

ZONDERVAN

*One Thousand Gifts*

Copyright © 2010 by Ann Morton Voskamp

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit [www.zondervan.com/ebooks](http://www.zondervan.com/ebooks).

This title is also available in a Zondervan audio edition. Visit [www.zondervan.fm](http://www.zondervan.fm).

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Voskamp, Ann, 1973–

One thousand gifts : a dare to live fully right where you are / Ann Voskamp.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 231).

ISBN 978-0-310-32191-0 (hardcover, jacketed)

1. Christian life. 2. Voskamp, Ann, 1973–. 3. Farm life—Religious aspects—

Christianity I. Title.

BV45O9.5V67 2010

248.4—dc22

2010025364

---

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Other Bible translations quoted in this book are listed on page 231–2, which hereby becomes a part of this copyright page.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

Cover design: Michelle Lenger

Cover photography: Masterfile®, iStockphoto®

Interior design: Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

# *contents*

## CHAPTER ONE

an emptier, fuller life / 9

## CHAPTER TWO

a word to live ... and die by / 24

## CHAPTER THREE

first flight / 42

## CHAPTER FOUR

a sanctuary of time / 62

## CHAPTER FIVE

what in the world, in all this world, is grace? / 79

## CHAPTER SIX

what do you want? the place of seeing God / 102

## CHAPTER SEVEN

seeing through the glass / 122

## CHAPTER EIGHT

how will he not also? / 141

## CHAPTER NINE

go lower / 163

## CHAPTER TEN

empty to fill / 182

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

the joy of intimacy / 201

*afterword* / 223

*acknowledgments* / 229

*Bible translations* / 231

*notes* / 233

But of those years, I have no memories. They say memory jolts awake with trauma's electricity. That would be the year I turned four. The year when blood pooled and my sister died and I, all of us, snapped shut to grace.



Standing at the side porch window, watching my parents' stunned bending, I wonder if my mother had held me in those natal moments of naming like she held my sister in death.

In November light, I see my mother and father sitting on the back porch step rocking her swaddled body in their arms. I press my face to the kitchen window, the cold glass, and watch them, watch their lips move, not with sleep prayers, but with pleas for waking, whole and miraculous. It does not come. The police do. They fill out reports. Blood seeps through that blanket bound. I see that too, even now.

Memory's surge burns deep.

That staining of her blood scorches me, but less than the blister of seeing her uncovered, lying there. She had only toddled into the farm lane, wandering after a cat, and I can see the delivery truck driver sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, and I remember how he sobbed that he had never seen her. But I still see her, and I cannot forget. Her body, fragile and small, crushed by a truck's load in our farmyard, blood soaking into the thirsty, track-beaten earth. That's the moment the cosmos shifted, shattering any cupping of hands. I can still hear my mother's witnessing-scream, see my father's eyes shot white through.

My parents don't press charges and they are farmers and they keep trying to breathe, keep the body moving to keep the soul from atrophying. Mama cries when she strings out the

laundry. She holds my youngest baby sister, a mere three weeks old, to the breast, and I can't imagine how a woman only weeks fragile from the birth of her fourth child witnesses the blood-on-gravel death of her third child and she leaks milk for the babe and she leaks grief for the buried daughter. Dad tells us a thousand times the story after dinner, how her eyes were water-clear and without shores, how she held his neck when she hugged him and held on for dear life. We accept the day of her death as an accident. But an act allowed by God?

For years, my sister flashes through my nights, her body crumpled on gravel. Sometimes in dreams, I cradle her in the quilt Mama made for her, pale green with the hand-embroidered Humpty Dumpty and Little Bo Peep, and she's safely cocooned. I await her unfurling and the rebirth. Instead the earth opens wide and swallows her up.

At the grave's precipice, our feet scuff dirt, and chunks of the firmament fall away. A clod of dirt hits the casket, shatters. Shatters over my little sister with the white-blond hair, the little sister who teased me and laughed; and the way she'd throw her head back and laugh, her milk-white cheeks dimpled right through with happiness, and I'd scoop close all her belly-giggling life. They lay her gravestone flat into the earth, a black granite slab engraved with no dates, only the five letters of her name. Aimee. It means "loved one." How she was. We had loved her. And with the laying of her gravestone, the closing up of her deathbed, so closed our lives.

Closed to any notion of grace.



Really, when you bury a child—or when you just simply get up every day and live life raw—you murmur the question

soundlessly. No one hears. *Can there be a good God?* A God who graces with good gifts when a crib lies empty through long nights, and bugs burrow through coffins? Where is God, *really?* How can He be good when babies die, and marriages implode, and dreams blow away, dust in the wind? Where is grace bestowed when cancer gnaws and loneliness aches and nameless places in us soundlessly die, break off without reason, erode away. Where hides this joy of the Lord, this God who fills the earth with good things, and how do I fully live when life is full of hurt? How do I wake up to joy and grace and beauty and all that is the fullest life when I must stay numb to losses and crushed dreams and all that empties me out?

My family—my dad, my mama, my brother and youngest sister—for years, we all silently ask these questions. For years, we come up empty. And over the years, we fill again—with estrangement. We live with our hands clenched tight. What God once gave us on a day in November slashed deep. Who risks again?

Years later, I sit at one end of our brown plaid couch, my dad stretched out along its length. Worn from a day driving tractor, the sun beating and the wind blowing, he asks me to stroke his hair. I stroke from that cowlick of his and back, his hair ringed from the line of his cap. He closes his eyes. I ask questions that I never would if looking into them.

“Did you ever used to go to church? Like a long time ago, Dad?” Two neighboring families take turns picking me up, a Bible in hand and a dress ironed straight, for church services on Sunday mornings. Dad works.

“Yeah, as a kid I went. Your grandmother had us go every Sunday, after milking was done. That was important to her.”

I keep my eyes on his dark strands of hair running through my fingers. I knead out tangles.

“But it’s not important to you now?” The words barely whispered, hang.

He pushes up his plaid sleeves, shifts his head, his eyes still closed. “Oh ...”

I wait, hands combing, waiting for him to find the words for those feelings that don’t fit neatly into the stiff ties, the starched collars, of sentences.

“No, I guess not anymore. When Aimee died, I was done with all of that.”

Scenes blast. I close my eyes; reel.

“And, if there really is anybody up there, they sure were asleep at the wheel that day.”

I don’t say anything. The lump in my throat burns, this ember. I just stroke his hair. I try to sooth his pain. He finds more feelings. He stuffs them into words.

“Why let a beautiful little girl die such a senseless, needless death? And she didn’t just die. She was *killed*.”

That word twists his face. I want to hold him till it doesn’t hurt, make it all go away. His eyes remain closed, but he’s shaking his head now, remembering all there was to say no to that hideous November day that branded our lives.

Dad says nothing more. That shake of the head says it all, expresses our closed hands, our bruised, shaking fists. No. No benevolent Being, no grace, no meaning to it all. My dad, a good farmer who loved his daughter the way only eyes can rightly express, he rarely said all that; only sometimes, when he’d close his eyes and ask me to stroke away the day between the fingers. But these aren’t things you need to say anyways. Like all beliefs, you simply live them.

We did.

No, God.

No God.

Is this the toxic air of the world, this atmosphere we inhale, burning into our lungs, this *No, God? No, God, we won't take what You give. No, God, Your plans are a gutted, bleeding mess and I didn't sign up for this and You really thought I'd go for this? No, God, this is ugly and this is a mess and can't You get anything right and just haul all this pain out of here and I'll take it from here, thanks. And God? Thanks for nothing.* Isn't this the human inheritance, the legacy of the Garden?

I wake and put the feet to the plank floors, and I believe the Serpent's hissing lie, the repeating refrain of his campaign through the ages: God isn't good. It's the cornerstone of his movement. That God withholds good from His children, that God does not genuinely, fully, love us.

Doubting God's goodness, distrusting His intent, discontented with what He's given, we desire ... *I have desired ... more.* The fullest life.

I look across farm fields. The rest of the garden simply isn't enough. It will never be enough. God said humanity was not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And I moan that God has ripped away what I wanted. No, what I *needed*. Though I can hardly whisper it, I live as though He stole what I consider rightly mine: happiest children, marriage of unending bliss, long, content, death-defying days. I look in the mirror, and if I'm fearlessly blunt—what I have, who I am, where I am, how I am, what I've got—this simply isn't enough. That forked tongue darts and daily I live the doubt, look at my reflection, and ask: Does God really love me? If He truly, deeply loves me, why does He withhold that which

I believe will fully nourish me? Why do I live in this sense of rejection, of less than, of pain? Does He not want me to be *happy*?



From all of our beginnings, we keep reliving the Garden story.

Satan, he wanted more. More power, more glory. Ultimately, in his essence, Satan is an ingrate. And he sinks his venom into the heart of Eden. Satan's sin becomes the first sin of all humanity: *the sin of ingratitude*. Adam and Eve are, simply, painfully, ungrateful for what God gave.

Isn't that the catalyst of all my sins?

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other.

Standing before that tree, laden with fruit withheld, we listen to Evil's murmur, "In the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened . . ." (Genesis 3:5 NASB). But in the beginning, our eyes were already open. Our sight was perfect. Our vision let us see a world spilling with goodness. Our eyes fell on nothing but the glory of God. We saw God as He truly is: good. But we were lured by the deception that there was more to a full life, there was more to see. And, true, there was more to see: the ugliness we hadn't beheld, the sinfulness we hadn't witnessed, the loss we hadn't known.

We eat. And, in an instant, we are blind. No longer do we see God as one we can trust. No longer do we perceive Him as wholly good. No longer do we observe all of the remaining paradise.

We eat. And, in an instant, we see. Everywhere we look,



we see a world of lack, a universe of loss, a cosmos of scarcity and injustice.

We are hungry. We eat. We are filled . . . and emptied.

And still, we look at the fruit and see only the material means to fill our emptiness. We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: *as the means to communion with God.*

We look and swell with the ache of a broken, battered planet, what we ascribe as the negligent work of an indifferent Creator (if we even think there is one). Do we ever think of this busted-up place as the result of us ingrates, unsatisfied, we who punctured it all with a bite? The fruit's poison has infected the whole of humanity. *Me.* I say no to what He's given. I thirst for some roborant, some elixir, to relieve the anguish of what I've believed: God isn't good. God doesn't love me.

If I'm ruthlessly honest, I may have said yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the no. I have. Infected by that Eden mouthful, the retina of my soul develops macular holes of blackness. From my own beginning, my sister's death tears a hole in the canvas of the world.

Losses do that. One life-loss can infect the whole of a life. Like a rash that wears through our days, our sight becomes peppered with black voids. Now everywhere we look, we only see all that isn't: holes, lack, deficiency.

In our plain country church on the edge of that hayfield enclosed by an old cedar split-rail fence, once a week on Sunday, my soul's macular holes spontaneously heal. In that church with the wooden cross nailed to the wall facing the country road, there God seems obvious. Close. Bibles lie open. The sanctuary fills with the worship of wives with babies in arms, farmers done with chores early, their hair slicked down.

The Communion table spread with the emblems, that singular cup and loaf, that table that restores relationship. I remember. Here I remember Love and the Cross and a Body, and I am grafted in and held and made whole. All's upright. There, alongside Claude Martin and Ann Van den Boogaard and John Weiler and Marion Schefter and genteel Mrs. Leary, even the likes of me can see.

But the rest of the week, the days I live in the glaring harshness of an abrasive world? Complete loss of central vision. Everywhere, a world pocked with scarcity.

I hunger for filling in a world that is starved.

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since He bent low and breathed His life into the dust of our lungs, since He kissed us into being, has never been to slyly orchestrate our ruin. And yet, I have found it: He does have surprising, secret purposes. I open a Bible, and His plans, startling, lie there barefaced. It's hard to believe it, when I read it, and I have to come back to it many times, feel long across those words, make sure they are real. His love letter forever silences any doubts: "His secret purpose framed from the very beginning [is] to bring us to our full glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7 NEB). He means to rename us—to return us to our true names, our truest selves. He means to heal our soul holes. From the very beginning, that Eden beginning, that has always been and always is, to this day, His secret purpose—our return to *our full glory*. *Appalling*—that He would! Us, unworthy. And yet since we took a bite out of the fruit and tore into our own souls, that drain hole where joy seeps away, God's had this wild secretive plan. *He means to fill us with glory again*. With glory and grace.

*Grace*, it means "favor," from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes

a free readiness. A free and ready favor. That's grace. It is one thing to choose to take the grace offered at the cross. But to choose to live as one *filling* with His grace? Choosing to *fill* with *all* that He freely gives and fully live—with glory and grace and God?

I know it but I don't want to: it is a choice. Living with losses, I may choose to still say yes. Choose to say yes to what He freely gives. Could I *live* that—the choice to open the hands to freely receive whatever God gives? If I don't, I am still making a choice.

The choice not to.

The day I met my brother-in-law at the back door, looking for his brother, looking like his brother, is the day I see it clear as a full moon rising bright over January snow, that choice, saying yes or no to God's graces, is the linchpin of it all, of everything.

My brother-in-law, he's just marking time, since Farmer Husband's made a quick run to the hardware store. He's talking about soil temperature and weather forecasts. I lean up against the door frame. The dog lies down at my feet.

John shrugs his shoulders, looks out across our wheat field. "Farmers, we think we control so much, do so much right to make a crop. And when you are farming," he turns back toward me, "you are faced with it every day. You control so little. Really. It's God who decides it all. Not us." He slips his big Dutch hands into frayed pockets, smiles easily. "It's all good."

I nod, almost say something about him just leaving that new water tank in the back shed for now instead of waiting any longer for Farmer Husband to show up. But I catch his eyes and I know I have to ask. Tentatively, eyes fixed on his, I venture back into that place I rarely go.

“How do you know that, John? Deep down, how do you *know* that it really is all good? That *God* is good? That you can say yes—to whatever He gives?” I know the story of the man I am asking, and he knows mine. His eyes linger. I know he’s remembering the story too.

New Year’s Day. He asks us to come. Only if we want. I don’t want to think why, but we know. “Already?” I search my husband’s face. “Today?” He takes my hand and doesn’t let go. Not when we slide into the truck, not when we drive the back roads, not when we climb the empty stairwell to the hospital room lit only by a dim lamp. John meets us at the door. He nods. His eyes smile brave. The singular tear that slips down his cheek carves something out of me.

“Tiff just noticed Dietrich had started breathing a bit heavier this afternoon. And yeah, when we brought him in, they said his lung had collapsed. It will just be a matter of hours. Like it was at the end for Austin.” His firstborn, Austin, had died of the same genetic disease only eighteen months prior. He was about to bury his second son in less than two years.

I can’t look into that sadness wearing a smile anymore. I look at the floor, polished tiles blurring, running. It had only been a year and six months before that. The peonies had been in full bloom when we had stood in a country cemetery watching a cloud of balloons float up and into clear blue over pastures. All the bobbing, buoyant hopes for Austin—floating away. Austin had hardly been four months old. I had been there on that muggy June afternoon. I had stood by the fan humming in their farm kitchen. The fan stirred a happy-face balloon over Austin’s placid body. I remember the blue of his eyes, mirrors of heaven. He never moved. His eyes moved me. I had caressed

my nephew's bare little tummy. His chest had heaved for the air. And heaved less . . . and less.

How do you keep breathing when the lungs under your fingers are slowly atrophying?

I had stumbled out their back steps, laid down on the grass. I had cried at the sky. It was our wedding anniversary. I always remember the date, his eyes.

And now, New Year's Day, again with John, Tiffany, but now with their second-born son, Dietrich. He's only five months old. He was born to hope and prayers—and the exact same terminal diagnosis as his brother, Austin.

John hands me a Kleenex, and I try to wipe away all this gut-wrenching pain. He tries too, with words soft and steady, "We're just blessed. Up until today Dietrich's had no pain. We have good memories of a happy Christmas. That's more than we had with Austin." All the tiles on the floor run fluid. My chest hurts. "Tiffany's got lots and lots of pictures. And we had five months with him."

I shouldn't, but I do. I look up. Into all his hardy tamed grief. I feel wild. His eyes shimmer tears, this dazed bewilderment, and his stoic smile cuts me right through. I see his chin quiver. In that moment I forget the rules of this Dutch family of reserved emotion. I grab him by the shoulders and I look straight into those eyes, brimming. And in this scratchy half whisper, these ragged words choke—*wail*. "If it were up to me . . ." and then the words pound, desperate and hard, "*I'd write this story differently.*"

I regret the words as soon as they leave me. They seem so un-Christian, so unaccepting—so *No, God!* I wish I could take them back, comb out their tangled madness, dress them in their calm Sunday best. But there they are, released and naked,

raw and real, stripped of any theological cliché, my exposed, serrated howl to the throne room.

“You know . . .” John’s voice breaks into my memory and his gaze lingers, then turns again toward the waving wheat field. “Well, even with our boys . . . I don’t know why that all happened.” He shrugs again. “But do I have to? . . . Who knows? I don’t mention it often, but sometimes I think of that story in the Old Testament. Can’t remember what book, but you know—when God gave King Hezekiah fifteen more years of life? Because he prayed for it? But if Hezekiah had died when God first intended, Manasseh would never have been born. And what does the Bible say about Manasseh? Something to the effect that Manasseh had led the Israelites to do even more evil than all the heathen nations around Israel. Think of all the evil that would have been avoided if Hezekiah had died earlier, before Manasseh was born. I am not saying anything, either way, about anything.”

He’s watching that sea of green rolling in winds. Then it comes slow, in a low, quiet voice that I have to strain to hear.

“Just that maybe . . . maybe you don’t want to change the story, because you don’t know what a different ending holds.”

The words I choked out that dying, ending day, echo. Pierce. There’s a reason I am not writing the story and God is. He knows how it all works out, where it all leads, what it all means.

*I don’t.*

His eyes return, knowing the past I’ve lived, a bit of my nightmares. “Maybe . . . I guess . . . it’s accepting there are things we simply don’t understand. But He does.”

And I see. At least a bit more. When we find ourselves groping along, famished for more, we can choose. When we

are despairing, we can choose to live as Israelites gathering manna. For forty long years, God's people daily eat manna—a substance whose name literally means “What is it?” Hungry, they choose to gather up that which is baffling. They fill on that which has no meaning. More than 14,600 days they take their daily nourishment from that which they don't comprehend. They find soul-filling in the inexplicable.

They eat the mystery.

*They eat the mystery.*

And the mystery, that which made no sense, is “like wafers of honey” on the lips.

A pickup drives into the lane. I watch from the window, two brothers meeting, talking, then hand gestures mirroring each other. I think of buried babies and broken, weeping fathers over graves, and a world pocked with pain, and all the mysteries I have refused, *refused*, to let nourish me. If it were my daughter, my son? Would I really choose the manna? I only tremble, wonder. With memories of gravestones, of combing fingers through tangled hair, I wonder too . . . if the rent in the canvas of our life backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own emptiness, might actually become places to see.

To see through to God.

That that which tears open our souls, those holes that splatter our sight, may actually become the thin, open places to see through the mess of this place to the heart-aching beauty beyond. To Him. To the God whom we endlessly crave.

Maybe so.

But how? How do we choose to allow the holes to become seeing-through-to-God places? To more-God places?

How do I give up resentment for gratitude, gnawing anger for spilling joy? Self-focus for God-communion.

To fully live—to live full of grace and joy and all that is  
beauty eternal. It is possible, wildly.

I now see and testify.

So this story—my story.

A dare to an emptier, fuller life.



## CHAPTER 2

# *a word to live ... and die by*

Eucharist [thanksgiving] is the state of the perfect man.

Eucharist is the life of paradise. Eucharist is the  
only full and real response of man to God's creation,  
redemption, and gift of heaven.

*Alexander Schmemmann*

I slam upright, jolt the bed hard, hands gripping the cotton  
sheets wild.

There's a halo of light by the door. I breathe, heave breathe.  
There are stars.

I can hear the clock in the kitchen, the one over the dining  
room table, making time, one loud, sure tick at a time.

My chest pounds the hooves of a thousand stallions running  
on and away, and the universe outside the window holds—the  
one stuck through with the stars—and I breathe. I breathe.

It was all dream, a mirage of the moon.

I feel my hand across the threads of sheets and there is a bed  
sure under the body and there are morning stars all in place  
out the window and his bare shoulders rise and fall beside me

in the heavy slumber and the relief courses through my veins, veins draining away the fear blue. It was all a dream.

I fall back to the pillow, lie on relief. I don't close my eyes. I stare out the window and I wonder that there is real breath in these real lungs and that is the real red Antares, Scorpion's beating heart, hanging below that waning crescent moon and I am here to see it. And they were just four nightmares in one night, a silver thread unraveling through black. And for me, she who says she never has dreams.

I lie there and untangle the memory of scenes, the string all twisted, one long strand of nightmares plagiarizing life, the fibers of the neocortex working through my life, all the life most important. I revisit dream scenes and I think about this. The all most important.

It has seemed real, the dream. It was a faceless doctor—just a voice—and it was a pallid room of walls and no windows and it was just the uttering of one word and I can feel it again, how the veins constrict.

That haunting “C” word, the one with gluttonous belly and serrated teeth and the voracious appetite to divide and dominate. *Cancer*.

It's a slam to the gut. I green. And he blandly says the cancer's been invisibly consuming bits and pieces of me while I've birthed the six babies, mopped their muddy prints off the floors, kissed the lips of their father at the door. He says there's nothing to be done. All's been devoured. Just wrap up the last of my living.

Already? No more? The heart hammers and the blood surges, scream of electric blue.

Gasping, grasping, I had tried to struggle free, to emerge up into life. Into the four scone-colored walls, the dim light at

the door, the pure white matelassé bedspread pulled up over the vows. How I wanted to surface and breathe and keep this skin on and *live*. But night's noose had tightened, and I'd been strangled back into this dream script of telling the news of my impending demise to husband, father, brother. In terrifying nightmare fashion, they all shrug their shoulders, walk away blithe. *I want to live. Fully live*. What is the message of dreams? I remember it, four times escaping up into consciousness only for the rope burn back into the choked out good-byes and last anguished touches.

I lie there long staring at ceiling, listening to the beat of my untamed heart.

This ...

But this ... this waking to the crack of a nightmare, this violet shock through the veins, even this might be better than the way I usually wake. Since ... I want to say since after the six babies, or at least since the third—the first girl and the one with the dimples—when motherhood began to sag me ... but really, no, it began years earlier. Since the girl with thick glasses in Mr. Colquhoun's English class read books to escape thoughts of her mama sitting up in a psychiatric hospital aching for the baby that bled through the blankets. Yes, it really has been all those years since then.

For years of mornings, I have woken wanting to die. Life itself twists into nightmare. For years, I have pulled the covers up over my head, dreading to begin another day I'd be bound to just wreck. Years, I lie listening to the taunt of names ringing off my interior walls, ones from the past that never drifted far and away: Loser. Mess. Failure. They are signs nailed overhead, nailed through me, naming me. The stars are blinking out.

Funny, this. Yesterday morning, the morning before, all

these mornings, I wake to the discontent of life in my skin. I wake to self-hatred. To the wrestle to get it all done, the relentless anxiety that I am failing. Always, the failing. I yell at children, fester with bitterness, forget doctor appointments, lose library books, live selfishly, skip prayer, complain, go to bed too late, neglect cleaning the toilets. I live tired. Afraid. Anxious. Weary. Years, I feel it in the veins, the pulsing of ruptured hopes. Would I ever be enough, find enough, do enough? But this morning, I wake wildly wanting to live. Physically feeling it in the veins trembling, the hard pant of the lungs, the seeing it in the steady stars, how much I *really* want to *really* live. How I don't want to die. Is that the message of nightmares and dreams? To live either *fully* alive ... or in empty nothingness?

It's the in between that drives us mad.

It's the life in between, the days of walking lifeless, the years calloused and simply going through the hollow motions, the self-protecting by self-distracting, the body never waking, that's lost all capacity to fully feel—this is the life in between that makes us the wild walking dead.

The sun climbs the horizon. I throw back the covers, take another breath, and begin. I *get* to. I *get* to live. A lone morning dove woos from high in the spruce tree. In the kitchen, I stand over the heat of the stove, slowly stirring the wooden spoon through the bubbling-up oatmeal, but my eyes are on the window, on the field. Freshly fallen snow coruscates in the sun, countless stars across fields, trees in the woods falling soundlessly, their blue shadows stretching. Down by the lane, where the gravel curves to the road, where that bulk of a yellow lab has been digging hard, steam rises slow off the earth's black loam.

Life has mirages of its own.

The nightmare creeps up the nape of the neck, clamps me in a chokehold of reality.

The end *will* come.

Doctor's warning or not, the end will come, and this life of the bare toes across grass, the sky raining spring down on eyelashes, the skin spread close under sheets, blink of the fireflies on dusky June nights—all this will all end.

I turn off the stove.

I toss in a load of laundry, pull a recipe book out of the cupboard to plan the day's menu, wipe off the counters. I try to breathe and press on. But I'm rattled, upended, undone. I can't quite shake the reality of the dream. The nightmare of my life.

Which road through this brief land? What is all most important? How to live the fullest life here that delivers into the full life ever after?

A child tromps in, boots still on, with a chestful of mail. Between the flyers of a grand opening for a new flooring store in town and a sale on tires lies a letter from my recently widowed father-in-law. On a hot night one July in the dark of room 117, God had used cancer to usher my mother-in-law, his bride of half a century, into the throne room and glory ever after. We had sung that night, "What a day that will be when my Jesus I shall see." I had laid the cold cloth on the sweat beads stringing along her brow. I tear open his envelope, slide out the DaySpring card, read his slow Dutch scrawl. But it's the last words of his card that grab me:

"Thinking on the beginning of this year, who does He call to come Home? Is it me, Lord? May I be ready. Or us. Whoever."

Emotion wells, spills. How this letter, these words, and

now, after last night's dream wrestle? After my years of mornings?

Whoever. Ready for the end of here.

Whoever. Ready for the first meeting of Him there.

Whoever. *Soon*.

Will I have lived fully—or just empty?

How does one live ready, and always? Yes, ultimately, only Jesus. Yes, this premature dying to self, birthing into the cross-life, the grace cocoon before emerging into the life unending. Without this Jesus, no, no one can be ready.

But, someone, please give me—who is born again but still so much in need of being born anew—give me the details of *how* to live in the waiting cocoon before the forever begins?

In my reality-dream (dream-reality?), I gasp for more time, frantic for more time. But I have to wonder: more time for more what? The answer to that determines the road these so-short days take.

Hard questions drive me hard to distraction. I check e-mail. More words sent this way, this time from a mother. Her seventeen-year-old has been diagnosed with, yes, specter of that word too real, cancer. I try to breathe. Today, it's hard. What are the messages of God? Her mother types the words across my screen: "Any words?"

I stumble away.

Obviously, I have no words, no answers. I am groping for my own way. Desperately feeling along today for a way to live through this fleeting blink of a life.

How do we live fully so we are fully ready to die?



I stack the linen closets. I think of all the things I might never live to do.

I think of all the things I am going to miss.

My eyes will never know China's jade-green Li River. I'm never going to see those black-haired boys under straw-brimmed hats fish off their bamboo rafts with the ringed cormorants, the mist rising behind over the karst formations, surreal and dark. I am never going to be ascending the Loita Hills of Kenya to witness the dance of gazelles migrating up by the millions from the Serengeti. I am not going to be swimming the sapphire waters of some South Pacific grotto, or sitting up late listening to the wind whisper through the Sequoia woods, or spending my golden years scaling the summit of emerald Machu Picchu.

I run my hand across the thick of the terry towels. I'm a farmer's wife. I'm the homeschooling mother of six children. There are no fancy degrees, titles, diplomas hanging on these finger-smudged walls. Are there places that must be known, accomplishments that must be had, before one is really ready? I know the theological answers, but do my blood and my pulse?

I remember once sitting at the hairdresser's. The woman beside me reads, and I read her title in the reflection of the mirror: *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. Is that it? Are there physical places that simply must be seen before I stop breathing within time, before I inhale eternity?

Why? To say that I've had reason to bow low? To say that I've seen beauty? To say that I've been arrested by wonder?

Isn't it here? Can't I find it *here*?

These very real lungs will breathe in more than 11,000 liters of air today,<sup>1</sup> and tonight over our farm will rise the Great Hexagon of the blazing winter stars—Sirius, Rigel,

ruby Aldebran, Capella, the fiery Gemini twins, and Procyon, and in the center, scarlet Betelgeuse, the red supergiant larger than twice the size of earth's orbit around the sun—and I will embrace the skin of a boy child that my body grew from a seed. The low heavens outside the paned windows fill with more snowflakes than stars, no two-stacked crystals the same; the trees in the wood draw in collective green breath to the still of January hibernation, and God in the world will birth ice from His womb, frost of heaven, bind the chains of the Pleiades, loose the cords of Orion, and number again the strands on my head (Job 38:31; Matthew 10:30).

Isn't it here? The wonder? Why do I spend so much of my living hours struggling to see it? Do we truly stumble so blind that we must be affronted with *blinding* magnificence for our blurry soul-sight to recognize grandeur? The very same surging magnificence that cascades over our every day here. Who has time or eyes to notice?

All my eyes can seem to fixate on are the splatters of disappointment across here and me.

I close the bathroom linen closet. Pick up a brush to swish toilets. I don't need more time to breathe so that I may experience more locales, possess more, accomplish more. Because wonder really could be here—for the seeing eyes.

So—more time for more *what*?

The face of Jesus flashes. Jesus, the God-Man with his own termination date. Jesus, the God-Man who came to save me from prisons of fear and guilt and depression and sadness. With an expiration of less than twelve hours, what does Jesus count as all most important?

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them ...” (Luke 22:19 NIV).



This. I live in this place, make porridge, scrub toilets, do laundry, and for days, weeks, I am brave and I do get out of bed and I think on this. I study this, the full life, the being fully ready for the end. I start to think that maybe there is a way out of nightmares to dreams? Maybe?

I thumb, run my finger across the pages of the heavy and thick books bound. I read it slowly. In the original language, “he gave thanks” reads “*eucharisteo*.”

I underline it on the page. Can it lay a sure foundation under a life? Offer the fullest life?

The root word of *eucharisteo* is *charis*, meaning “grace.” Jesus took the bread and saw it as *grace* and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be *gift* and gave thanks.

But there is more, and I read it. *Eucharisteo*, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, *charis*. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word *chara*, meaning “joy.” *Joy*. Ah . . . yes. I might be needing me some of that. That might be what the quest for more is all about—that which Augustine claimed, “Without exception . . . all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy.”<sup>2</sup>

I breathe deep, like a sojourner finally coming home. That has always been the goal of the fullest life—joy. And my life knew exactly how elusive that slippery three-letter word, *joy*, can be. I think of it then again, that night of nightmares, the flailing, frantic, moon-eyed lunge for more. More *what*? And this was it; I could tell how my whole being responded to that one word. I longed for more life, for more *holy joy*.

That’s what I was struggling out of nightmares to reach, to seize. Joy. But where can I seize this holy grail of joy? I look back down to the page. Was this the clue to the quest of all most important? Deep *chara* joy is found only at the table of the

*euCHARisteo*—the table of thanksgiving. I sit there long ... wondering ... is it that simple?

Is the height of my *chara* joy dependent on the depths of my *eucharisteo* thanks?

*So then as long as thanks is possible ...* I think this through. As long as thanks is possible, then joy is always possible. *Joy is always possible. Whenever*, meaning—now; *wherever*, meaning—here. The holy grail of joy is not in some exotic location or some emotional mountain peak experience. The joy wonder could be here! Here, in the messy, piercing ache of now, joy might be—unbelievably—possible! The only place we need see before we die is this place of seeing God, here and now.

I whisper it out loud, let the tongue feel these sounds, the ear hear their truth.

*Charis*. Grace.

*Eucharisteo*. Thanksgiving.

*Chara*. Joy.

A triplet of stars, a constellation in the black.

A threefold cord that might hold a life? Offer a way up into the fullest life?

Grace, thanksgiving, joy. *Eucharisteo*.

A Greek word ... that might make meaning of everything?



When children sleep under the scraps stitched into quilts and the clock ticks too loudly through the dark hours and the spiral galaxies spin in space, I lie under the afghan by the fire and read the words of an old sermon. It is weeks later now, and the mind stores things, waiting for such a time when God aligns the stars. I read, “The greatest thing is to give thanks for everything. He who has learned this knows what it means

to live. . . . He has penetrated the whole mystery of life: giving thanks for everything.”<sup>3</sup> Breath leaves the lung.

I whisper in the dark: *Eucharisteo!*

It really might be the mystery to the fullest life . . .

I lie on relief. I might have found the holy grail . . . and lost it, moved on. And yet really—hadn’t God set the holy grail in the center of Christianity? *Eucharisteo*, it’s the central symbol of Christianity. Thanksgiving. The table with its emblems is the essence of what it means to live the Christ-life. Sunday after Sunday in our nondenominational Bible church, we’re formally invited to take the bread, the wine. Doesn’t the continual repetition of beginning our week at the table of the Eucharist clearly place the whole of our lives into the context of thanksgiving?

And too . . . it’s the most common of foods, bread. The drink of the vine has been part of our meal taking across centuries and cultures. Jesus didn’t institute the Eucharist around some unusual, rare, once-a-year event, but around this continual act of eating a slice of bread, drinking a cup of fruit from the vine. First Corinthians 11:26 reads, “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup” (NIV)—*whenever*.

Like every day. Whenever we eat.

*Eucharisteo*—whenever: now. Joy—wherever: here.

Doesn’t Christ, at His death meal, set the entirety of our everyday bread and drink lives into the framework of *eucharisteo*? The Big Dipper lurks low outside the window. Yet how does the framework of *eucharisteo* undergird a life? Penetrating the mystery is like discovering galaxies; there is always more.

I stand the next morning on planks of light lying down across the floor, and I bake bread, yeasty dough moist between

my fingers, and that one word works me, again and again—*eucharisteo*. I won't let it go this time. I'll enter into the mystery.

I shape loaves and think how Jesus took the bread and gave thanks ... and then the miracle of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes.

How Jesus took the bread and gave thanks ... and then the miracle of Jesus enduring the cross for the joy set before Him.

How Jesus stood outside Lazarus's tomb, the tears streaming down His face, and He looked up and prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me ..." (John 11:41 NIV). And then the miracle of a dead man rising! Thanksgiving raises the dead! The empty, stiff cadaver surging, the veins full of blood, the alveoli of the lungs filling with oxygen, the coronary arteries full of the whoosh of thrumming life.

How there is thanks ... and then the mind-blowing miracle! I lay loaves into pans and feel years of the angst lying down too.

*Eucharisteo*—thanksgiving—*always precedes the miracle*.

The bread rises.

And I stand in the kitchen stirring a kettle of lunch's lentil soup, the one that calls for the salsa and the carrots and the hungry children, and I read while stirring and I have to sit down to let the words find their places: "The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world."<sup>4</sup> That was the fall! Non-*eucharisteo*, ingratitude, was the fall—humanity's discontent with all that God freely gives. That is what has scraped me raw: ungratefulness. Then to find Eden, the abundance of Paradise, I'd need to forsake my non-*eucharisteo*, my bruised and bloodied ungrateful life, and grab hold to *eucharisteo*, a lifestyle of thanksgiving. Might a life of

*eucharisteo* really work the miracle of the God-communion? I rise from the chair.

That's when I begin to track it whenever I open my Bible, the red pen in hand, hunt down the trail of *eucharisteo* through Scripture. Where it leads barbs, and I am surprised and I reel.

"*On the night when he was betrayed*, the Lord Jesus took some bread and *gave thanks to God for it*. Then he broke it in pieces . . ." (1 Corinthians 11:23–24, emphasis added). Jesus, on the night before the driving hammer and iron piercing through ligament and sinew, receives what God offers as grace (*charis*), the germ of His thanksgiving (*eucharistia*)? Oh. Facing the abandonment of God Himself (does it get any worse than this?), Jesus offers *thanksgiving* for even that which will break Him and crush Him and wound Him and yield a bounty of joy (*chara*). The mystery always contains more mysteries.

Do I really want this way?

I listen to Matthew 11 for a whole week while exercising, panting hard, skin flushed with life, before I snare this truth—and it snares me:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent.

"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day." (Matthew 11:20–21, 23 NIV)

And then what does Jesus directly do, in the face of apparent failure, when no one responded to His teaching and things didn't work out at all? He lives out *eucharisteo*. "At that time, [*precisely at that failing time*] Jesus answered and said, 'I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .'" (Matthew

11:25 KJV). In the midst of what seems a mess, in the tripping up and stumbling down of all hopes, Jesus gives thanks?

What precedes the miracle is thanksgiving, *eucharisteo*, and it is a Greek word with a hard meaning that is harder yet to live. Do I really want to take up this word?

But I wonder it one Sunday as they pass the broken loaf on that plate of silver, from Paula Van de Kemp to Ron Collins to Tammi Lindsay reaching for it over her kids. Maybe I already take up *eucharisteo*'s hard meaning every time I take Communion? In a very tangible, physical act, aren't I enacting my thanksgiving for His pain? In a very real way, in a digestible, consuming-oneness way, I'm celebrating greater gain through great loss. "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16 NIV). The Eucharist invites us to give thanks for dying. To participate in His death with our own daily dying and give thanks for it. Then Mrs. Klumpenhower passes me the silver plate, and I tear off my small chunk of bread, chunk of the dead-and-risen-again wheat. I feel the granules between the fingers. I lay the torn bread on the tongue and I remember and press it to the roof of my mouth and the bread melts and I give thanks for the dying.

I swallow it down.

This constellation in the dark—grace, thanksgiving, joy—it might be like that—reaching for stars. So hard. *So hard.*

Is there some easier way to the fulfilling life?



The day I peel back chapter 17 of Luke's gospel, I think I have my answer.

I sit at the prayer bench before my bedroom window. Outside, our boys roll millions of flakes into a snow fort. I read the passage, one I remember from the musty basement of the Knox Presbyterian Church Sunday school. I think I know this one. Jesus restores ten lepers to wholeness. And only one returns to offer any thanks. I remember the moral too, Mrs. Morrison and her glossy red lipstick: “How often do you remember to say thanks?” Yes, I think I know this one.

I skim.

“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan” (Luke 17:15–16 NIV). Yes, thankfulness, I know. Next verse.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:17–19 NIV)

Wait. I trace back. Hadn’t Jesus already completely healed him? Exactly like the other nine who were cured who hadn’t bothered to return and thank Him. So what does Jesus mean, “Your faith has made you well”? Had I underinterpreted this passage, missed some hidden mystery? I slow down and dig. I read Jesus’ words in Young’s Literal Translation, “And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Having risen, be going on, thy faith has saved thee.’” Saved thee? I dig deeper. It’s *sozo* in the Greek. Many translations render *sozo* as being made “well” or “whole,” but its literal meaning, I read it—“to save.” *Sozo* means salvation. It means true wellness, complete wholeness. To live *sozo* is to live the full life. Jesus came that we might live life to the full; He came to give us *sozo*. And when did the leper receive

*sozo*—the saving to the full, whole life? When he returned and gave thanks. I lay down my pen.

Our very saving is associated with our gratitude.

Mrs. Morrison hadn't mentioned this. But ... of course. If our fall was the non-*eucharisteo*, the ingratitude, then salvation must be intimately related to *eucharisteo*, the giving of thanks.

I look back to the text. That is what it says: "Thy faith has saved thee." And the leper's faith was a faith that said thank you. Is that it? Jesus counts thanksgiving as integral in a faith that saves.

We only enter into the full life if our faith gives thanks.

Because how else do we accept His free gift of salvation if not with thanksgiving? Thanksgiving is the evidence of our acceptance of whatever He gives. Thanksgiving is the manifestation of our *Yes!* to His grace.

Thanksgiving is inherent to a true salvation experience; thanksgiving is necessary to live the well, whole, *fullest* life.

"If the church is in Christ, its initial act is always an act of thanksgiving, of returning the world to God," writes Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann.<sup>5</sup> If I am truly in Christ, mustn't my initial act, too, always be an act of thanksgiving, returning to Jesus with thanks on the lips?

I would read it much later in the pages of the Psalms, at the close of a Communion service as the bread and the wine were returned to the table, the Farmer handing his Bible over to me, his finger holding the verse for me to see because he had just read it there, what I had been saying, living, believing, and the chin would quiver before I'd brim at the way God shows His salvation: "He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God" (Psalm 50:23 NIV).



*Thanksgiving*—giving thanks in everything—prepares the way that God might show us His *fullest* salvation in Christ.

The act of sacrificing thank offerings to God—even for the bread and cup of cost, for cancer and crucifixion—*this* prepares the way for God to show us His *fullest* salvation from bitter, angry, resentful lives and from all sin that estranges us from Him. At the Eucharist, Christ breaks His heart to heal ours—Christ, the complete accomplishment of our salvation. And the miracle of *eucharisteo* never ends: thanksgiving is what precedes the miracle of that salvation being fully worked out in our lives. Thanksgiving—giving thanks in everything—is what prepares the way for salvation’s whole restoration. Our salvation in Christ is real, yet the completeness of that salvation is not fully realized in a life until the life realizes the need to give thanks. In everything?

I would never experience the fullness of my salvation until I expressed the fullness of my thanks every day, and *eucharisteo* is elemental to living the saved life.

Mrs. Morrison hadn’t told me this either.

And sitting there before the window, I’m struck, a comet blazing across the empty dark of my life. All those years thinking I was saved and had said my yes to God, but was really living the no. Was it because I had never fully experienced the whole of my salvation? Had never lived out the fullest expression of my salvation in Christ? Because I wasn’t taking everything in my life and returning to Jesus, falling at His feet and thanking Him. I sit still, blinded. This is why I sat all those years in church but my soul holes had never fully healed.

*Eucharisteo*, the Greek word with the hard meaning and the

harder meaning to live—this is the only way from empty to full.

I watch our boys carve in the wall of their snow fort.

They dig and their cheeks flame with the heat of the work, their hair damp with the effort. I think of the mother of the daughter with cancer, my father-in-law asking if I'm ready to go Home. No. I still have no words. Our tallest son has a shovel and the youngest son, a garden spade, and they dig into their wall. I have just one word. A word to seize and haul up out of a terminal nightmare, a word for fearless dying, for saved, fully healed living, a word that works the miracle that heals the soul and raises the very dead to life.

The packed snow of the fort gives way and there it is. A door in the wall.

*Eucharisteo.*

The way through is hard. But do I really want to be saved?