



Overwhelmed & Grateful

The Key to Finding God's
Goodness in All Life's
Ups & Downs

JILLIAN
BENFIELD

“Overwhelmed & Grateful is a stunning masterpiece that is hard to put down. Jillian Benfield leaves you feeling seen, understood, and held by God above as you learn to both recognize and embrace the & moments of life. She authentically and beautifully weaves together personal stories, astonishing facts, and Scripture. Her personal stories are reminders that we are not alone in the struggles we face in life and that we can simultaneously hold those things that seem in opposition. The Further Reading, Reflection, and & Gratitude Practice sections at the end of each chapter give the reader places to pause and reflect on all the wisdom Benfield shares in a way that enriches the text and really invites the reader in. Her words are a gift to all who crack open & find themselves in the pages of this book.”

Jen Thompson, author of *Return to Jesus* and writer
at *Truly Yours*, Jen blog

“Jillian Benfield’s Overwhelmed & Grateful beautifully articulates what those of us who’ve experienced special needs parenting and loss know intimately—that our hearts can simultaneously hold deep pain and profound gratitude. Her wisdom about living in the ‘&’ space invites us into a richer experience, where gratitude doesn’t erase our pain but transforms how we carry it.”

Rachel Wojo, mom of a child with a disability, loss mom,
author of *Desperate Prayers*

“In a culture abuzz with talk of gratitude, Jillian takes us deeper into not just the practice of being thankful but altogether renewed vision—vision constantly awake to the divine among the difficult. This is more than a simple change of perspective. It is a call to hone your habits of awareness and no longer miss life’s invitations to see and to celebrate.”

Mattie Jackson, bestselling author of *Lemons on Friday*
and *Through the Valley of Grief*

“Contrary to what culture tells us, we are not merely a reflection of our good choices because (more often than not) *life* happens too. Enter the ‘& concept.’ In *Overwhelmed & Grateful*, Jillian reminds us that our days are both beautiful & hard, and I can feel overwhelmed by them & grateful for them all at the same time. This is an idea I’ll carry with me forever.”

Mikala Albertson, MD, family doctor and author of *Everything I Wish I Could Tell You About Midlife: A Woman’s Guide to Health in the Body You Actually Have*

“*Overwhelmed & Grateful* is a gentle invitation to live fully in the tension of joy and sorrow, beauty and brokenness, the fullness of our humanity. Jillian gives us permission to sit in the hard while holding on to the good, walking us through the complex emotions we face and helping us process them in small steps. *Overwhelmed & Grateful* offers a much-needed mindset shift, reminding us that God meets us in every moment—the messy, mundane, miraculous, and unexpected. It reassures us that it’s okay to live in the both/and, to be overwhelmed and still grateful.”

Natasha Smith, author of *Can You Just Sit with Me? Healthy Grieving for the Losses of Life*

“As always, Jillian is a voice in the darkness that the world sorely needs. In *Overwhelmed & Grateful*, she helps us hold both in our hands as we examine these wonderful, beautiful, and sometimes wonderfully hard lives God has given us. Through real stories as well as strategies and reflections, she gently guides us to not only live in the Lord but to live in our *lives* as wholly as we are meant to.”

Amy Betters-Midtvædt, author of *You’ll Make It (and They Will Too): Everything No One Talks About When You’re Parenting Teens*, educator, speaker, and mom of five

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Books by Jillian Benfield

The Gift of the Unexpected
Overwhelmed & Grateful

Overwhelmed & Grateful

The Key to Finding God's
Goodness in All Life's
Ups & Downs

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For my mom, Joanne,
who has held me through the storms
& by her presence, helped me point
my face toward the sun.
Thank you, Suzy Sunshine.

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Foreword

YEARS AGO, a dear friend of mine received a life-changing diagnosis.

Breast cancer.

Hearing the word *cancer* at any age is devastating, of course.

But she was only in her early thirties.

Young. Healthy. A wife and mom of three little boys.

I couldn't comprehend it. I know she felt the same.

I had many conversations with God about this one. We talk often, though I tend to do most of the talking.

"God, why does she have cancer? I don't understand. Help me understand."

During one particularly hard day of motherhood, I was venting to this friend about something going on in my life. I can't remember what it was—probably exhaustion and overwhelm from parenting my own small kids.

After a few minutes of talking, I realized I had been going on and on about my situation, which made me feel insensitive to my friend.

Her problems, of course, seemed so much bigger in my mind. Sure, I had stress—don't we all? But I didn't have cancer. What did I have to complain about?

“I’m so sorry,” I told her. “This must seem small and petty to you. I should stop complaining—this is nothing compared to what you’re going through.”

I’ll never forget her response.

“Leslie, just because my version of hard is different than yours doesn’t make it any less hard. What you’re going through is a lot for you. Don’t compare the two. I’m here for you, just as you’re here for me.”

Mic. Drop.

Just because my version of hard is different from yours doesn’t make it any less valid.

Her beautiful words helped me embrace my own struggles and gave me empathy for the hardships of others. I watched this woman undergo rounds of medical treatments to save her life, all while radiating love and gratitude.

She often showed up to chemo in her wedding gown, determined to find joy even as life-saving poison coursed through her veins.

She shared her story with strangers online.

She smiled and cried and wasn’t afraid to tell the world that what she was going through was pretty dang hard.

She was in the muck and still found joy and—*gasp*—had enough energy to sit with others facing their own battles.

She is my hero. I’m not sure she realizes how much her strength, compassion, and love for life changed me.

And by the grace of God, she has been cancer-free for years.

My friend reminded me we each face our own version of hard. But life is too short to simply wish it away. I’m old enough now to know that saying things like, “Hey, God, if you can just get me through this week, then I’m sure I’ll be able to relax,” is laughable.

Ha! Remember the old saying? If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans.

The reality is, we're all going to face challenges along this journey. And just when we get through one, *BAM*—another one takes its place.

What gets us through is finding joy in the midst of it and making space to empathize with others—even when their struggles don't look like ours.

That's what gives us hope.

Love.

Compassion.

Empathy.

Wisdom.

That's what makes us better humans.

Just because I'm going through my own version of hard doesn't make yours any less real. I'm here for you.

And do you know who else embodies this truth so well?

Jillian.

She knows that not all women will walk her exact journey. But because of it, she's able to sit with others—either in person or metaphorically, through this beautiful book—to help us all see through the hard and find goodness within it.

This book is a gift. Not just because it's filled with Jillian's inspiring words, but because, as she so beautifully states:

There is no line dividing the secular and the sacred. God's fingerprints mark it all. Our job is to recognize it. To recognize this Love who is ever-present in us and in each other, in nature and in the good things God inspired people to create.

I want to create pause, to sit in awe, to thank God for life's beauty in busy times, in times of heartbreak and when I am finding my way to new ground.

Same, Jillian. Same.

Dear reader, what you're going through is hard.

But there's hope in the darkness. There's joy in the hurt.
There's love in the pain.

Let's figure this out together.

—Leslie Means, founder of Her View From Home
and author of *So God Made a Mother*
and *So God Made a Grandma*

Introduction

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Don't be afraid.

—Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words:
Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*

YEARS AGO, I had one of the saddest conversations of my life. The conversation wasn't about death; it wasn't about grief. It was about beauty.

It was late September 2016 when my husband, Andy, and I, with our three-year-old and eighteen-month-old, boarded a plane in Tucson, Arizona, caught another in Las Vegas, and landed in Atlanta to join Andy's family in putting his grandfather, Fred Sr., to rest. We drove through Atlanta traffic to the North Georgia funeral home where Fred, a World War II veteran, husband, and father of five, lay.

We arrived at the Georgia funeral home with our toddlers in tow. We saw Grandpa from afar. We made small talk with distant relatives while the smell of disinfectant, lilies, and embalming chemicals hung in the air. A deacon arrived and

asked if anyone wanted to share something about Fred Sr., and many did.

But that's not where the sad conversation took place.

It unfolded afterward at my in-laws' house. Family from Georgia and the Midwest sat where they could find a chair or an open spot on the couch. The house was filled with an array of covered dishes brought in by neighbors and loved ones. There were paper plates to serve yourself. There was chatter, lots of it. In other words, there was life. There was death and there was life. Life among the death.

I sat across from the eldest people at the gathering at the black and cherry kitchen table. They were distant relatives I had never met. We talked about another relative who couldn't make it to the funeral. This relative lived in one of the most beautiful places in the United States. The old woman sitting across from me told me how harsh and how very long the winters could be there.

I asked her, "Do the mountains and lakes make up for it a bit?"

She replied, "Oh, it all just becomes the background."¹

Just the background—how sad, I thought.

We were a military family at the time and moved more than the average military family. As someone who had spent only three years living amid the Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona mountains, I couldn't fathom their beauty fading into the background. The mountains were alive to me, a part of my every day. They were a constant. They sustained me through many hard years, years I will tell you about later in this book. They were a reminder that God's beauty, God's goodness, God's self are here, right here. *Even here. Even now.*

I forgot about the exchange until years later. After spending three years in mountainless Texas, the military assigned us to Colorado—our dream location. A location I thought

we would never leave. Life leveled out there. After many tumultuous years for our family, we had finally made it to our desired destination: one with fewer medical appointments and medical scares, with more resources and less anxiety over school systems for our son with a disability. And we were back in the mountains.

Then, one day, I drove from our home to drop off my youngest at preschool. At the top of the hill, before the turn into the church parking lot, was the most spectacular panoramic view of the entire Colorado Springs mountain range, surrounding its crown jewel—Pike’s Peak. Normally, the view made me gasp, or had me praying a simple two-word prayer, *Thank you*. But on that day, I had no reaction.

The beauty had become the background.

It was a wake-up call, a warning sign that something was off.

Life can be overwhelming even when it’s steady. This book is called *Overwhelmed & Grateful*. You’ll encounter that overwhelm in each of the chapters ahead. Overwhelm looks like anger and confusion. Overwhelm looks like longing and tears. Even if we are not in a place of overwhelming busyness or grief, even when we are not experiencing a life change that has us reeling, there’s so often something or someone who needs more of us—more of us than we sometimes feel capable of giving. We are pulled in multiple directions at once when life has been turned upside down and even when it is right side up.

When things are steady, there are still schedules to manage, deadlines to meet, and laundry always in need of folding. All while trying to fit in exercising, getting enough sleep, and drinking enough water too! And it is so often overwhelming. When our calendars, our minds, and our hearts are brimming, it’s easy to miss the beauty all around

us. When our children's giggles don't make us pause and breathe in thanks, when our spouse touches the small of our back and we can't feel that quick burst of love, or when we can't see the presence of the Divine in the nearby wheat field, the swaying palm trees, or the mountains, it's time to create pause. It's time to start paying attention to the beauty once more.

There is no line dividing the secular and the sacred. God's fingerprints mark it all. Our job is to recognize it. To recognize this Love who is ever-present in us and in each other, in nature and in the good things God inspired people to create.

I want to create pause, to sit in awe, to thank God for life's beauty in busy times, in times of heartbreak, and when I am finding my way to new ground. I believe it was my time in those upside-down years that taught me to look for beauty. I was desperate to find something good to hold on to. Now that life has settled, now that my want has lessened, I have found that keeping an eye out for beauty requires daily practice. I have found that I cannot always fix overwhelm and yet I can look for beauty within it. I am hoping you will join me in searching.

Because I do not want to become an old woman who let the beauty of her life become the background. I have a feeling you don't want to become an old woman who missed the good and lovely things of your one precious life either.

But what does the spiritual practice of recognizing and being thankful for beauty look like when life is really hard? What does it look like when you are covered in baby spit-up and taking a conference call in your unkempt house? What does it look like when the unexpected has upended your life—instead of walking your neighborhood each morning you are now walking the hospital hallways, praying for rescue? What does it look like after one of life's metaphorical

storms has passed, but the storm blew you off course and you are living in a place that feels unrecognizable?

Western culture often tells us we should downplay the hard parts of our lives and just focus on the positive.

“Look on the bright side!”

“It could be worse!”

“Good vibes only!”

These sayings and others ring in our conversations and echo in our minds when hard times hit. Yet, forced positivity can be dangerous. Toxic positivity “is defined as the act of rejecting or denying stress, negativity, or other negative experiences that exist.”²

Multiple studies have found that denying our emotions makes us depressed and physically ill.³ A Harvard study found that people who bottle up their emotions even increase their chance of premature death from all causes by more than 30 percent, with their risk of being diagnosed with cancer increasing by 70 percent.⁴ As author and researcher Dr. Brené Brown puts it, when we deny emotions, they own us.⁵

Research points us to be more candid, more honest about our emotions instead of ignoring them. However, research also consistently shows that practicing gratitude leads to a happier life.

The word *gratitude* comes from “the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness.”⁶ According to researchers at Harvard Medical School, in the process of practicing gratitude, people usually recognize that the source of goodness in their lives “lies at least partially outside themselves,” and consequently, being grateful also helps us connect to something larger than ourselves.⁷

In the past two decades, social scientists have found gratitude to have measurable benefits for nearly every area of our

lives.⁸ The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley describes gratitude as the “social glue” that inspires people to be more generous, kind, and helpful and key to building and nurturing strong relationships.⁹

So, what is gratitude? Gratitude is the act of recognizing and being thankful for goodness and beauty. Gratitude is a feeling we get when we acknowledge this goodness, and it is more than a feeling.

Diana Butler Bass, the author of *Grateful*, writes that gratitude is also an awareness.

Gratitude is not only the emotional response to random experiences, but even in the darkest times of life, gratitude waits to be seen, recognized and acted upon more thoughtfully and with a sense of purpose. Gratitude is a feeling, but it is also more than that. And it is much more than a spiritual technique to achieve peace of mind or prosperity. Gratitude is a habit of awareness that reshapes our self-understanding and the moral choices we make in the world.¹⁰

Gratitude requires a heightened awareness. This noticing can sustain us and it has the power to change us. Gratitude is required to transform into the people we are meant to become.

I believe that gratitude helps us to connect to the source of life itself, and when we are more in touch with our Creator, we begin to live out the full life God dreams for us—one marked by love.

There is a paradox here:

Denying our emotions harms us.

Practicing gratitude—a habit that requires us to look at the good and positive aspects of life—helps us.

So how do we deal with these two seemingly competing truths?

How do we recognize beauty and be thankful for it at the graveside?

How do we practice gratitude when someone who promised to love us forever leaves?

How do we move forward when we are carrying a tormented past we wish we could trade?

The word *and*, or *&*.



The history of the ampersand is rooted in ancient Rome. The exact date of its creation is unknown, but the first record of *&* was found beneath the ash of the volcanic eruption that buried Pompeii in 79 AD. The writer was linking the letters *e* and *t*—forming the word *et* in Latin, which translates to the word *and* in English.¹¹ The ampersand is a link, a connection.

My history with the ampersand began in 2017—the year I gave birth to my youngest son, Preston, in Texas. Preston was diagnosed with posterior urethral valves in utero. I will tell more of his story later, but just know that the year he was born was one of the most difficult years of my life. Between Preston and my son Anderson, who has Down syndrome, the boys had eighteen specialists between them, my husband tells me. I add this detail of my husband recounting this because every day I was simply surviving and trying to make sure my boys more than survived.

That year, I read a Facebook post by Rachel Whalen about how the word *and* helps us to live more truthfully.¹² I could feel scared and worn out from my child's medical conditions & I could feel incredibly grateful that the worst—the worst that we were told in an ultrasound at fourteen weeks gestation—had not come to pass.

Before reading that article, I may have described this time in my life like this: “This is the hardest my life has ever been *but* I’m so grateful my sons are here and their medical conditions are improving!”

We are conditioned to frame things this way—in the *but* of things. We are conditioned to shine a light on the positive, otherwise we fear we are just sad, negative people.

However, unlike the word *and* that connects two ideas, the word *but* often does the opposite. *But* disconnects a statement that has already been made. When we use *but*, we negate the first part of our truth. Or, at the very least, downplay it. One of my main objectives with this book is for us to become *&* users. Because *&* helps us live in the fullness of our realities; *&* is our reminder that two competing emotions can be true at once. We can honor the darker parts of our reality while also practicing gratitude—the act of looking for and being thankful for the goodness around us and in us. Because God’s goodness is always at work.

Gratitude is not the act of denying our hard circumstances; instead, it looks for beauty wherever our feet take us. In the mundane, in the sorrow, and in the rebuilding, the Divine is there—whispering the ways of love. Gratitude, in many ways, is the act of paying attention to this love that is always beating.

I wrote in my first book, *The Gift of the Unexpected*, that the closest I ever felt to God’s presence was in the fifth-floor waiting room of a hospital while my son was undergoing open-heart surgery. I could tell you that day was awful and it would be true *&* I can tell you that I experienced peace like never before. That would also be true. With *&*, we don’t have to choose. Gratitude is not a cure *&* gratitude can play a part in our healing when no cure is available. We have permission to live into our beautiful *&* difficult realities. We can be

honest about what hurts, confuses, or even angers us & we can be on the lookout for God’s beauty still unfolding. & is the spiritual practice of noticing. & is a prayer.



In his book *The Spirituality of the Psalms*, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann divides the Psalms into three categories:

- Psalms of Orientation reflect the goodness of God’s creation and order.
- Psalms of Disorientation reflect our periods of hurt, anguish, and confusion.
- Psalms of New Orientation reflect when joy breaks through once more and the psalmist is overwhelmed with gratitude for the new gifts God has given.¹³

Brueggemann writes, “The flow of human life characteristically is located either in the actual experience of one of these settings or is in movement from one to another.”¹⁴

In this book, we will call the rhythms of life Order, Disorder, and Reorder.

- **Order**—when life is relatively steady, even a bit predictable, and we can live at a day-to-day pace. Of course, even when our feet find a solid path, there is inevitably a bump along the way that makes us trip. No pathway exists without an ill-placed stone or a twisty root that can make us lose our balance. Or perhaps you’re walking with a heavier backpack than most. You carry this added challenge or pain with you, yet you’ve learned

how to manage. You know how to move through life with it, even if at times it feels like too much. Being in a place of Order doesn't mean life is without hardships, but for the most part, these challenges are an expected disruption, since we know life is never perfect.

- **Disorder**—when an unexpected storm has come into our lives. We move to this place often by surprise, and the surprise is not a welcome one. Even if we know an ending is on the horizon, nothing can fully prepare us for the storm's level of impact. The tempest blows trees down onto the path we once knew. Our feet are no longer touching the ground. The terrain, our lives, are now unrecognizable, and it is devastating. We must make our way through the debris to find a new path.
- **Reorder**—when we have made our way through the wreckage of the storm. We find ourselves on that familiar path but it is not quite the same as we remember. Traces of the storm still linger & there are new things along the path because of the storm. The storm cleared shrubs and made way for new life to bloom. We are surprised by God's love breaking through once more. We are amazed by how we have changed through it too.

Brueggemann insists his Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation method is not meant to be a straitjacket.¹⁵ We will take the same approach in this book. I believe we can experience a sense of Order in a Disordered period and Disorder once we have found our way to Reorder. Life is complex. I use these categories so we can discover how to practice the *& life* in all its ups and downs. It is also why you will see a suggested reading of a Psalm at the end of each chapter. The Psalms speak to us because they reflect the lives

we have—lives that are so very often overwhelming. This overwhelming life is filled with great suffering & great joys. Thank God, the Psalms teach us our humanity is allowed. More than half of the Psalms are laments. The Psalms show us how to be in relationship with our Creator in all of life's phases. The Psalms remind us that God is with us in the struggle & in the rebuilding. The Psalms are so often an act of &. They remind us that bad things happen and we are allowed to account the damage. The Psalms so often end in hope & end in trust that God sees us in our struggle and will somehow, some way, bring us to new life once more.

“Feeling is only half the equation,” says Phillip Watkins, professor of psychology and author of *Gratitude and the Good Life*.¹⁶ It is equally important to express gratitude to reap the benefits, according to Watkins.¹⁷ That's why at the end of each chapter there is also a short “&” prompt, designed to get you to really think about hard realities you are facing or have faced and to reflect on where you can see beauty in these periods.

My hope is that when you close this book, you will find your own way of reflecting, meditating, or praying through the &'s in your life—whether in a journal, a note on your phone, or a pause in the middle of the day to acknowledge the harsh & be grateful for the lovely.

This is a book about gratitude and it is also about honesty. My hope is that this book, this practice of &, will help you become more honest than you ever have been. Honest with God, honest with the people in your life, and honest with yourself. Honesty takes in the whole picture. If you look at your life and only talk about the good, that's not being honest. If you look at your life and only see the bad, that's not honest either. Love is why you are here, and you cannot experience its fullness without honesty & gratitude. & can

help you to go deeper than you have gone before in your relationships, in your endeavors, and in your faith. & can help you to live fully. This is what I hope for you. This is what I hope for myself—that we are fully alive while we are living.

Because when we are overwhelmed, we can get used to coasting. We can get used to living with grief and letting it be our only companion and not make room for anyone else to come in. We can get used to wanting to go back, back to better times, and forget to live the lives we have right now. We can get so used to the mountain view that instead of our appreciating its majesty, it becomes merely the background of our lives.

My hope for you when you close this book is that you will live into the &. Because to do so is to live into the life you actually have and into the life you are meant to co-create with the One who created you. & is honest. & is hopeful. & can remind you that even when the worst comes to pass, love still beats and love still creates. & love can help you live your life to the fullest and & can help you live into your fullest self—the version of you God dreamt up long ago.

I am writing this book from the vantage point of faith. Through years of enduring bad fundamentalist theology to years of agnosticism, I have arrived to this place where I believe Jesus was and is who He claimed to be. Even now, when the church disappoints me or confuses me or even has me wanting to run away—I can't get over Jesus. But you don't need to be a devoted Christian to join me on this journey of honoring the hard things & beautiful things of life. You just need to be open to this transformative process that can take place when we move from an either/or way of living and toward a both/and way of being.

In each chapter, we will explore the common emotions we experience at these different points of the human experience.

(And of course, we can feel all sorts of emotions no matter what rhythm of life we are in!) In each chapter, we will learn how to hold the dark in one hand, the light in the other, honoring both. This book will combine science, metaphor, and passages from the Bible to remind us of our humanity and to take refuge in the One who took on humanity.

Jesus entered the darkness with us, acknowledged its power, wept with us, was hungry and tired and misunderstood, like us. Jesus enjoyed friendships & ended up being betrayed by a friend. Jesus experienced the joy of healing people wherever He went & He experienced exhaustion. Jesus knew the deep trust of a friend that prompted him to walk on water & the same friend denied knowing Jesus in His darkest hour. Jesus knew the darkness & He was the light. He wants us to remember: Darkness is here & so too is the light. This light is more powerful than the darkness. This light is in us and all around us. This light is pointing out the good and pointing us toward a good life.

In this world, we will experience the full range of what it means to be human, and being human is so very hard. & we always have access to this light.

Let's learn to be the kind of people who have eyes to see, let's be the kind of people who create space to hold it all—the difficult & the beautiful.

Because life is both.

Let's be people who notice.

We get the beautiful life we are looking for when we acknowledge the darkness of this world & see God's love in all its forms whispering to us in the midst.

Beauty cannot fade to the background when we make a habit of whispering back, "Thank you."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AS WE BEGIN

What rhythm of life are you in right now: Order, Disorder, or Reorder?

Is it easy or hard for you to see beauty right now? What is helping you or hindering you?

& REFLECTION

The overwhelm I am experiencing right now is:

& I can see beauty in my life right now in this way: