



# exhale

LOSE WHO YOU'RE NOT  
LOVE WHO YOU ARE  
LIVE YOUR ONE LIFE WELL

AMY CARROLL &  
CHERI GREGORY

FOREWORD BY KATHI LIPP



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*To Mom and Dad,*  
the first and most treasured  
seed senders in my life  
-Amy

*To Daddy,*  
I'm so glad you picked me  
to be your daughter.  
-Cheri

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# Foreword

When was the moment?

The moment the world told you that you were not enough.

Or in my case, just way too much.

For me, it was in fourth grade, my first day at a new school. I was so grateful that my new teacher had assigned a “friend,” Valerie, to show me how to maneuver all things elementary school. She sat next to me during class and told me which books to pull out, pointed out the pencil sharpener, and most importantly, showed me where the girls’ bathroom was.

Then it was time for lunch. I grabbed my *Laverne & Shirley* lunch box and headed for the picnic tables. Valerie stopped me cold and said, “I don’t think I have to have lunch with you. I think I get to have a break,” and walked on to be with her real friends.

Not the friend that was assigned to her.

I sat alone that day on the hard wooden bench and vowed to do everything I could to not be the person everyone needed a break from.

And at times, it has worked. I’ve kept who I am hidden so that I don’t put my needs on others. I’ve worked hard to make sure the world doesn’t see the person I am trying so hard to keep pushed down. But let me tell you, that is an exhausting way to live.

So, my friend, when was the moment? The moment you found out you were too . . . (fill in the blank).

Because let's be clear—the world doesn't have the time or energy to figure you out. So it squeezes and compacts you until your only concern is that everyone around you is comfortable. You make yourself small so that everyone else is not inconvenienced, bothered, or put out by the too-muchness of you.

But why did we ever start to believe the lie that being who God designed us to be is something to be contained for the convenience of others?

And that is why this book, *Exhale*, is what I needed, when I needed it.

You see, Cheri and Amy are two of the bravest people I know. As far as memory serves, they have never jumped out of an airplane or sung a solo in public (two things I find to be equally terrifying). But they have done the hard soul work that comes with being who God has designed them to be.

A lot of authors talk about being fearless and brave. There are a lot of books with the not-so-subtle theme of “Just trust God and pull yourself up by your bootstraps, baby!” But this book you hold in your hand? This comes from the hard-won knowledge that a life lived with a focus of making others comfortable is a life of *less than*. And that's how Cheri and Amy lived most of their lives.

But . . . God . . .

Amy and Cheri invited God into the process of making each of them brand-new—and God continues the work in each of their lives. In miraculous, spectacular, only-God-could ways.

As you read this book, know one thing: You are not reading the work of a cheerleader standing on the sidelines. Amy and Cheri are on the field with you. Calling plays and taking hits. They are still in the game. They are the kind of authors—and people—I want to learn from.

And you, the reader? Thank you for doing the hard soul work of becoming who God created you to be.

I need you. The world needs you. Yes—even in all your you-ness.

You are exactly what this world needs.

Kathi Lipp, bestselling author, *The Husband Project*  
and *Clutter Free*



# Introduction

It's 2:37 a.m., and she's wide awake.

Again.

Her busy brain is rehearsing everything she didn't get done today. All the things she's got to do tomorrow (which, she realizes with a new jolt of anxiety, is now technically *today*).

- *Rejoin that class at the gym. Swimsuit season is almost here . . . sigh.*
- *Be sure to swing by the dry cleaner's on the way home.*
- *Call the pharmacy first to make sure the prescription is really ready. (Can't afford a twenty-minute wait due to someone else's mistake today, of all days.)*
- *And for heaven's sake, whittle down the inbox and return Sharon's text!*

She tries to take slower, deeper breaths.

*I've got to go back to sleep, or I'll be a zombie in the morning.*

The mounting pressure in her chest squeezes a familiar question from her heart—a question she dodges during daylight hours. But every night, it tracks her down:

*What's wrong with me?*

“Just be yourself!” the adults in her life told her when she was little, as if being yourself was the easiest, most obvious thing in the world.

But she quickly figured out (a) it wasn’t easy, and (b) they didn’t really mean it. What they *really* meant was, “Be who we want you to be.” So, at an early age, her motto became “Be all things to all people.”

And did she ever get good at it.

It won her pats on the back, accolades galore, and a few plaques on the wall to boot.

Acquaintances consider her responsible, godly, efficient. Those who love her laud her as loving, cheerful, and productive—a real get-’er-done kinda girl! But behind her back they sometimes whisper, “Prickly, bossy, wound too tight, rigid.”

Ask her about her relationship with God, and she’ll tell you that she treasures it. But secretly, she struggles. She longs to do a better job of having consistent quiet time.

Watch her for a week, and you’ll notice that she’s fervent when she does spend time with God. She’s sincere and really does want to experience more of God’s presence and power in her day-to-day life.

She knows God offers freedom and joy. She believes God has given everyone gifts and a calling. She trusts that God is big enough to create change. But all these blessings seem to show up in other people’s lives, not hers.

Instead of relishing an abundant life, she’s drowning in an endless sea of meaningless “have-tos.”

She does so much for so many, longing to be one of those legendary world changers, but she sees so little evidence that she’s making any difference.

She feels anxious, overwhelmed, and (if she’s honest) resentful toward everyone within a five-mile radius.

It’s 3:03 a.m. now, and her mind still won’t shut down. Like chocolates in the *I Love Lucy* scene with Lucy and Ethel in the candy factory,<sup>1</sup> the to-dos and anxieties never stop. They just keep coming faster.

1. If you don’t recognize the reference, you’re in for a laugh: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnbNcQlzV-4>.

And, as always, the inescapable question:

*What's wrong with me?*



If she sounds a lot like you, welcome to the club.

Who is she? She is me. She is you. She is a sisterhood who posts on social media in the wee hours, holding her breath to see if anyone else feels the same way.

You're not alone at 2:37 a.m. . . . or 3:03 a.m. . . . not by a long shot.

We've been there. (Maybe we should just give in and all do a group FaceTime next time?)

We know what it's like to feel so exhausted that the idea of adding one more thing to your to-do list will make your head pop off.

To feel responsible for All The Things, All The Time.

To cheerfully encourage others to "Choose joy!" while blinking back our own tears.

To believe that *generous* means "boundary-free."

To fear that it's selfish, even prideful, to learn about our gifts and strengths (let alone talk about them!).

We've been there. To be honest, sometimes we slip back for a visit. But we don't live there anymore.

You don't have to live there anymore, either. We're friends who have moved forward together and occasionally given each other a big ol' shove. Even though we may not have met you yet, we know this much about you, because it's been true about us:

*Something's got to change.*

You are created for less. Less worry, less over-attempting, less problem-preventing, less second-guessing.

You are created for more. More joy, more pure happiness, more fulfillment, more deep relationship.

God's delighted with us, friends, and He's so inspired by us that He sings over us. Scripture tells us that as we grew in our mothers' bellies, He was making plans for us that are good and that lead to an abundant life.

And, as crazy as this may sound, we know that when you truly invest in others, you'll receive more than you'll ever pour out.

But now we're running ahead of ourselves. So let's start here:

*Something's got to change. And change is possible. We know it!*

Not sure that's true yet? That's okay. It took a while to convince us, too.

There is a path that leads to a less draining, more fulfilled (but not more to-do) life. We've found a process that's changing our lives, and we're excited to share it with you.

We're here to equip you and cheer you on as you learn to . . .

. . . lose who you're NOT (Part 1).

. . . love who you ARE (Part 2).

. . . live your ONE life well (Part 3).

We know the pressure you're feeling now, the weight on your chest that makes it hard to breathe, but hold on and keep reading, sister.

There's an exhale coming.



# Part One

## LOSE WHO YOU'RE NOT

We invite you to join us on our journey of change. We sure aren't doing it perfectly, but we're learning that every failure offers a lesson. Journeys are so much better when you travel with friends. So won't you sign up for this road trip, even if you're still unsure?

We've got an amazing destination in mind, and it's got some great stops along the way:

- believing that God's best life is for us, not just everybody else
- embracing a growth mindset
- identifying and reveling in our gifts
- integrating our desires, our people's needs, and God's glory
- moving into a life of investing instead of spending

Doesn't that sound like a trip worth making? We promise it'll prove worth the effort.

The first step is a huge exhale, losing who you're *not*.

Releasing who you were never meant to be.

Letting go of what's weighing you down and holding you back.

So muster up your courage. Dust off your faith. Dig out your determination, and let's go!

*one*

## You're Not Stuck Forever: So Celebrate Change

*Amy*

Change is . . . possible?

Wow. Pretty underwhelming, right? But that's the way I approached life for a long time. I wobbled between wanting change and being unconvinced that I could change. I'm a glass-half-full girl with sunshine in my pockets, and I'm always ready to toast your success. My belief in the transforming power of God for *you* is unshakable. But for me . . . well, my get-'er-done attitude and dangling to-do lists were wrapped around a quivering confidence, masking the doubt of whether I could ever get unstuck and earn God's best life for myself. (Hear the issues?!)

Not to mention that my natural tendency leans toward change-resistant. No matter how tough circumstances are, at least they're the life I know. It's the unknown, holding my breath as I dive into the deep, that's most scary. Curious about how we wrote the introduction about a woman lying in bed awake at 2:37 a.m.? Here's the scoop: Cheri

gave me an inventory, a list of telling questions to answer, and the woman in the intro is basically me. If it's you, too, we're cut from the same cloth, but we need some change, sister!

## A Moment to Choose

Over the Christmas holidays, a misunderstanding with a friend re-exposed all the issues I thought I had dealt with: expectations, over-planning, and a rigid attitude about how things “should be done.” The evening started well with all the details falling into place. I hummed a tune while putting the finishing touches on dinner and the table. Some friends were coming to dinner, one set of new and one set of old, and I tingled with anticipation.

Suddenly my phone dinged, and my dear friend texted, asking me what time we were coming over. *What?* My mind spun in confusion. *They're supposed to be coming here,* I thought. I picked up the phone, calling her to straighten the tangle, but she was as confused as I was.

In the midst of multiple phone calls and texts to plan the time with our new neighbors, my friend and I had gotten our wires crossed. Her house was decorated and ready with food in the oven—just like mine! I was expecting her arrival at my house while she was expecting me to knock on her door any minute.

With irritation boiling below the surface, I asked her if I could think for a moment and call her back. Truthfully, my initial reaction wasn't great. *This is my party! After all this work—the planning, the cleaning, the cooking, the decorating—I want everyone at my house.*

Change is hard. There's no doubt about it. I've been a planner since I was small, joking constantly about my five-year plan while holding it tightly. I make my plans. I *love* my plans. I work my plans. Woe to anyone who messes with my plans.

But in that moment with my friend, I needed to find a new way to respond, a way that would grow the friendship instead of wreck it. I needed to change my way of reacting, and I knew I had to let go

of my plans. Would I be able to do it? It was a moment of decision. I could stay stuck in my old ways or ask God for a new process to deal with my upended plans.

## **One Step at a Time**

In my wrestling match to embrace a better way of living, I've realized there are two essential beliefs we have to grab and hold before change is possible:

1. We're created for empowered change.
2. Our failures are the beautiful (but sometimes painful!) steps toward change.

There's good news. Both of these essential beliefs for change are actually true. How can I state that with such complete confidence? The Bible tells me so.

One of the stories in Scripture that I've loved since I was little is the story of Zacchaeus found in Luke 19:1-10. Taking a fresh look at this riveting story has given me some mind-changing insights:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."



Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus was definitely a man that needed a change. Verse 2 gives us a glimpse at two major character issues that left him stuck. First, he was the chief tax collector. In other words, he was sleeping with the enemy. The conquering Romans employed Jews to collect taxes from their countrymen to deliver to their Roman occupiers.

Not only that, but it was common practice for the Romans to allow these Jewish tax collectors to take extra money under the table. Based on the fact that Zacchaeus admitted his cheating ways and that he was rich, we can assume he was triply hated by the people around him. Tax collector. Strike one. *Chief* tax collector. Strike two. Rich. Strike three!

Zacchaeus was deeply flawed, but he must have had something new stirring within him. Something that made seeing Jesus worth running toward. Worth climbing a tree for. I love that Scripture says that he wanted to see "who Jesus was." Zach didn't just want to see what Jesus looked like. He wanted to know all about Him, watching His every move to gain an insight into His essence. The Jesus that Zacchaeus saw changed him, and the truths he experienced teach us truths about change.

## Falling Short Doesn't Stop Us

Zacchaeus was short. We have shortcomings. Human limitations and flaws are just part of life, but they don't have to stop us. We don't have to stay stuck in them. What if Zacchaeus had said to himself, "Well, I'm short. It's just the way it is. It's the way I *am*. Guess I'll miss out on Jesus?"

I've taken that approach way too many times! Here's how it's gone in my head: *I'm a planner. It's the way I am, so I'm not changing plans. Or, I'm wired to want things a certain way, so I'll just have to endure exhaustion. Or, I want everyone to be happy, so I'll adjust my expectations to theirs even though I feel resentful.*

But Zacchaeus didn't use his height challenge as an excuse. Because he wanted Jesus so much—and because he wanted change so much—he found a way.

When we slow down to think about humanity, Zacchaeus's determination to get to Jesus is even more stunning. His unpopular vocation must have made him reluctant to face a hostile crowd. Surely he usually tried to avoid people's stares and comments and pointing fingers. Yet *nothing*—not his size or his unwanted presence—could keep Zacchaeus away from his pursuit of Jesus.

How tired are we of our current condition? How badly do we want change? How much do we want to live the better life Jesus has for us when we connect with Him? If we'll push aside all the obstacles and *run* to Jesus, He'll meet us with delight just as He met Zacchaeus. And not only will Jesus spend a few minutes chatting, like in this story, but Jesus will follow us all the way home, where real change starts to happen.

## **Change-Resistant People Can Be Overcome**

In Zacchaeus's story there were people who criticized Jesus because they couldn't imagine a change in Zacchaeus. Sound familiar? In every life there are people who don't think we can change. Or they don't *want* us to change because it benefits them for us to stay stuck.

Zacchaeus shows us how to handle people who are resistant to our change. He tuned them out by focusing exclusively on Jesus. While the people were muttering, Zacchaeus addressed Jesus exclusively, "Look, Lord!" It makes me think of the lyrics to the classic hymn *Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus*, "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." I can just imagine Zacchaeus making his declaration of change with his eyes *locked* on Jesus and the negativity of those around him bouncing right off. We love people, but when we're ready for change, we listen only to Jesus. Ultimately, we trust that the changes He makes in our lives benefit all those around us, too.

## Jesus Is a Change Agent

Zacchaeus experienced a change—a miraculous change. He immediately and joyfully let go of the riches that had strangled him and took a cleansing breath of repentance, giving birth to a new life. Jesus was there, and He wasn't just a witness to Zacchaeus's change. He was the agent of Zach's change: the awesome power behind it.

Jesus empowers our change, too. He doesn't stand by and just watch to see how we'll do. When we climb down out of the tree of our self-made solutions and invite Him home, He pours out all that we need.

Jesus defines His role in this passage when He says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Our Savior's saving isn't limited. Yes, it's there in the moment when we give our lives to Him at salvation, but the saving doesn't stop there. His restoring power continues through our whole lives, saving *all* that's been lost. Zacchaeus had lost his friends and his reputation, but when Jesus saved him, Zach received a life even better than the one it replaced.

Jesus saves our souls, and He wants to save other lost parts of us, too. Have you lost your peace? He wants to save it. Have you lost your purpose? He wants to save it. Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind? Jesus wants to save that, too! He's the source of the power we can't do without, and He's the Savior we need for empowered change. When we hand Jesus the broken pieces of our lives, He hands them back better than new. Jesus is just waiting for us to stop clinging to the tree.

## What If I Can't Change?

This question is the root of most of our paralysis. If we don't try to change, then nothing seems lost. The real tragedy would be trying to change and finding out that we can't. Nothing would be more heart-breaking than such an outcome.

Here's the good news. Not only can we change, but God's created us for change and growth. I'm going to get a little geeky on you here. Brain scientists tell us that our brains function with neuroplasticity,

a term that points to its meaning. Just as plastic can be reshaped, our thinking and actions can be altered because of the neuroplasticity of our brains. God has hardwired us for change.

That's established science, but we also need to be aware of our perceptions and belief patterns about our ability to change and grow. Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck has defined our beliefs about change in two categories—fixed mindset and growth mindset. If you're a fixed-mindset girl (which I've been for most of my life), you see things in terms of either success or failure. There's no in-between. Growth mindset means that you see everything, even failure, as a learning experience with success occurring after many, many faltering steps toward growth.

My friend Glynnis Whitwer gave the best example leading to a flash of insight in my own life. She helped me see the silliness of my fixed mindset by saying, "Just think of a child learning to walk. They never fall and think, 'I'm not going to do that again!' They instinctively get up and try again. I like to think they are saying, 'Okay, I'm going to get myself back up, and I'm going to try to walk again.'"

Bing! All kinds of lightbulbs went on in my head when Glynnis described growth in terms of literal baby steps. Toddlers fall down innumerable times before they run across the floor. Babies listen for a whole year before they say a word. Change and growth happen on the inside for a long time before anything exhibits on the outside.

We're just the same. We can set aside our fear of trying to change by understanding that failure isn't the worst thing that can happen. It's part of growth. We can exhale, knowing that change only requires progress, not doing it all perfectly.

## **A Pilgrim's Progress**

The night that my dinner plans went awry, I thought through options that would let me embrace a change, and I called my friend back with a revised set of plans.

"How about we make this a progressive dinner?" I asked my friend. "We'll walk around the corner to your house and bring our side dishes.

After eating the main meal at your house, we'll walk back to mine for coffee and dessert. What do you think?"

My friend loved the idea, so we set off on a short walk to spend a long evening basking in the company of friends. Our time together was even more fun than if we'd eaten at one house or the other. Our progressive dinner provided additional opportunities to enjoy the warmth of each other's homes and laugh about how easily miscommunication happens.

Jesus saved my soul forty years ago, but He's still saving and changing me. My past failures have been tools to teach me. That night He empowered me to hold back my hasty words and to implement an idea that saved a friendship.

Empowered by Jesus, I'm changing slowly but surely, and so can you. Feel free to let my confidence buoy you until you believe it for yourself.

Exhale. We can breathe easy, because change is possible!

 *now breathe*

Note: At the end of every chapter, Cheri and I will give you just one action step to keep it easy-breezy. We suggest reading the book slowly, too, so that these steps feel like blessings, not burdens. Purposeful progress is permanent progress!

Write down one way that you've grown in the last ten years. Take a few minutes thinking about what brought about that change in your life, and write a few sentences recording the catalyst or steps that led to positive change.

LOSE WHO YOU'RE NOT:

*You're NOT permanently stuck.*