainbows, with a harp and sword in my hands."

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

MOURNING A FUTURE SELF

Oh friend, if you were drawn to read this particular entry today, perhaps you are in that place where grief is what makes the most sense to you right now.

Because there is something that will now never be. There is an imagined future, something beautiful and dear to your heart, and it has dissolved before your eyes.

What is it that you grieve?

Perhaps your grief has a name. She is gone. He will never come back. The funeral is over, but the pain lingers. Perhaps you are grieving an event: an accident, an illness, a messy divorce. Maybe you are mourning a relationship that has come to an end with no possibility for forgiveness or reconciliation. Or perhaps you grieve for a marriage or relationship you still hope for, and work for, but one that has painted you into a corner.

Or is it someone close to you? Maybe you mourn for the relative with mental illness, a child who continues to struggle, or the loved one who will never be able to drive, work, or have the relationships that would make life feel full. Or maybe you lost an opportunity to do the right thing, say what mattered. Or perhaps you couldn't say goodbye.

I know that ache. It is a deep sadness that reverberates through our bones. We mourn not in general, but in

particular. After all, love is in the details. It is, as Dr. Don Rosenstein says, “the loss of an imagined future.” He is a clinical psychiatrist who works in a cancer center. An unexpected form of grief emerged for him when his son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum. He had to grieve the loss of who he’d imagined his son to be. He had to give up on the fantasy of a future where he and his son could hit tennis balls back and forth. Of course, his son is lovable and loved. But Don had to mourn his expectations and root around for a new dream of what it means to be the dad of his *actual* son, not just the son he thought he might have.

Loss requires us to reimagine hope. But before hope comes acknowledgment. Let us count not only our blessings, but our losses. That might sound “negative” to people accustomed to leaning on optimism, but there are good reasons for starting with a deep accounting of loss. Honesty allows us a moment to pause and take stock *before* we forge ahead.

Acknowledging “this will never be” is the precursor to imagining what might happen next. Without it, we may inadvertently find ourselves trapped in what psychologists call “identity foreclosure.” As psychologist Adam Grant describes, we can get tunnel vision. We commit and recommit to a single vision of the future, shutting down any alternate plans and the ability to adjust. You wanted to be a parent, but infertility made it too difficult. You hoped for a long-term partner by this

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age, but they haven't come along. You were excited to help raise your grandkids, but then they moved away. We are forever being kept from an imagined future. And without honesty, we cannot first mourn that loss.

When you cannot have the future you imagined, let the tears flow. Let yourself mourn. Pour out your grief in all its truth, with all your power, in whatever form comes. With words or songs or talking with friends. Long walks or screaming into the void. Let it out.

Tell God the whole of it. Even though it hurts. And especially the honest, angry parts. Anger is our soul's sentry, put there to protect our boundaries and the vulnerabilities we carry.

"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

There is a time to mourn. Let it take up as much space as it needs. Your future self can wait.

A Blessing for When You Mourn What Could Have Been

Blessed are you, friend, sitting among the shards of what could have been. It is broken now, that dream you loved, and it has spilled out all over the ground. Blessed are you, dear one, letting your eyes look around and remember all the hope your dream once contained. All the love. All the beauty. Blessed are you, telling your tears they can flow. Telling your anger it can speak. Blessed are you when mourning is the holy work of the moment, for it speaks of what is real. Blessed are you, letting this loss speak all its terrible truth to your soul.

Blessed are we who mourn, saying let us remain in grief's cold winter for as long as it takes, that mourning might be to our hearts the gentlest springtime. Let the thaw come slowly, so we can bear the pain of it and find comfort at each release. *Amen.*

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Ritual helps us mark important transitions. I have a friend who, after her divorce, held a funeral for her marriage. Another person held a memorial for who she was before a traumatic brain injury left her changed.

Plan a funeral for something you are grieving—an imagined future or the death of what could have been. Set aside a time and a place for your grief to be named and expressed. Write down its name on a small card, and set it out on a little table. Light a candle. Wear black, or a shirt that you can tear in half. Read a poem, play a song, or say a simple phrase like this one: "Oh light that once shone, you have departed. How I loved you. And how I miss you now that you are gone. I release you, and yet part of you will always be with me. Yet even as I hold the beauty of memory and the sadness of loss, I commit you now into the hands of God whose heart holds all that I don't understand. Amen."

*"God pity them both! and pity us all,
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall;*

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'*

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*Ah, well! for us all some sweet hope lies
Deeply buried from human eyes;*

*And, in the hereafter, angels may
Roll the stone from its grave away!"*

—JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER, "Maud Muller"

SHINY THINGS

I teach in one of the great mainline seminaries in the world (if you don't mind me saying something so gauche), a bastion of American Methodism and a standard-bearer of the Protestant mainline in an era of declining vitality. And I got terribly sick when I was there, and I spent most of my time trying not to die, and they were pious and beautiful and soul-saving in every way.

I have always loved my job. It has always felt like the purest expression of who I am. I find much of my energy and my attention is devoted to a version of my career that, conveniently, suits me perfectly. So I have the kind of life that is perfectly suited to idolatry of the highest order.

Let me explain.

One of the defining features of cosmopolitan Protestantism is the sweet little promise—whispered even—that Christianity is not going to ruin your life. You can still love salty language (and I do) and feel justified by holding prevailing opinions (which I do) and have many mild to moderate faults that are not polite for me to mention. Its wonderful accommodation to modernity has liberated the church from a great many sins (Phariseeism, disembodied love, political acquiescence, etc.), but I'm afraid it has laid itself quite open to the glories

of idolatry. And let me be clear, idolatry—which is to say, comforting false images of a true God—is the most fun in town.

There's a wonderful account in our tradition, in the book of Exodus, about our irresistible pull toward worship of the wrong thing. The Israelites have already been rescued from Egypt. They have been miraculously and ceremoniously yanked out of slavery and oppression. They are a people whom the Lord has saved and provided with all the food and water and sustenance they needed, despite much whining on their part.

They have been given a series of laws like “You shall have no other gods before me,” and “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.”

The people had been given two wonderful leaders: Moses, the intercessor, and Aaron, his brother and the high priest. He would tend to the religious needs of the people while Moses was up on the mountain, lingering with God.

Now, in the story, we are about to see Aaron do some spiritual improvisation. Moses is up the mountain receiving the rest of God's laws on Israel's behalf. Meanwhile, the people are getting impatient that Moses is “so long in coming down.”

The Israelites say to Aaron, “Come make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses (who brought us up out of Egypt), we don't know what has happened to him.”

Aaron told the Israelites to surrender their jewelry, then he whipped out an iron cast (I'd love to know where that miraculously came from) and smelted everything into a glorious idol. Later, when Aaron explains this to an irate Moses, he uses the most deliciously shoulder-shrugging explanation. He "threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (*How did that happen?!*)

It's not simply that the Israelites were wildly impatient and prone to epic forgetfulness. It's not only that they immediately fashioned a golden calf the minute that Moses was "too long in coming down." It was their defense. They argued that they were still, somehow, not violating the first commandment. After all, they did not create an image of a false God. They created a *false* image of the *true* God.

Welcome to your idols, people of Israel. *They aren't idols, I swear. It's still Yahweh. This is the festival of Yahweh, can't you tell?*

The golden calf brings home the fundamental issue for Christians who are not particularly worried about being apostates. At least not often. We are not unusually haunted by the specter of our salvation or in danger of being entirely unaware of our false pursuits. I work predominantly with pastors, and I have yet to hear any good sermons that come out strongly in favor of any of the exciting sins.

My sense is that we are more likely to be Judas than Peter. Peter denies God. Judas betrays him.

In other words, we are much more likely to do exactly what the Israelites have done: not to have a false image of a false God, but a false image of the true God. We take great comfort in our own version of God instead. Perhaps one that is composed of bits of things I already know are good and golden, things I melted into a god-like form. *Oh, is that an idol? It looked so familiar I hardly would have noticed.*

As Martin Luther famously wrote in his *Large Catechism*, “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.”

An idol is like a flowering weed. It grows and spreads. Its blooms can fill a whole garden, even creeping over the edge and onto the lawn, without any cultivation. You don’t even have to try, and it grows to take up every available nutrient in the soil, lightly choking out other, more tender, species. If it’s lovely to look at, its sprawling tendrils often become too hard to yank out. And why bother? It looks like a garden. It looks JUST. LIKE. A GARDEN.

We are less likely to commit any of the very dramatic sins (murder! arson!). Instead, we are more likely to live comforting half-lives of faithfulness. The substitutions. Where we put in all the effort of declaring to be followers of Yahweh. Until we’re not, as much.

There is a lovely book of advice for writers called *Turning Pro* by Steven Pressfield, which talks about how much easier it is to pursue a *version* of something than

the real thing. Pressfield says that the biggest obstacle to great writing is the same for great living. It is to substitute a safer, lesser goal for the tough and exciting work you really ought to be doing. He calls this a “shadow career.”

You are a teacher but it’s less about the kids now and mostly about getting to the end of the day. Or you thought you wanted to be a parent and now you dream about being alone most of the time. Or you’re humming other people’s songs when you are too afraid to play your own.

The key, says Pressfield, is to ask yourself what your life is trying to point to. That’s a wonderful and horrible thing to think about.

We are not apostates. We are idolaters. We fall in love with the things that are almost true. We start taking our gold and pouring it into a cast that we can shape with our own hands, one that inspires us and challenges us, but is not, necessarily, given to us by the one true God.

After all, what is idolatry except beautiful things that do not transform us?

A Blessing for Letting Go of the Things That Shine

Blessed are we, when the heart shudders to ask, is it me, Lord? Am I one who has chosen to follow a proxy? What does my life point to? When I look at the decisions I make and the ways I spend my time and my money, what is it that I love? What does the evidence tell me about the cause that I care for the most?

Blessed are we who cringe at the thought of betraying You, the lover of our souls.

Blessed are we who have caught ourselves walking the road toward self-justification, who pause to ask, is it really You, God, I worship? The Immortal, the Ancient of Days, yet no stranger because You make yourself known.

Oh, how blessed are we who lay it all out before You, oh God, asking to be awakened to our lives as You see them. Asking for the inward renovation that will tear down anything false we worship, and for the outward turning that will make every aspect of our life point to You.

Blessed are we, looking for the transformation that has begun, one delight at a time.

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What do your major life choices point toward? Your relationships . . . your kids . . . your career . . . your hobbies . . . the places you want to travel?

What is the most beautiful thing you can say about your life when you look at the evidence?

You want to love people.

You want to challenge deeply held ideas.

You want to take risks.

Write it down. Be clear. Be specific.

What is a core truth of your life, the straightest arrow you can imagine finding there? Now ask yourself: *Is it aimed too low?*

"Sometimes, when we're terrified of embracing our true calling, we'll pursue a shadow calling instead. That shadow career is a metaphor for our real career. Its shape is similar, its contours feel tantalizingly the same."

—STEVEN PRESSFIELD, *Turning Pro*

BUILDING A GOOD DAY

I love to openly begrudge a good sermon analogy. If someone begins to describe God's love as a lesson she learned by pushing her daughter on a swing, I vow never to visit a playground again. Did you learn freedom from sin during a skydiving lesson? But no lessons learned about the odds of falling precipitously to your death? Good luck leaving the sanctuary without me bringing that up.

But this one stuck.

An old Mennonite pastor was at the pulpit explaining the importance of time spent with God, and he took out a wide-mouthed mason jar. He began to drop stones of various sizes to the bottom. Big. Small. Smooth and jagged. *Plonk. Plonk. Plonk.*

"Notice what happens when you put them in randomly," he said dramatically, and the jar quickly filled up to the top with dozens of stones left over. We shrugged.

"Now notice what happens when you put in the large stones first," he observed sagely, and I started to pay attention.

The largest stones anchored the bottom, then the medium stones, then the smallest stones filled in all the cracks. Presto! All the stones fit snugly in the jar as each settled. And, with the Mennonites around me—which

is to say, people deeply impressed by good, common sense—I rolled my eyes and agreed it was the best thing I’d seen in months.

For some people, the idea of prioritizing how to spend their day is very intimidating. I vividly remember my lonely grandfather, whom I loved more than butter-scotch, explaining how the day felt absolutely interminable. In my recent conversation with author Mary Pipher, she wholeheartedly agreed: a single day can feel impossible to wrangle into shape. As she got older, her friends were dying and her role was changing rapidly, and all the familiar work of parenting and caregiving and working had given way to an entirely amorphous existence. She, like the Mennonite pastor, decided that the trick was to treat the day as something to prioritize.

First, she decided, there would have to be a walk. She would listen to the birds, *no matter what*. “We need to learn how to structure a day that is rich in meaning and joy-producing activities,” she writes. “How we spend our time defines who we are. There is no magical future. Today is our future.”

A day is a limited thing. It is a mason jar with only so much room to spare. So, as the adage goes, first things first.

It will take some time for you to decide what the Big Stones and the Small Stones should be. Some seasons of our lives are overwhelmingly crowded, and if that’s the case for you just now, I completely understand. Maybe

you can take a single moment, just breathe and ground yourself in the remembrance that you are a complete delight. Just this could be your touchstone.

The best days will have room for the Big Stones. That doesn't mean that everything has to happen in the morning. There are two dozen self-help bestsellers at any moment ready to explain to you that you can solve the problem of bad days by conquering your mornings. Sorry. Some people like to sleep in and, again, good luck trying to get Jessica to do anything on a fixed schedule.

The structure of a good day is simply this: your biggest loves find their way in. God. Friends. Meaning. Family. Take some real unhurried time to reflect on how a spiritual practice might pop into your day. When is it practical for you? What is your preference? A night owl might choose to set aside a bedtime moment for her spiritual practice. Another might find that lunch is best. Either way, you will need a regular reminder to look for God.

And when your day is getting too stuffed, stop. Notice what is happening. Ask God for help, and look for the coming of Love that renews and restores the goodness.

Perhaps you have serious limitations—a health condition or too much work or caregiving to do. My friend with leukemia recently told me that she began to see each day as capable of only three things. Take a shower. Call a friend. Make lunch. Others have forty thousand

GOOD ENOUGH

things that must be done. To be human is to accept that we are limited and the more honesty we have about that, the better.

If we want to build a good day, we can start with just that. One day. One jarful at a time.

A Prayer at the Start of the Day

Dear God,

Help me stop, for I am likely to keep doing all the things I usually do. And in that stopping, meet me here, in the beauty of all Your incredible mercy and goodness. And in doing so, remind me again that of course You're here, You're listening, because that is who You are.

You are the kindness that runs to find me wherever I have wandered off to. You are the faithfulness I don't have enough of. You are my safe harbor in the midst of the storm. And in that quiet place, speak gently to me of what needs to change in order for Your freedom to free me, Your love to care through me, and Your faithfulness to strengthen me.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

A GOOD ENOUGH STEP

Think about the day you'll have tomorrow. Is there anything you can cross off or kick down the road? Don't crowd your day.

Find a prompt to remind you to let God in, e.g., a pebble in your pocket, a sticky note on your bathroom mirror, a rubber band bracelet.

What are your big loves? Allow them to take up space.

Then, do it again tomorrow. One good day at a time.

"Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives." —Kate's favorite soap opera