

*Paying Attention to What Matters Most
in a World That's Pulling You Apart*

AWAKE



ANJULI PASCHALL

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Mom
For every cup of tea shared
For every “God thing” lived
For every song you’ve ever sung
Thank you.

Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

EPHESIANS 5:14

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Introduction

The Whole Truth

I've spent most of my life trying to figure out how to be human. I know I *am* human. I know I am a living, moving, breathing, full of angst, anger, and tangible hope—human. I've tried to figure out how my body works and how my mind processes information. I've tried to understand how the physical relates to the spiritual world. I've worked tirelessly at navigating relationships and figuring out how to simply—get along with others. Yet, after all these years my soul is battered with the same bewildering questions: Am I living my life to the fullest? Am I doing what matters most? Am I fully awake? Honestly, I hate questions like these.

There is no better way to feel like a failure than to start really examining my life. That's why I truly dread New Year's. All the resolutions and finding your word for the year makes me want to take a long nap. It's like I'm buried in piles of laundry and

everyone else is talking about organizing the cans in the pantry by alphabetical order. I just can't keep up. I can't figure out the human thing. The longing to live a beautiful life is compelling. Yet, I instantly feel pressure and anxiety when I look at my actual life. Where I want to be and where I actually am are drastically different. When I look at my every day, I'm unamused by it all. I'm stumbling at best to live intentionally and without being daily irritated by dumb things like a slow drive-thru lane or someone ignoring my text. I get pulled and yanked by social causes and signing petitions. The rabbit hole of what to do, how to do it, and when to do it is as mind-bending as an underground subway system. I'm rapidly approaching midlife, and I still don't fully know how to do life *right* or *well*. I feel like something is missing. I call it *carpe diem* syndrome—the fear of not living life to the fullest.

I've spent most of my life on hold. Wait till college is done; then I can get married. Wait till I'm married; then I can travel. Wait to travel until I have money. Wait to buy a house until I have a stable job. Wait to have a career until my babies are grown. Wait for better friends to come, a better church to be planted, a better car to drive. Wait till the weekend to relax. Wait to do the things I've always imagined doing *until*. Wait a second, I'm sprinting through life with a million commitments wondering, *What do I even want to do anymore?* So much of life is—hurry up and wait for some other day. We hold on and hold on and hold on until we forget what we are even holding on to and for what. This hold-and-wait way of living is so dismal, exhausting, and tiring that at some point it is easier to

sleep than stay awake to wonder, to a dream, or to a hope of something different.

I've been alive 14,511 days. The sun rises. The sun sets. Another day. Sometimes in small moments when the world is quiet and asleep, I contemplate what it is to be alive. Thousands of beautiful hours are tethered together by laughter and longing, hurt and sorrow, breath, and beat. Each second composing our incredible reality. I'm afraid of life. The mere possibility of my existence feels fragile and somewhat inconsequential. I've had a slow-growing itch I've been trying to reach for most of my life. It's an itch for something more. I've longed for that.

At each momentous occasion, I thought the itch would resolve. I backpacked through Europe, lived in Asia, tasted the finest of food, lived among the poor, and danced with the wealthy. I've built a business, married a handsome man, had enough kids to fill a minivan, and taken in stray cats. All of these scratched the itch but didn't resolve it. Each were good, but somehow not enough. The desire for more persisted. At some point, I typically Googled some version of the question "Where are the best cities in the world to live with kids?" and I got lost in a fantasy for a few hours. But, of course, those searches only aggravate me more. I so desperately wanted one of these experiences to satisfy me like spreading creamy icing onto a cake, but none of them did. I lie awake at night with this longing, the quiet itch for more.

I thought the desire for *more* meant that I was ungrateful or greedy. Maybe I just needed to be more content. But I couldn't deny my desire. It was there. I was hungry for more. I wanted more peace, more joy, more hope, more love, more of

my soul-bursting-wide-open in glorious praise, more. I worked to get more. I chased hard after the illusive more. It had to be obtainable. If I just kept looking, pressing, ordering my priorities differently, getting a new system in place, planning a better trip, getting my kids to easier ages, the *more* I wanted would be found. But the more I sought after *more*, the further away it got from me. No matter how hard I tried, the dangling carrot could never be touched. The itch was always just out of reach—my carpe diem syndrome kicking into full gear.

I wanted to be awake and live life to the fullest, but I just couldn't figure out how to do it. I had spent so much time trying to appease my itch that I never stopped to understand it.

I was hungry
for more.

Looking, really looking, at my desire for this mysterious *more* meant I had to see myself, experience my lack, and face some of my demons. Sometimes it's easier to close my eyes and pretend than it is to see reality. When I was younger, I was afraid of sleeping alone, being left out, my mom dying, and spelling tests. Today, my fears range from public bathrooms and sick kids, to loved ones walking away from Jesus. I'm afraid of the IRS and when unknown numbers leave me voice messages. I'm always afraid of being caught, found out, or called out for something I did wrong or by mistake. But the older I get, the more I see one overarching fear in my life. I'm afraid I'll arrive at the end of my life, maybe it will be tomorrow or in fifty years, and realize that I never really lived. Looking at my itch meant my greatest fear was coming true. Even though I had so much, I was still unfulfilled. Gut punch. I was moving

so fast trying to catch life that I was actually missing it. This terrified me. I was doing everything right, but something in me was wrong. And there remained the unreachable, pressure-mounting, shame-filled, untouchable—itch.

Do you know this itch too?

I've always interpreted the itch as though something was wrong. The itch was haunting me like a quiet echo inside my mind. It was my job to resolve it and get rid of it. People, social media, and every message on my screen said, "The way to true life is possible! With this course, a swipe up, or on sale today, you can get the life you've always wanted!" Maybe finding more meant giving away more of my time, resources, and money. Maybe I needed another cause to support, one more baby, or a chicken coop in a rural community. If the itch was going to find relief, it was up to me. So, I rolled up my soul-sleeves and I got to work punching that itch into submission. My goodness, it's exhausting fighting a shadow.

But what if the itch isn't mine to fix? What if there is more for me to follow?

What if that impossible place to scratch in the middle of my spine wasn't for me to reach with a long stick and Gumby arms twisted like a bendy straw always on the verge of snapping? What if the itch is a whispered invitation from God, *I have something more for you?* The itch is an invitation into a better story. Here, the adventure begins.

God is on a mission to move us into a life of abiding. The work of the Spirit right now is to transform my heart habits from living a life of autonomy (the self-laws I've made) to a life

of with-ness with God. Living life to the fullest doesn't have anything to do with my ability to *carpe diem*, but everything to do with living a life of connectedness. Awake-ness is with-ness. It is a call to wake up to the story beneath the story.

I recently watched a movie with my husband, Sam. There were guns, fighting scenes, and an assassin trying to start a new life. When I turned to fall asleep, I was unsatisfied with the film. Yet, Sam pulled out all these deeper themes I didn't even notice. Apparently, the assassin was fighting her way to freedom by healing the broken relationships in her past. I turned my head. *Really?* How did I miss that? How did I miss the real meaning of the story? It was hidden, laced, and nuanced throughout the dialogue and PG-13 violence. The story wasn't about killing the bad guys. The story beneath the story was about redemption.

I think I miss the meaning of the story a lot. Not just in movies, but in my real life. I think my story is about what college to attend, career paths, vacations, buying a house, managing a nap schedule, or getting the backyard in order. I think my story is about motherhood, planning meals, community service, healthy relationships, a well-balanced diet, hospitality, staff meetings, or sneaking in a workout before the day is done. The strained relationship with my spouse, annoyance with an inefficient system, the fluctuating housing market, heartbreaking adoption process, leadership that is tone deaf is the story I might be struggling with at this moment, but it isn't the whole story. God is waking me up, through those stories, to the real story. So often we ask, *God, what do you want me to do?* rather than the more pertinent question, *God, what are you doing?* I

can focus all of my time, attention, and energy on figuring out my life circumstances. I can spend countless hours trying to finagle my life into getting the maximum amount of comfort. These stories consume all my thoughts, affection, and attention. Those are the places where I start, but not where I am intended to end. I'm learning to follow these stories like signs leading me to the real story.

The real story is underneath all of these. So often I stop at the signs thinking I've arrived at my destination. How disappointing it would be if I stopped at the "10 miles to Big Sur" sign off Highway 1 and didn't continue up the curvy, steep, one-lane road to the top. If I stopped at the sign, I'd miss the expansive ocean view slowly opening my soul yet sewing it back together at the same time. As I approach the middle of my life, I think I've stopped at the arrows and not followed to where they intended to lead me. I have marriage, kids, friends, career, church, yet I have that persistent itch like something is missing.

Here, right here, is where God's whisper comes: *I have something more for you*. My itch is a gift into a good journey. I want *that* adventure. I want the story beneath the story. Then I began to see it. It is there. Hidden, tucked, and woven beneath all the other stories. It's a journey into connectedness. It's an unwrapping of the greatest gift. An awakening to discover how the actual real-life presence of God in my life changes everything. The story beneath the story. It is always the same. Underneath my daily irritations, the rapid news cycle, family drama, and mail mounting up, the story beneath these stories is always one and the same—God is waking me up to himself. My average

existence folds into God's massive love for the world and intimate love for me. I belong here. Here is the more I've been craving.

I want to be awake to the real story. I want to live my life present to what God is doing and not just focused on what I'm supposed to do. So many stories are vying for my attention. So many voices demand my eye contact. I am pulled wide and thin, and I'm tied to my phone, trying to manage the noise. If I'm not careful I'll live a story that doesn't belong to me or become fixated on a daydream of something better than being right here. I refuse to chase a mirage that promises water but leaves me parched. I want to lean into the story that matters most. I want to stay awake to God's presence with me. I don't want to blink. I don't want to miss a meaningful, wide-awake life.

I want all of this, but how?

Follow the itch.

Our souls pry apart slowly, yet at times, they pop open like a spring. In a moment, by the smell of almond trees or the hum of a distant train, we can be transported to a place inside ourselves we've long lost contact with. We have windows to our bodies. Our senses allow direct access to our deepest places. They are the backstage passes to our becoming. Through taste, touch, sight, smell, sound, memory we can become awake to God's presence of love in our lives. He meets our souls through the quiet ding of the dishwasher, the expansive valley parting the way through mountain ranges, and the frothy foam ceiling on our morning coffee greeting us into a new day. With our eyes we read psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our souls awaken.

In the scraping of wipers scratching frost off windshields and soft ice in sweet lemonade, God greets us gently with kindness. With butter slathered over slices of fresh sourdough bread, fried eggs cackling like the sound of schoolgirls giggling, and sunlight bursting into sleepy kitchens like a laser show, God is waking us up to His constant presence. In response, we stay soft, open, and on the lookout for His invitations.

Our senses and everyday stories become like signs leading us to the story beneath the story. When our everyday stories of frustration, hope, beauty, and apathy connect with God's love pursuit story, there is the more (joy, hope, peace, and faith) we've been desiring. The layers are peeled back. We can begin to see what's really going on. We can see the real story. Through the compelling act of paying attention, we start to discover the story beneath the story of God in our lives. It's wild and safe and everything we've ever wanted.

Sister, take a moment to look back on your life. When were you the most awake? Really, think about it. Your mind may stream through a series of significant events: graduations, your wedding day, your first kiss, a thesis paper you worked hard on, a coveted promotion. All of these were good, but they slowly slip out of your mind. To your surprise, you recall a two-a.m. conversation you had with a friend when you were in college. You shared things you'd never shared before. You were connected closely to another person, and something in you woke up. You remember that time when God used your unique gifts for the good of others and a burning light turned on inside of you. You were connected to your calling. Your memory takes you back to

a lonely night when in the most unexpected moment, you saw a shooting star. Somehow you knew the streamer of light dazzling like a sparkler across the cave-dark sky was meant for you. You were connected to creation. But, most certainly, you could never forget the exact second when Jesus saved you. When you were flat on your face, God loved you. You were connected to your creator. These intersections of awake-ness weren't milestones, accomplishments, or something you coerced; they were about connection. Mysteriously, instead of achieving awake-ness, you were actually receiving it.

Sister, highlight this: if you want a rich life without regret, it will never come from chasing after it. Waking up has nothing to do with your ability to make it happen, hustle, or push harder.

If you want a rich life without regret, it will never come from chasing after it.

Living life to the fullest isn't something we do with more book clubs, wine nights, weekend getaways, or the next home project. It isn't found when we sacrifice more, live with less, or give away all we have. It won't come when you plant a garden, have a happy family,

reach your ideal weight, or make enough money. Look at the times in your life when you have been most awake and let those be your guide into the future. If you want to truly be awake, it comes through meaningful connection to others, connection to your calling, connection to your voice, connection to creation, and connection to your creator. Connection, connection, connection. Follow your itch into the story beneath the story. God is inviting you into more and more soul-awakening connection.

I won't prescribe a list of how-to's or tell you to just do it like I do. I won't make court-like arguments or graph unreachable goals. I will, however, promise you this—the life you want is possible, and you don't have to lose your soul trying to get it. I'm not referring to financial stability, your kids turning out okay, or the easy life you want. I am referring to a life you *really* want. The life that lives below all the other things. I know what you want because it is what every human wants. We want true, meaningful, rich, soul-satisfying connection. We want to be known intimately, understood without justification, and loved unconditionally.

Sister, this is possible. I know you have voices that tell you otherwise, but I stand convinced it is true. I've lived it. I've tasted, touched, and felt it. Without waking up to God's presence with you, you will meander through your days sleepwalking. You will continuously feel stuck, lost, disconnected, and adrift. You will have low-grade anxiety, frantic thoughts, numbing strategies to get through the day, and pills to get you through the night. You will be with people you've known for years but feel sadly unknown. Life will feel like a bland dish; you'll eat it, but it won't be savored. If you are honest with yourself, you will hear a nagging, haunting, and confusing desire for *more*. There is another way. Wake up—God is inviting you on a new adventure.

Sister, I'm inviting you to live at the edge of the abyss. Stand at the unknown places of your soul and story. This adventure doesn't have an itinerary or departure times. It is an inward journey. The journey might have long stretches of dry desert, steep terrain, and slippery rocks. Winter storms and blazing

heat will meet you on the road ahead. This adventure will only require one thing of you—a willing heart. But I promise it is worth it. At times, it will be almost too easy. You will sit and reflect and feel nothing but gratitude. Other times, you will be tempted to fall back asleep because the road will narrow, and shadows will grow scary. But stay awake. In the hidden places of your heart, you won't be alone; you'll find connection with your friend Jesus.

Pay attention. God does the waking and prodding. He leads the way. Jesus is the compass, map, and true north. God waking you up to the story beneath your story can be as abrupt as a rooster crowing before daybreak, invasive and intruding. Sometimes it can be subtle, quiet, and as silent as bubbles floating by. Other times God's soul nudge can be so obvious we cover our mouths in sheer amazement and silent tears. Nonetheless, the love of God is persistent to penetrate even the coldest corners of our hearts. Consider this book as a gong, a gentle song, or a dinner bell calling you to wake up to certain parts of your story. God is here. God is present. God is pursuing us in second-by-second love. Like calling a child awake, God nudges, repeats, and carries us up and out of bed. God pulls wide the shades and invites us to see the sunrise. A relationship with God is *being* with Christ no matter how horrible or happy the adventure may be. Watch the show, hang the clothes, have the hard conversation, drink another cup of tea, be with Jesus. True awake-ness isn't about what we do, but who we are connected to. Your itch for more soothed.

I want to wake up to beauty, delight, and everything that is holy in our world. I don't want to shut off my joy because I was

too scared to see my pain. I don't want to nervously navigate my life one to-do list, text, and espresso shot at a time. I want to engage in my one exquisite life, task by task, boring or not, excruciating or not, anxiety-filled or not, awake to the wonder of God's presence with me. I want real connection. I want God more than I want anything else. Or it would be more honest to say—I *want* to want God more than anything else.

Tomorrow is day 14,512. I'll most likely live it out with some sort of fear. I'll check my phone for security before I check in with Jesus. I'll worry about everything that

I have to do or haven't done. I'll nervously putter, trying to get people's approval. God isn't concerned with results, quick changes, and "just get it right." He is always making room for my heart to rest in His. God is always joyfully tapping on the window

God is always making room for my heart to rest in His.

of my body. It brings Him delight to wake up my soul to His love. It is a never-ending surprise party just for me or like the instant giddiness of finding a forgotten twenty-dollar bill in my back pocket. I hear love in the low, sturdy sound of cello strings, see it in a cinematic moonrise calling me to sleep, taste it in the salty crackers my kids didn't finish at lunch, and feel it in the softness of my favorite worn-in sweatshirt reminding me the best things get softer with time. My irritations rise with the demands required of me, and I'm drawn back to my need for true rescue. I let myself dream without a straitjacket, and I watch where my heart goes when I'm not afraid. God's love tap is always inviting me to the story beneath the story.

This is the whole truth: no one knows how to be human. Even the most intelligent, witty, and all-put-together people are winging it at best. We are all stumbling through a darkened wood with just a match, a dying phone battery, a hope, and a cheap survival kit strapped to our backs. It's okay, though. It's okay because Jesus goes before us on this journey. God who grew limbs, lungs, and love all the way down to earth to be human with us. He teaches us how to be human. We don't have to figure it all out alone. I don't have to do everything. I just have control over one thing every single day of my God-given, beauty-orchestrated, grace-saturated, love-abounding, holy, and hand-picked life. It isn't complicated or confusing. It isn't overwhelming or even hard. I can open my eyes. That's it. I can wake up to God's love story.

My first book, *Stay*, invited you to simply be where you are. *Awake* asks the most pertinent follow-up question: "Now, where is God as you stay?" As you name where your heart really is, stay and be awake to the presence of God. This book is how I stumbled and discovered God's love story beneath my story. Stories about how I grew into my humanness marked with qualities, flaws, and grace-filled do-overs. It's how I stood at the edge of my abyss and instead of being afraid, to my surprise, I became awake. Take courage, sister. No more delays. No more putting life on hold. The time is now. Adventure rises with the sun. God is calling, whispering, wildly waving, "Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

My Name

Wake up to more meaning

My name is Anjuli. I've always had a love-hate relationship with my name. I love how it looks pretty on paper. I think a "j" in any name is elegant. It is so graceful and, in my opinion, a "j" in cursive is the jewel of all the letters. It's so quaint, humble, and yet, confident. My name is unique and interesting. But I also hate it. The pronunciation is tricky. At several turning points in my life, I've tried to change my name. In college, I introduced myself as "July" and at my MOPS group table, "Jules." At Starbucks or with any reservation I make, I don't even bother with all the back and forth and give my husband's name, "Sam." Close friends and family pronounce my name "Anjelic." New friends might say "Ann-Julie." When I meet someone for the first time, there

is always a hint of awkward hesitation because, to be honest, I don't really know how to pronounce my name. People usually repeat my name back to me with a kind but questioning eye. My response is always the same: "Yes, that's how you say it." I smile and move on.

I was named after a book my mom read while her best friend, Juile, was dying of breast cancer. The book is *The Far Pavilions*, and the main character is a young Indian girl named Anjuli. I didn't know what my name actually meant while I was growing up, but I would learn soon enough. In the most unimaginable way and from the most unsuspecting person, I'd learn what the name *Anjuli* means. In my early twenties when my life felt meaningless, a doctor delivering me devastating news would surprise me with the meaning of my name.

My twenties were transformative years. I went through bouts of desolation, the always regrettable decision to cut bangs, and a newfound love for adult beverages. I experienced a lot of silence from God, who had always been so active, safe, and good before. I had mysterious health issues, ended a significant relationship, lost friendships, and moved back in with my parents (every college graduate's dream). What was the meaning of my life? Not just my life, but life at all.

A sacred tear began. A tearing of skin between my internal world and external world. I couldn't control the feelings I had been stuffing for so long. I was leaking. For me, leaking looked like locking myself in my room, listening to moody music, lighting candles, and being mad at my mom because she asked too many questions. With a hammer and nails, I hung a queen-sized

yellow sheet to my bedroom wall. It draped long and hit the floor. With acrylic colors and the Cardigans playing, I painted my heart on the sheet. In bold black letters, I scribbled *Invisible*. I pinned magazine clippings and old photographs to my massive wall collage. It was a mosaic of words and stories and short phrases that were welling up inside of me. It was all my brokenness exposed on a bed linen. It was my pain. When I had to go to work or school, I'd take the sheet down from the wall, fold it up, and tuck it back under my bed. Hidden. I put my heart away. I did this every day.

If I'm honest, I've been putting my heart away all my life. It wasn't like I tried to hide. I just did. It was my habit and rhythm and way of life. I didn't know how to be vulnerable or myself. I was good at stuffing my heart into small places. I was always afraid, and for the first time I was waking up to feelings, thoughts, and fears I had never had before. My heart felt weak, fragile, and embarrassing. To feel safe and secure I'd borrow strength from other people. I'd borrow it from friends, leaders, sisters, or anyone who looked like they had the human thing figured out. I survived by following, learning, and keeping my real self out of sight.

I've been
putting my
heart away
all my life.

Most of my life, I've taken strength from my earliest friend, Krissa. She is candid and loyal and speaks her mind. She is sarcastic and blunt and strong. She doesn't care what people think about her. If I ever find myself in a situation where I don't know what to do, I recite these four letters to myself: "WWKD." What would Krissa do? I examine my situation through Krissa's

eyes, and somehow, I feel more confident. If I'm in a social situation that feels daunting, those four letters pop into my head. I quietly chant to myself, "Be more like Krissa." The words give me the courage to make hard decisions.

I've found confidence from women spiritual leaders. When I had my first speaking engagement, I was terrified. Because I am a pastor's wife, there is an unspoken expectation to speak publicly (as well as love children's ministry, know everyone's name, and be at every event with a smile to name a few others). Though I don't mind being up front with a microphone, I don't love it either. The morning of the church's Christmas brunch I folded my message, printed out on computer paper, in half. I grabbed the book *Cold Tangerines* by one of my favorite writers at the time, Shauna Niequist, from the shelf. I tucked my words into hers. From the stage, I opened her book and read my message. I held her courage in my hands, and somehow she gave me strength to speak. Her strength transferred to me.

My sister Wanida is another person who is solid inside. She is two years older than I am. I've basically followed in her footsteps my entire life. She did show choir, so I did it. She studied abroad, so I did it. She shopped at Abercrombie and Fitch and cut her hair pixie short, so obviously, I did too. I'll never forget when I was pulling out my heart from under the bed every day and I decided to let her see me. I let her into my locked room, and she sat on my bed. I read to her out of my journal with tears and tissue and lots of over apologizing. Wanida, the one I always leaned on for strength, wasn't startled or bothered by what I shared. She let me read and cry and go on and on without

interrupting. She didn't try to fix me or give me advice. When I was done reading her my secrets from out of my spiral red notebook, she said, "I believe in you." She believed I could do the brave work of becoming real. Wanida gave me courage that day. I had been borrowing it from her for so long. She breathed courage into my soul.

We all need soul breathers. We need people who are patient and kind and aren't surprised when secrets come out. We need people who won't be shocked when they see the truth or be afraid to hold our pain. We need people who offer grace and freedom and thoughtful questions. I'm not sure if I would have ever had the courage to keep going if it weren't for that moment sitting on my bed with my sister. So I did the next scary thing. I followed my fear. I became a fear chaser. Because when someone believes in you, anything feels possible. I pulled out my yellow sheet I had methodically hidden away every day. I secured the two corners up high and let the rest unfold to the ground like a scroll. It was as though the skin on the front side of my body was coming down to the floor too. I unlocked the door and let my heart hang wide open on the wall.

It was one moment of courage that led to the next. I let the door stay open. I became less and less afraid of who might walk by or what someone might think about the words *alone, afraid, guilty, ugly* I had painted in bold black lettering. When my courage was weak, I borrowed it from others. I needed their confidence to help buoy me through. I wish I was naturally confident like Krissa and Wanida and even Shauna (my best friend who doesn't know I exist). But I've always felt nervous

on the inside. I've always looked for affirmation from others to feel safe. Even when my courage grows, I still don't feel entirely sturdy, so I keep borrowing courage from others when I need it.

I wrap the courage of others around me like a cape. I think about the cape that Joseph's father, Jacob, wrapped around him. The robe was sewn with spectacular colors. It inflamed envy, the scariest shade of green, in his brothers. I think about the cloak that the father flung over the shoulders of his prodigal son, who made unforgivable mistakes. He was now draped in holy forgiveness. I think about the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. God became small and was kept warm in a cloth. Jesus used a cloth to wash the feet of His beloved friends and the ones He knew would betray and deny Him. On the dirt floor He bent low, cleaned filthy feet, and dried them with a towel. Strips of cloth wrapped Christ in the tomb. The hope of life was without a heartbeat and bound up in blood-drenched linen.

I don't just want to take on others' courage, I want my own. I want courage that doesn't disappear as quickly as a mean comment on a social media post appears. I need a pill so strong its effects won't wear off. I'm not sure how to get through this life without courage. I need courage to not lose myself, speak my mind, and walk the long, hard road with people I love. I need something stronger than a cape to protect me when all the lights go out, when people get sick, when I can't withstand one more punch of rejection. I think courage is less about bolstering up strength or right thinking or a radical change. For Jesus, courage wasn't mounting an attack, getting bigger, standing taller on a soap box. Courage wasn't pumping himself up or rousing a

crowd with His charisma. Courage wasn't that He died, but that He walked into death even though there was terror in His heart. He accepted His cup of suffering. He kept walking toward the cross even though He could have run or won the war.

I needed this kind of face-any-kind-of-fear courage as I walked into the doctor's office the day I discovered the meaning of my name. I didn't want to go to the doctor's office. In fact, I'd ignored symptoms and avoided scheduling an appointment with the specialist for as long as I could. I remember walking into the cold building past the trees as barren as my soul. Late fall in San Diego dusts everything with a light frost. I sat awkwardly on the table. The white sheet they made me wear felt sun-dried and stiff. I was nearly naked under it, but sometimes the weight we carry inside of us is heavier than any weight on the outside. The crinkly tissue under me kept sticking to my bare skin. This felt impossible. It was awkward. I was alone. Trying to convince the doctor I was confident and mature enough to be there without a chaperone, I pulled my shoulders back and looked him directly in the eyes. The doctor held up the MRI results like he was mentally doing a math problem. The tumor in my brain was still there.

A tumor the size of a blueberry sat suctioned onto my pituitary gland. It wasn't dangerous enough to do surgery but was still big enough to cause problems. Cancerous—thank goodness, no. Problematic—most definitely. Terrifying—yes. It wasn't growing or shrinking, but it was exactly where it shouldn't be. He gently talked me through the next steps. It would mean medication for a lifetime, more appointments, and

the possibility of never having children. He was kind and spoke softly with his Indian accent. He looked directly at me with “Do you understand?” eyes. He scribbled a prescription. Before he handed it to me, he paused. He said, “Anjuli,” and looked up. “Do you know what your name means?” His question caught me off guard. I shook my head. I didn’t tell the nice doctor that not only did I not know the meaning of my name, but I didn’t know how to pronounce it either. He smiled. “Anjuli means the fragrance released from a love offering.” I left the cold room not feeling cold. I left with the answers I didn’t want, but more awake than I had ever been. Meaning changes everything.

I think in my search for the universal meaning of life, I forgot my meaning. This happens though, doesn’t it? We run and push and pull. We hurry, chase, and fix. Then at some point we stop and wonder, *What is the point of all of this?* What’s the point of *me*? Why do we frantically manage people’s expectations, sign up for everything, or need the towels folded a certain way? Why do we worry about what the neighbors think, hold on to a grudge from decades ago, or carefully craft a comeback? We go and go and go, blindly forgetting where we are actually trying to get to. This was me. All the while, I was wondering why I was lacking so much courage.

Courage isn’t a virtue that is a manifestation of itself. One doesn’t go to war, fight, and die because of courage alone. No, someone dies on the battlefield or in the arena because a compelling reason drives them—freedom. Meaning drives the action. Meaning first, courage second. Meaning is what I am made of, my substance, and what defines me. If I didn’t know

my meaning, I would never have courage. If I don't know why on earth I'm alive at all, I'll never catch my balance. I'll always feel like I'm toppling over. On the day I left the doctor's office, I knew my meaning. Maybe I had always known it, but I had forgotten. The heaviness of my vices, the breaking down of my beliefs, the persistent pull of other voices, and the hurry-angst of life left me grappling instead of grounded.

My fear and my heart-sheet hanging on my bedroom wall, the courage I just couldn't get a grip on started to make sense. My soul felt centered. I could face the day with my tumor and my fear and my always shaky soul because God was giving me meaning. Even when I couldn't make sense of everything, I could keep walking forward with Christ because life had meaning.

The general meaning of my life—like everyone's—is to love and be loved by God with my entire heart, soul, mind, and strength. I am called to love God with all of me. In all things, God's glory is the goal. God goes before me and behind me. Much of the courage I will ever need in my small, sacred, beautiful life is this—God is with me. When my insides are weak and my heart-sheet on the wall is exposed, I am not alone. I can walk forward in life with terror in my soul because Jesus is with me. He is with me today as I pour the cereal and wait for the water to boil. He is with me as I wait for the email to come and as I wrangle my internal dialogues. When I walk with God, pay attention to His presence, adhere to His ways, I am loving Him.

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But there is also a personal meaning for my life. Yes, one that is just for me. I know the meaning of my one and only life when I reflect on how God rescued me. My story is defined by the ways God freed me from legalism, harmful relationships, and a long season of sadness. My story mounts on moments when I knew I was made to care for hurting souls, buoy the spiritually broken, and guide others back to the love of God. When I walk in step with God's story of meaning in me, my life releases a rich

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aroma. I can feel it. Others can almost smell it. When I stay connected to who God has made me to be, I am awake.

I know your life is moving fast. Several hard relationships yank on you. Dozens of complicated thoughts nag on you. Your fears, trauma, and shame linger in you like an endless hangover. You wake up and go, go, go. The pressure to keep going is unrelenting. You don't have time, space, or energy to deal with anything that really needs to be dealt with, and getting dinner done on time is the best you can manage. I get it. Me too. But sometimes we must pause and ask ourselves, *What's the meaning of it?* We have to go back to the original Greek, the starting line, and the drawing board. For me, I had to hammer a yellow sheet to my bedroom wall. We have to ask ourselves, *What's the point of my life?*

We must know our *why*. We must know for certain why we do what we do. If you want to know your unique meaning in this big world, you'll find it at the intersection of your pain and

God's rescue. When we reflect on our story and the suffering we've overcome, we will start to see our meaning clearly. God always gives us meaning. He gives us our names. He changed Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter. Our names matter. They define us. Our truest definition comes out of the healing from our deepest pain. What happens when we have nothing determines everything for us, just like it did for Abraham, Sarah, and Peter, whose names changed at the most crucial point in their lives. God meets us right in the crevice of our greatest wounds and wakes us up to His presence. He doesn't just meet us there but transforms us there.

God gives us all new names (Revelation 2:17). Our new names identify our past and give us meaning to move forward. For example, if you overcame addiction, your new name might be—the one God set free. If you were abandoned, physically or emotionally, by a parent—the one God remembers. If you spent your whole life unseen and God finds you—the one God pursues. If you survived a devastating divorce—the one God eagerly wants. If God made a way for you out of an impossible situation—the one God finds worthy. If God used your average abilities, looks, and limited education to help others—the one God adores. If God brought you out of darkness—the one God shines His light on.

Maybe you need to remember your unique meaning in this big world. You need to know why you exist in the first place. If you're like me, you need the reminder like notifications flashing, popping up on your phone. They interrupt life but also keep us connected to it. So often we see interruptions as a bad thing.

They seem like a detour from the thing we want. But what if interruptions are wake-up calls? What if they are calling you to come back to your *why* and the way God defines you?

In the Gospel of John, the author repeatedly refers to himself as *the disciple whom Christ loved*. For years, I read this and was completely bothered by it. John's audacity to say *he* was the one that Christ loved seemed so arrogant. But I think I was wrong. I think John discovered his purpose, his pulse, his identity, and the significant meaning of his life. He said it over and over as a reminder to himself and others of this radical truth. John walked into every room, every relationship, every conflict, and every celebration attentive to his meaning. John—the one Christ loved.

What if we took our meaning into our everyday world with us? Our general meaning is to love and be loved by God. Our personal meaning to be a vessel of God's love to others in a unique way based on our stories. If our souls were suctioned to the meaning God has given us, we would have all the courage we need to face impossible situations. In our quiet moments, fearful ones, dull ones, let our meaning be ever present. Let it be what defines us when we wake up, what inspires us as we walk the long day of arduous tasks, and what determines how we welcome others. Everywhere we go and no matter what we do, we repeat it like John did because it is the most important and beautiful thing about us.

Meaning is fundamental. Meaning matters. It is your lane. Stay centered. Stay right there. A million voices will scream, demand, and insist you need to do more or do things differently,

but don't budge. Don't shy away from the path God has put you on. Be undeterred by what culture, prominent people, or your critics think about you. Through motherhood, marriage, and the relationships Jesus brings to you, stay awake to your meaning. Through your service, career changes, and life choices, remember who called you by name and don't be afraid. If you want to really be awake, stay close to your redemption story. Remember your places of pain and the times you survived when you almost wished for death. Remember the ways God answered prayers you barely even prayed, just silently hoped for. Remember the ways God walked with you. Now, watch courage rise. You don't have to fight for it, cling to it, or tattoo it to your skin. You just get to receive it. What glory our lives bring God when we live like this. What a fragrance we are.

Wake up, sister. I know it is scary to wake up to fears, feelings, and the thoughts you've kept quiet. I know it's terrifying to be real. I know you tell yourself to put your desires back to sleep. For a moment, relax your fingers, tilt your head right and left, unclench your jaw. You are real and your fears keep your body so tied up.

If you haven't found your meaning, look for it. It's fundamental. Without meaning, you are just spinning circles around courage and not living through it. You are trying to put out your fires with kerosene. You are treading water in the shallow end when you could just stand up. You are looking everywhere for the source of courage, except the one place it is found. You don't have to borrow courage from others anymore. As you step into the meaning of your life, courage will come.

Stop tucking your heart away. The hushed corners of your soul are allowed to speak. Your life has meaning. In wet cement on the foundation of your life, let God write out what your unique meaning is. I stand on these words when life feels scary: *safe, daughter, seen, held, liked, loved, and the one God could never lose*. When I stay here, with Christ, my courage is activated.

The words scripted on my sheet began to give me power instead of stealing it. Through being seen, my life was becoming an offering. Through my loneliness, guilt, and fear, God didn't back away, but was awakening me to love. Through my sadness and the sickness that was in my brain and the brokenness in my soul, my meaning was being made known. I was growing stronger, even though I felt depleted. The story beneath my health issues, my lack of direction, and my fear of seeing myself and being seen was that God was drawing me closer to the meaning of my specific life. He saw all of me and liked me anyway. In and through all these things, I was received as a fragrance.

I imagine how smells dwell and occupy space. I think about the delicate lavender scent lingering on my kitchen shelf right now, reminding me of summers past. I think about how smells layer together like stew simmering for hours, intoxicating my senses with comfort. When I walk into my favorite brick-and-mortar shop, tropical fruits and sweet citrus scents instantly enamor my soul like a familiar song. I never want to leave. Lemongrass, chopped and submerged into my dad's Thai curry, sends up swirls of sour and spice like streamers inviting me to a party. Smells envelop me.

My friend Ashley always smells like sweet peaches. With every hug, my heart is held by love. Her fragrance isn't only from her perfume; it radiates out from who she is—kind, generous, and warm. I think we all know people in our lives who radiate love like this. Beauty, gratitude, and joy flow almost effortlessly out of them. Their circumstances could be dire, yet they have an internal light. We don't just see it, but we sense it. We smell it. We want to be around it. I want to be this kind of person. The kind who glows on the inside and outside. When people are in my presence, I want them to sense love. The scent of Christ. This is what my name means.

The doctor that day thought he was delivering bad news, but he didn't. He wrote me a new prescription for life. I knew if I were to get sick, I wouldn't suffer alone. I knew I didn't need to siphon strength from friends, sisters, and coworkers for the rest of my life. I didn't need to lean on my knowledge, abilities, or inner confidence for courage. Instead, I leaned more into the story Jesus was writing in me. As I leaned, I let Christ come closer. As I know my purpose, every doubt inside of me settles. I feel unstoppable.

I wasn't afraid to let the inside of me live on the outside anymore. The yellow sheet hung proudly on my wall until I didn't even notice it anymore. A few months later, I would even display my soul sheet in an art show for strangers to see. My heart lived on the outside of my chest the way I think hearts are supposed to live—breathing, beautiful, and exposed.

I was awake now to my meaning. His meaning in me. You can call me Anjelli, Ann-Julie, or July. I don't care how you say

it. What matters is that my name means something. I mean something. In all that I am, in all that I do, in everything that I face in life, God receives my life as an offering of love. He sustains me. My soul is held suspended and secure. I become full. My name is Anjuli, and to God, my life is a fragrance.