

# More Than Enough

*Living Abundantly in a Culture of Excess*

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For Rob

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

—Luke 1:52–53

*Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a  
needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*

—Matthew 19:24

*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

—John 10:10

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# CHAPTER 1



## LIVE IT WELL

### *Building Houses and Hanging Hammocks*

A piece of advice: if you are lucky enough to have a friend with a hammock in a tropical part of the world, and said friend invites you to visit her and ponder the great questions of life while swinging in the hammock, you should take her up on it.

My trip to Nicaragua starts the day after Ash Wednesday, just as the season of Lent begins. At church the night before I leave, with our foreheads smeared with ashes, a friend tells me he's always loved Ash Wednesday, but he can't quite articulate why. There's something "darkly beautiful," he says. I agree: to acknowledge the complete inevitability of death is reassuring. We need not try so hard to avoid it.

I'm keenly aware of my own mortality as I say good-bye to my children and leave the country for the first time since

they were born. I won't be gone that long, less than a week, and Nicaragua is an easy flight from Miami, but it feels very far away. I leave midmorning; the kids are at school and Rob's at work, so I write them each notes to leave on their pillows.

I get to the airport early and stop at the bookstore before getting in line for security. I have absolutely no need for another book—I have at least three with me—but last night I told Rob what I planned to bring to read and he said, "Those all sound boring; you should take something fun." He is probably right. There isn't a novel in the collection. I look for a while at the airport bookstore, but I can't find anything that meets my primary criteria; that is, a book that costs less than ten dollars and that I'm sure I will like. I contemplate a magazine, but the easy-to-read stuff will just make me feel bad about the state of my social life/body/hair/house/parenting skills, and the *New Yorker* just offers more of the heady stuff I already have in my carry-on. As it turns out, it doesn't matter; I sleep most of the way to Miami and then to Managua.

My friend Laura Jean and her family—her husband, Tim, and their daughters, Quinn and Maya—have lived in Nicaragua for the past several years. She's a minister, and they've been serving as missionaries with Global Ministries, the joint mission effort of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. They're partnered with a Nicaraguan denomination called La Misión Cristiana. Laura Jean has been teaching theology at the local seminary and started a program for rural church members who want to become pastors but don't have access to education. Tim is a scientist, a physicist. He's also been teaching classes in environmental studies at the university.

Plus—I think this is amazing and I keep making him explain it to me—Tim has spent a whole lot of time working with volunteers from the local church to build biodigesters for churches in rural areas. If you think a biodigester is something out of a science fiction story, you're not far off.

It's a contraption that turns cow manure into methane gas, in a way that cuts down on odor and pollution and makes the gas safe for indoor cooking. In parts of the country that have a lot of cows and not many trees—thanks to decades of deforestation—a biodigester makes fuel from a widely available resource that otherwise would be a disposal problem. It is a lot safer and more energy efficient than a wood-burning stove. (When I tell this story to someone back at home, she misunderstands me and thinks that Tim is helping people cook with cow manure. Like, in the pan with their rice and beans. Um, no.)

Tim and Laura Jean are awesome. I've come to visit not just because they're doing such good work here but also because they're good friends. Laura Jean and I were pregnant together with our firstborns; we happened to live in the same place then, so we compared notes on swollen ankles, went to prenatal yoga together, and took long walks with our newborns in their strollers. Those are the kinds of friendships that stick, even when one of you moves to a place you need a passport to get to.

Laura Jean's hammock is on the front porch of their house, and she's right: it's a good place for pondering life's great questions. It's also a good place to take a nap, or to read a book to one of the girls, or to listen to the neighbors laughing. Quinn and I spend quite a bit of time in the hammock together; she has a notebook and pencil and she's writing a story about the richest family in the world, with fourteen daughters who all live in a palace.

One night, we're invited to dinner at the home of some friends of Laura Jean and Tim's. They are expats as well, having come to Nicaragua to work for a faith-based social service agency a decade ago. Somewhere along the way, they decided to make their lives here; they have two children and a house up in the hills above Managua.

When we arrive, Paul is hanging up socks on an elaborate clothesline suspended from the ceiling of the porch. His wife, Becca, tells us that the water had just been

delivered; their house is built at the end of a long, winding road, and there's no infrastructure here. They have the water carted up by oxen two or three times a week.

Paul and Becca built this house themselves. It's a straw-bale house, which is exactly what it sounds like: the walls are built out of straw bales covered with plaster. The straw bales make for excellent insulation and are more sustainable than other construction materials. (I manage to bite my tongue long enough to avoid making the obvious "three little pigs" joke.) I know people in the States who have built their own houses, and I am always amazed. That one could know enough to actually construct a dwelling place for one's family astounds me. I'm not even any good at building a fort out of couch cushions in the living room.

I'm feeling very much like a tourist as I marvel at all the eccentricities of their house, which is beautiful and well built. It's not big, but it has everything a house needs, and the big porch and hillside give the sense that the home doesn't end at the straw-filled walls. Their doors and windows don't lock, and they hire a neighbor to stay nearby as security all the time. In their upstairs loft bedroom, a door-sized window opens out to a second-story deck that overlooks the cascading hillside below. Conspicuously, there is no railing.

"We had one, but it broke, and we just never replaced it," Becca tells me as I take a step back, away from the edge, my acrophobia kicking me in the stomach. "It's nicer for doing yoga up here, without the railing in the way of the view, and the kids just know to be careful."

I try not to be too obnoxiously interested in every little detail of their lives, but I'm intrigued by this family that looks just like mine but lives so differently. We take a walk to the orchard, and Becca picks a fruit I've never heard of. Back at the house, she squeezes it into a pitcher with water and a little sugar. We drink it at room temperature, but it's still a relief from the afternoon heat.

The girls are excited about the prospect of a dip in the hot tub after dinner. When Laura Jean mentioned the hot tub before we arrived, I had a moment of self-righteous gloating. *They have a hot tub? How sustainable can that be?* I thought, imagining the electricity needed to heat the huge tarp-covered tubs in suburban American backyards. It turns out, however, that this hot tub is a six-foot half circle of cement, the size of a large bathtub, built by Paul when he was building the walls of the house. It's heated by a fire he stokes every once in a while as we are chatting on the patio. It may be a luxury, this handmade hot tub, but it is no energy-guzzling plastic monstrosity.

During dinner, we get to talking about children. Watching the girls makes me miss my own kids, and I wonder what they are doing at home right now. Paul and Becca moved to this house shortly before their older daughter was born, so it is the only home their girls have ever known. They are Nicaraguans. Talk turns to the details of child rearing, and some things don't vary by culture: Maya isn't quite ready to be potty trained, but Laura Jean is thinking about it. Becca tells us that the nice thing about this house is the cement floors; it makes for easy cleanup when one of her girls doesn't make it to the bathroom in time.

I mention that we tried potty training with Jonathan a while back, but he wasn't really into it, so we'll try again in few months. I tell them that I've been waiting to replace our living room rug; it's been peed on so many times that it really just needs to be burned. I say this as a way to connect to the conversation—*Yes! Potty training is messy! The floor is a disaster!*—but as soon as it's out of my mouth, I realize how American this makes me sound: even our home furnishings are disposable. I'm visiting a family who recycles their washing-machine water, and I'm talking nonchalantly about throwing away my rug.

They aren't showing off, and they aren't judging me; this is just the way they live their lives. This is the sort of intentional living I long for, I realize with a confused mix

of jealousy and relief, but in my mind my life doesn't look at all like this. I don't want to live in the hills of Managua; I don't want my water to have to be brought up the hill by oxen; I don't have the know-how or the desire to build my own house, no matter how sustainable it might be. This is a good and faithful life, I'm sure; it's just not mine.

My life, at least for these years, is in North Carolina, in a house in a leafy neighborhood, on a street that's a little bit too busy for Jonathan to play freely in the front yard. It's an old house and not particularly energy efficient, though we did install better windows, and we try not to overdo it with the heat or air-conditioning. There are things we could and should do better in the choices we make and the impact we have on our poor, neglected earth.

But the reality is that, for better or worse, my life is here in the United States. Becca and Paul have built their lives in Nicaragua, and Tim and Laura Jean have made their home there for a season. To be able to visit them there is a gift, but that's not my life.

The words of Jeremiah 29 keep coming to mind. The prophet is writing to the exiled Israelites who find themselves in Babylon, and they are coming to realize that they're not going to get home to Jerusalem any time soon.

Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

— Jer. 29:5–7 CEB

“Build houses and settle down,” says the Lord, through the voice of the prophet. Grow gardens and have families. This is where your life is now.

It's not exactly the same, I realize. I'm hardly in exile here, in my comfortable house, in a town of my own choosing. But it's where my life is now.

Maybe that's what I've been wrestling with: figuring out where God is calling me to live my life and then figuring out how to live it well. To live in a way that honors my gratitude for the life I have. To celebrate the diversity of life on this globe. To do good where I am, to "promote the welfare of the city" where I've made my life. To pay attention to the choices I make and the impact I have on the earth and the people around me. To delight in the goodness and sweetness of this life.

The way that I do that will be different from the way you do it, which will be different from Becca and Paul, and Laura Jean and Tim. There are lots of ways: Some folks have decided to give away everything they have and live in intentional poverty so that they can better stand in solidarity with the poor. Some are philanthropists who manage their wealth in such a way that they can support important work in their community. Some are imagining new family structures and creating communal living arrangements in which they share what they have.

There are a lot of faithful ways to live this life, to live responsibly and gratefully with the abundance of gifts we've been given. But there are also some not-so-faithful ways to live. There are, even, some sinful ways to live. To live without gratitude. To live selfishly. To live as if we are entitled to what we have or as if we've earned it all ourselves. To live without any sort of regard for the people with whom we share this earth.

I don't want to live like that. I want to live the most faithful, most grace-filled, most life-giving life I can.

On my first full day in Nicaragua, we stop at a market, and I buy small souvenirs for the kids. I don't usually do that when I travel—they have no need for more stuff—but an out-of-the-country trip feels like it calls for different rules. I get a small ball for Jonathan and maracas for

Harper. I also, with an impulsiveness I don't usually have, buy a hammock. It's red and white, the loose rope kind with two big rings but no bar at each end, so it'll fit into my suitcase going home. We have two trees in our backyard that I've always thought would be the perfect distance apart for a hammock.

When I get home, we rig it up with clips and ropes, and as the winter finally wanes, it hangs as a reminder of the hot Managua breeze. Life moves on, much as before, but every once in a while, I glance out the back window while I'm washing the dishes and the hammock catches my eye. I think of Paul and Becca's hand-built straw-bale house, and our beloved, drafty home. I think of the water that comes straight from the faucet in my kitchen sink, and the water they so carefully ration. I think of all the ways we make the best lives we can, right where we are. Spring finds us in the backyard more and more, and I often catch Harper out there with a book, one leg hanging out of the hammock to keep it swinging.