



breathing room

letting go so you can fully live

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
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To Luke, Lane, and Elle with all my love



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prelude

breathing

But me he caught—reached all the way
from sky to sea; he pulled me out
Of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos,
the void in which I was drowning.
They hit me when I was down,
but God stuck by me.
He stood me up on a wide-open field;
I stood there saved—surprised to be loved!

Psalm 18:16–19 Message

The human body's urge to breathe is irrepressible and essential. When we hold our breath, we begin to feel a pain inside our chest. This is called our critical line, a signal it's time for another breath. Everyone's critical line is different, but everyone—at some point—must breathe.

Research shows we hit our critical line, not necessarily because our body needs oxygen, but because our body needs to release CO₂. When we hold our breath, our body tells

us it's time to exhale. Only then can we take in the air we need.

"As it turns out," a breathing researcher writes, "the opposite of holding your breath isn't inhaling, it's letting go."

Over the past four years of my life—which have included the birth of my first children (boy/girl twins), the challenges of learning to be a working writer, two moves within my hometown of San Diego, a miscarriage, another pregnancy, a move to the Middle East for my husband's job in the Navy, the birth of our third child in the Middle East, and a move back to San Diego with three small children in tow—I have been through a bit of a Come Apart. Or, to say it in breathing terms, I hit my critical line.

I had been holding my breath for years—probably more years than I realized—trying to manage the pain in my chest. Trying to stave off surrender. Trying to keep it all together.

Until I couldn't anymore.

This is not to say the last four years have been horrible. They haven't. In most every way, they have been the richest, most textured years we've lived.

Which is why things got so very confusing. If life was so beautiful (and it was) and I had so much to be grateful for (and I did), why was I struggling? Why did I feel like I was being squeezed relentlessly? Why did everything feel so urgent? So suffocating? All the time?

Sure, we had stress. No one would deny that. But our *life* wasn't coming apart, not in the ways you think of someone's life crumbling. If anything, our life was arriving, precious dose after precious dose.

Still, I could not breathe.

My inability to suck it up and manage exposed and highlighted my growing suspicion that I was grossly inadequate for my own life. I begrudged my critical line and believed something was wrong with me because I couldn't just push past it like it seemed so many others were able to do, like I had always been able to do.

My refusal to exhale, to let go, just about drowned me.

I needed someone or something to release the valve on the blood pressure cuff that was squeezing my soul. I needed the anxious intensity to dissipate. I needed a place I could go where no one would try to convince me of how blessed I am or how I should simply pray harder. I needed people and words and spaces that were filled with grace, that honored my struggle. I needed someone to give me permission to exhale, because I could not offer it to myself.

So, I started reading literature from the 12-step program, Emotions Anonymous, because I knew 12-step helped you break down something that had become unmanageable. In the Emotions Anonymous materials, I read a sentence that changed everything for me. It said:

We do not deserve to keep hurting ourselves.

Like a film sequence I saw myself in a closed loop that I couldn't exit: struggle, self-contempt, swirling . . . struggle, self-contempt, swirling . . .

Why can't I just get it together? Why can't I just make it all look like she does over there? Why am I struggling when this is what I've always wanted?

About a year ago, our church offices caught fire when a faulty copy machine shorted. The fire started around 4:00 a.m., so no one was injured, but the majority of the office space was

a black crisp when the staff arrived to inspect the aftermath. One million dollars' worth of damage.

One of the pastors brought in a therapist to facilitate a conversation around the staff's experience of the fire, an opportunity to debrief. The therapist explained that some staff members might register the fire as an inconvenience, even a loss, while other staff members would internalize the fire as a trauma.

Trauma to one person isn't necessarily trauma to another, which is awfully confusing. How we internalize current life events is largely related to how we've internalized and flushed out past life events. If we've got big experiences stuck inside us, then current experiences will likely trigger those we're already carrying.

Like the critical line in breathing, feelings and experiences don't translate the same for everyone. What's hard about this is that we tend to look for validation from those around us, permission to feel what we're feeling. And so many of us have been told that what we're feeling just can't be right. *Because so many others have it so much worse, what I'm up against doesn't get to be difficult.*

Some of us lived in families where we were literally not allowed to have our own reactions to events. Some of us believe God would be disappointed if we struggled. Some of us will only ever feel what everyone else in the room is feeling because we would never trust that our own intuition or instinct could be valid.

We've let others talk us out of our experiences. We've let our ideas of God talk us out of our experiences. And we've talked ourselves out of our experiences.

When I read "We do not deserve to keep hurting ourselves," I knew my refusal to validate my current struggle was not only

a way I had been hurting myself but also a “void in which I was drowning,” to take a line from Psalm 18.

Drowning in a void. Doesn’t that say it all? God knows we don’t just drown in circumstances and crises. We drown in our own refusal to acknowledge and validate our struggle. We drown in toxic thinking. We drown in internal chaos. That void can be just as dangerous and deadly as any catastrophe.

Just as the psalmist did, I believed I had been offered a salvation, a hand reaching down to pull me out of the void and deliver me into a spacious place, a wide-open field, an expanse. From void to validation, surprised to be so loved.

That’s the whole story.

Catastrophe or no catastrophe, if you are unhinged, dis-oriented, suffocating, or otherwise generally dragging, I’m inviting you to pull up a chair at this table.

It doesn’t really matter to me what the outside of your life looks like. If the inside of you is struggling, this is your book, baby. I’m your girl.

Let’s talk about how the Hard took up residence and how the stress piled up like stop-and-go traffic and how all of a sudden we woke up one morning and we realized we weren’t doing well. Like, not well at all. The pain in our chest became the only thing we could see and feel.

Let’s talk about how we might begin caring more how it feels on the inside than how it all looks on the outside.

Let’s talk about how we might stop talking ourselves out of our own feelings, so that we can get some relief and freedom.

Let’s talk about how we are both blessed and struggling. Struggle and gratitude are not two ends of a dichotomy. In God’s world, they can simultaneously coexist.

Most of all, let's talk about how desperately so many of us need to let go of the ways in which we think we should be living so that we can actually, truly, really, live.

I'm not going to spend this book telling you how hard my life is because, the truth is, my life is gorgeous. Certifiably gorgeous.

I'm going to tell you how hard it is to feel like you're suffocating when your life *is* so gorgeous, and how badly I turned on myself in the midst of the Hard because I couldn't do better and be more. I punished myself for being human, for struggling, which is heartbreaking because it prolonged and intensified the struggle all the more.

My story, then, is a tribute to what happens when God reaches down to us with truth and we choose to reach back. And, also, what happens when we courageously extend a desperate hand in God's direction and he carries us into a broad grace. Void to validation.

Edna Pontellier is the heroine of my very favorite novel, *The Awakening*. Her life is privileged by most standards, but she struggles to find herself in the relentlessness of motherhood and marriage and the restrictive gender norms of the late nineteenth century. Barely able to tolerate her doting-yet-detached husband and two young children, Edna longs for a life she can't have. She longs to choose herself. So she strips down naked and walks out into the ocean, and she never comes back. She takes charge of her own life by ending it.

If we will not attend to the void in which we are drowning, we will disappear into it. That's the ugly truth. One way or another, unless we turn toward the struggle, it will suffocate us.

My friend Corrie and I were talking about *The Awakening* years ago, a favorite of hers too. She said something I've never

forgotten, something I heard then, but I have actually begun to live now. She said, “We need to be people who come out of the water, like baptism. We go in—that’s part of life—but not to stay. We go in and we emerge, cleansed and reborn.”

How might we emerge from the Come Apart instead of letting it consume us? How might a truer, richer version of ourselves come up and out of that water? How might we hit our critical line and let go instead of holding our breath to the point of unconsciousness?

As long as we feel the need to hold our breath, hold it all together, we will never experience space, grace, breathing room. We’ll be floundering in the void. But if we will let go, surrender, let the crash happen—validate that the struggle we are feeling actually exists—we just might be able to get the help we need to really live.

In our kitchen, we have a breakfast nook with an L-shaped bank of seating and an oval table. Normally, it’s a hub of stickiness, which I actually love—the epicenter of a home with three crazy Tiny Tanks at the helm. Twice a week, though, Luke and Lane go to preschool, and I put Elle down for an early nap, and I sit at the nook with the house quiet. I light a candle in a mercury glass container and I drink coffee with plenty of cream. Usually I drink out of my pink mug that says “Amore” on it because it reminds me to believe God loves me with every sip. I open my laptop and get to work. Inevitably, when I’m engrossed in a thought, I will look down and see the rug under the table I’m working at. It’s a vibrant tribal rug with dancing ladies in rows. Their arms are extended, holding scarves in each hand, a depiction of the scarf dance performed at weddings in the Middle East.

These women are my muse. Life as scarf dance.

prelude

To get there from here, I must wake up every morning and answer Christ's single most important question: Do you want to get well?

*I believe in you,
Leeana*



1

confessing to the trees

The more we are able to embrace our sorrow and learn from it, the more we will also be capable of experiencing great joy. Yet to embrace our sorrow takes a great deal of courage. So often we try to soften or resist our pain.

—Emotions Anonymous

Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.

—Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

The cypress and pine—*Callitropsis macrocarpa* and *Pinus radiata*—of the Northern California coastline look like apparitions in the sea fog. Endemic to Monterey and neighboring Carmel, their ancient knuckles and gnarls reach through the mist. Creeping. Rising. Stretching.

God himself must be speechless when it comes to these trees. Earnest glory stripped naked right before your eyes.

Even in my woeful state, I can see how beautiful they are. They form a protective circle around me, warding off the world, and I feel safe enough in their confessional to say:

I wish everyone would just leave me alone.

As the words form in my head and leave my mouth, I know how bad they sound. Princess-y and melodramatic. Even I am annoyed at my desperation. Immediately, I want to find other words. Sunnier words. Something a little more socially acceptable to feel. Dinner party talk. After-church pleasantries.

One year earlier, when I was thirty-eight weeks and four days pregnant, I became a mother for the first time. My husband, Steve, and I welcomed boy/girl twins, Luke and Lane. I was immediately wild-eyed. They were the most gorgeous things I had ever seen, the most stunning gift a person could receive. Boy/girl twins. *So perfect*, everyone said.

In the year that followed, leading up to this moment on the beach, we all became wet ink. Our colors running into each other. I had no idea where I stopped and they started. Where they stopped and I started again. I felt as though we were artwork on a page that had been dunked in ice water—shockingly and abruptly cold—and our distinctions bled. Which is to say, I felt I had lost myself. How disillusioning to be struggling when things were *so perfect*.

I'm really good at making everything work, holding it all together, presenting well. I have always been able to muster. Always. I have always been able to override what's really going on inside me in order to keep things pleasant and lovely. Absolutely always.

In the Come Apart of life, we find that we have lost some of our capacity to muster, some of our capacity to perform well. I guess this is another way of saying we've lost some of our capacity for BS. Ultimately, I think this is a good thing, especially for those of us who have become skilled in the art of BS over time. But it's also disorienting, when our ways of relating become threatened.

I began to feel so tired, so reduced on the inside, that the gap between what was happening inside and what I could present on the outside became harder and harder to manage. I tried to run, to keep that gap from closing, but it was always at my heels.

I would write really dark and dirty things on my blog, and people who knew me would be surprised. *Wow, I had no idea that was going on for you. I had no idea you were feeling that way. I had no idea you were coming apart. You never seem like you're coming apart. You're so strong.*

I haven't always known how to inhabit my own feelings. I haven't always known how to let life be both hard and good. I haven't always known how to make peace with the paradoxes and texture of life. I'm still learning how to do that every day.

What's more is that I believed—as I had countless other times—that life was hard, not because it was simply hard, but because I was failing.

The struggle I felt indicated some sort of deficit in me and my abilities. After all, things were *so perfect*. I had a fledgling writing career. I had two babies. I had a condo in a cute beach town. Come on, people. Life had arrived!

The truth is, if you aren't at peace with what's "in here," then it does not matter one bit what's "out there." If your

center is white-hot, then it doesn't matter what you drape over that center. The façade will be consumed.

Just days before my confession to the trees, I had been cleaning up after my now one-year-olds. Their latest sport was sending all kinds of food flying off their highchairs onto the floor. *Man overboard*. Nothing I did made any difference. Pats on the hand. Removing the food. *No, no, no*, Luke. *No, no, no*, Lane. It was all just hysterical to them.

For the one-gazillionth time, I sat down on the floor and began picking up bits of turkey, string cheese, banana, sucked-on peanut butter crackers. They watched me with great focus—four little eyes following my every move, as if I lived to entertain them—as I mindlessly piled their scraps into my palm.

What happens next will not surprise many of you. Because you have *so* been there. You've been on the floor, highly unshowered, picking up soggy crackers and mushed banana. You've realized, in some very primal part of your hypothalamus, that you too are hungry. In your attempt to keep the kids pleased in every way, you have forgotten your own need for food. That is, until you unconsciously start picking hair and carpet fuzz off the pieces of banana and shoving them in your mouth.

(This is what we call a low.)

I had assumed life would end up being slightly more razzle-dazzle. Turns out, it's me, resembling Charlize Theron in *Monster* in most every way, scavenging for discarded leftovers like some sort of feral forager. Oily, with bad roots. All from my new address: the floor.

When I think of myself in this state, I can summon no compassion. I can only summon contempt, which is the essence of the problem.

I want to be the girl in the Anthropologie catalog, the one who I believe to be the very best version of me. Perched on a tufted leather sofa, wearing impossibly skinny jeans with an effortlessly belted tunic. Loose curls. Accessorized with a bohemian ease. Eclectic yet not overdone. Likely gluten free. Showered, it goes without saying.

From my spot on the beach, I am longing to be “that girl.” Not “this girl.” And it hurts. I don’t want anyone to see “this girl.” This picking-hair-off-a-banana girl. This struggling heart. This mediocre mom. This everybody-leave-me-alone lack. The one who thought she could be so much more, and now ends up feeling like so much less. The one who is hiding, reduced.

I once heard educator and activist Parker Palmer say, “We are all heartbroken.” He went so far as to say, the one thing he and the terrorists who drove planes into buildings on September 11, 2001, have in common is that “we are all heartbroken.”

Well, except me, Parker Palmer. *I’m* not heartbroken. Good Christians aren’t heartbroken. New mothers aren’t heartbroken. Blessed blondes like me aren’t heartbroken. You must be mistaken on that one. I’m just out here talking to the trees, wishing life would go away. Heartbroken, you say? Naaaaaah. Not me.

This is what I want to say. What I want to feel. What I wish were true. Some of us learned along the way that our pain is an inconvenience to others and probably to God too. We’ve also learned that faithful people don’t come apart. Faithful people are stable.

We’ve also feared that if we turn toward that ache for even one moment, it will swallow us whole.

So we turn the other way—away from our own need—and we send the message to ourselves, for the countless time, that what’s hurting us isn’t valid. We’ve gagged the ache with Doritos and Diet Coke. We’ve covered it up with bronzer. We’ve smothered it with layers and layers of trying-too-hard. We’ve shut it up with the how-richly-blessed-we-are talk.

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” one woman told me when I had recently shared my angst with her. “You have two beautiful babies and a nice (enough) husband. I just don’t feel sorry for you.”

You don’t need anyone to cosign on a Come Apart. In other words, you don’t need to wait until someone else tells you that your particular struggle is worthy enough to call life hard. If it feels hard, then it’s hard. If you’re lost, it’s OK to say it.

To not say it, I’ve found, is one of the most flagrant and egregious ways we hurt ourselves. Denying our truth.

There is so little in life we can actually control. Did you know that? We can’t control our kids, our spouses, our friends, our parents, the government, the weather, God, the Bible, our pastors, our kids’ friends, our friends’ kids, our losses. We can’t control people’s perceptions of us. We can’t even completely control our own bodies.

I know, I know. This is terrible news. I need a lot of control. Chaos makes me itch.

I remember sitting in the Middle East, texts coming in on my phone letting us know we had to limit all nonessential travel until further notice due to riotous infighting between the Shi’a and Sunni all over the island. I had a newborn. I had two three-year-olds pent up in the house because it was, approximately, two hundred and forty-six degrees outside. My phone rings and Steve lets me know he has to go on a trip.

These are the moments when you realize the one thing you can control is how you treat yourself. And that one thing can change everything.

Have we listened to ourselves as we would a dear friend, or are we treating ourselves as a hostile witness—distrusted, dishonest, discredited? Have we splintered off from and silenced the very source that could guide us home?

I do something radical. I assume Parker Palmer's right for just one second. I assume he's talking to me. I let "heartbroken" in.

I'm heartbroken that it's not feeling easier.

I'm heartbroken that I'm not better.

I'm heartbroken over these gorgeous, wide-eyed beings
I've been given.

I'm heartbroken that I have no idea what I'm doing.

I'm heartbroken that I have no idea who I am.

I'm heartbroken that I can't breathe.

They say having an asthma attack feels like pushing and pulling air through a coffee straw stirrer. It's true. I've struggled with asthma since I was a toddler. When an attack comes, the effort required to breathe—to keep the air moving—is startling and consuming. Something that was once effortless and thoughtless has become labored and affected. Making you work to keep up.

When we're carrying unattended ache, we have to work to keep ahead of it. We live that coffee-straw-stirrer existence. Pushing and pulling the air so we don't suffocate from the small living. Then we stop. We go to the trees. We watch them move in the sea air. In one brave moment, we tell the truth. We confess. We take the first deep breath we've taken in memory.

I cry. An exhausted, grieved, wishing-it-were-different cry. I shake my head at my own inability to just pull myself together and get on with things. I feel how tired I really am. I walk in toward the low ache, which I had been fastidiously avoiding. I fall apart. I fall open.

This was the beginning of something for me, the reality that breathing room was available when—and only when—I faced the very thing I didn’t want to face. In this case, my growing suspicion I wasn’t doing well. I could no longer dismiss or override what I was feeling. This was a personal abandonment, a betrayal. We know it’s not OK to bully other people, but somehow we forgot—or never learned—that it’s not OK to bully ourselves.

How do we find the spacious place? The place where we accept ourselves—forgive ourselves, even? The place where we live with the profound sense we are loved? How do we find our way to *that* place? To *that* person?

We begin right where we are. With the ugly truth. With the ache. We confess we cannot get ourselves up off the floor. We admit our self-contempt. And we invite Christ to come and sit with us, perhaps offering a fuzz-free banana if we have one to spare.

We don’t stay in the ache forever, of course. That would be despair. But we can’t avoid the struggle, either. That would be denial. We have to turn toward the ache with even the tiniest desire to get well.

“There is a hole in your being,” Henri Nouwen says, “like an abyss. You will never succeed in filling that hole because your needs are inexhaustible. You have to work around it so that gradually the abyss closes. Since the hole is so enormous and your anguish so deep, you will always be tempted to flee

from it. There are two extremes to avoid: being completely absorbed in your pain and being distracted by so many things that you stay far away from the wound you want to heal.”¹

I begin to practice what it feels like to offer up my pain, because I could see the more I denied it, the more it controlled me. I begin to work around the abyss with a confession, a stripped down utterance of inconvenient truth. That’s how things begin to change, I’ve learned. By standing toe-to-toe with the truth.

The sanctuary of trees bows and groans and exhales in the fog. Practicing their dance of approval. Like a scene from Lewis or Tolkien. Meanwhile, seven miles south, the Lone Cypress stretches out her gnarled arms over the ocean. Rebel-
liously reaching out for life.