

Contents

Sowing Seeds	9
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PART ONE:

1. Withering on the Vine	17
2. Breaking Ground	31
3. Returning to Our Roots	45
4. Family Tree	61

PART TWO:

5. Local Honey	81
6. Healing Herbs	99
7. Vine-Ripened	117

PART THREE:

8. Natural Resources	137
9. Field of Dreams	155
10. Thorns and Thistles	173
11. A Secret Garden	191

Acknowledgments	207
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I

They shall sit every man under his vine
and under his fig tree, and no one shall
make them afraid, for the mouth of the
LORD of hosts has spoken.

—MICAH 4:4



FIGURE 1

Red Anemone, *Anemone coronaria*

Withering on the Vine

“The kind of life that makes one feel empty and shallow and superficial, that makes one dread to read and dread to think, can’t be good for one, can it? It can’t be the kind of life one was meant to live.” —Willa Cather

I was done. I had reached my limit.

I rolled over to check the time—1:26 a.m.—and then rolled back over to look at my husband. By the light of the waxing moon, I could just make out the shape of his body under the white matelasse quilt we shared; his eyes were closed, his head resting serenely on his pillow. As my eyes adjusted to the silver-blue light, I could also see that his cotton pillowcase had a dark smudge on it—the consequence of having three children who love to cuddle and having made chocolate no-bake cookies earlier in the day. *Remember to strip the bed in the morning and put a load in the washer before you make breakfast*, I instructed myself, knowing full well that I wouldn’t.

I looked back at my husband who lay there facing me, although not seeing me. His entire body was relaxed, his arm draped across his bare chest, one hand extending in my direction and the other tucked beneath his head in an almost childlike posture. His

breathing was heavy but unrushed, rhythmic and content. The breathing of a man at rest. The breathing of a man oblivious to the fact that he was sleeping on a chocolate-stained pillowcase.

This wasn't the first time I'd found myself wide awake while everyone else in the house was asleep. If anything, it seemed to be happening more and more often despite the fact that all my children were past the nighttime feedings of infancy and soaked sheets of the toddler years. When one of them did need me, they'd simply stumble into our bed, dragging their blankets and stuffed menagerie with them. There was little reason for me to be awake at 1:26 a.m.

But there I lay: restless while everyone else rested.

To make matters worse, I was finding that my agitation didn't limit itself to nighttime hours. During the day, my mind raced from one responsibility to the next, mentally calculating all the things I needed to accomplish before bed. It also kept track of how many calories I'd consumed, what chores I'd left undone, and my failures to be an appropriately invested mother, readily available friend, and consistently devoted wife. And all of it made me so very tired.

I was tired of feeling judged everywhere I turned—unfinished to-do lists, neglected friendships, unreturned voicemails, and looming deadlines. I was tired of feeling overworked, tired of being stressed out, tired from all the busyness. I was tired of being sensitive, fragile, and snippy. I was also tired of knowing that I had absolutely no right to feel the way I did.

Blessed?

Despite my restlessness, our family was in the middle of one of the most blessed, most productive times of our lives. For many years of our married life, we'd existed in crisis mode: young babies, un-

and underemployment, issues at church, and multiple job transitions. But recently, Nathan had landed his dream job as a pastor of a small church in Appalachia, less than an hour from where he'd grown up. Like Edward Ferrars in the 1995 screen adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, my husband wanted nothing more than “a small parish where [he] might do some good. Keep chickens. Give very short sermons.”¹ So after eleven years of marriage—and almost as many moves—we returned to his home, to his Virginia, bought our first house, and started to put down roots. The move itself wasn't too difficult for me because I'd grown up in a similar community in the Pennsylvania foothills. I understood the cultural rhythms and loved the intimacy of smaller congregations. As a family, we were also moving into a new phase: Our children were quickly becoming self-reliant and nary a diaper, jar of baby food, or backward-facing car seat was in sight. To top it off, I'd just published a book. By anyone's standards, we were experiencing a new level of financial, physical, and professional freedom.

But still I felt weighed down.

For a while, I chalked it up to the stress of moving, the adjustment of living in yet another new place, meeting new people, and settling in.

It's a busy season . . .

If we can just get through this week, next week will be easier . . .

Maybe I need a girls' night out or a vacation . . .

If everyone would stop asking me to do stuff, I'd be okay . . .

But eventually, like the excuse of motherhood, these excuses wore thin too. Time passed, we developed a routine, but I still felt overwhelmed. The work I accomplished each day never felt like enough, and I regularly crawled into bed feeling like a failure. Some

1. Despite being a memorable line, this exact wording is not in Jane Austen's original work, which was published in 1811.

nights, as I lay awake next to my husband, I wondered whether I really wanted to sleep after all: I'd simply have to wake up the next morning and start the cycle all over again.

Nathan, on the other hand, seemed to experience a natural (and infuriating) calm. He'd come home from the church, change out of his dress clothes, and work around the house. He'd play or do homework with the kids, putter in his garden, split firewood for the coming winter, and eventually, when it was time for bed, lay his head on his pillow and drift into an effortless eight hours of rest.

"How do you do that?" I asked him once. "How do you just go off to sleep the way you do?"

He looked at me with the same blank stare he might have offered if I'd asked him to stand on his head and recite the Etruscan alphabet. I persisted.

"I mean, how do you turn it all off? How do you just lie down and . . . fall asleep?"

"It's not that complicated, really. I'm tired. I lay down. I close my eyes. I go to sleep."

"Well, I'm tired too, but my mind just keeps turning—I keep thinking about all the stuff I didn't get done and the stuff I'll have to do when I wake up and to remember to take the kids to piano lessons and email my editor and call Nancy to see how her surgery went—"

"That's because you're an A-plus kind of girl, Hannah," he interrupted. "Me? I'm content with a B-plus. Just go to sleep."

Was it that? Was I simply a perfectionist? I didn't feel like a perfectionist—my house certainly didn't scream "perfectionist." It screamed a lot of other things, but it didn't scream perfect. When I thought about the piles of clothes sitting next to the washer, I'd feel guilty. But when I began working through the piles, sorting them into darks and whites, heavy and light, I'd feel guilty over owning so much stuff. And then I'd feel guilty about feeling guilty.

No, I wasn't a perfectionist. I was simply losing my mind.

Age of Anxiety

But, of course, I wasn't. Losing my mind would have been a legitimate explanation for the level of angst I was experiencing; embarrassingly, my troubles were much more mundane. The truth was that I had no large looming problems, only small ones that *felt* large. I had no major life crises, only minor ones that *felt* major. I had no monumental difficulties, only trivial ones that *felt* unbelievably monumental. I was stressed and unhappy with a very normal life.

As it turns out, I am not the only one to feel this way. In 2015, the American Psychological Association released a report detailing the state of stress in the United States. The purpose of the study was to measure “attitudes and perceptions of stress among the general public . . . and draw attention to the serious physical and emotional implications of stress and the inextricable link between the mind and body.”² In other words, the APA was trying to figure out why so many of us spent our days feeling overwhelmed and unable to sleep at night.

According to the data, 75 percent of Americans report experiencing some level of stress in the previous month, with 42 percent reporting that they had lain awake at night and 33 percent reporting that they had eaten unhealthy food as a result. And while the sources of our stress are varied—money, work, family responsibilities, and physical health—my own experience suggests that some of us are skillful enough to worry about all of these things at the same time.

And when we do, we end up irritable, nervous, apathetic, fatigued, and overwhelmed. In her book *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin described her own experience with stress this way:

2. “Paying With Our Health,” American Psychological Association. February 4, 2015, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2014/stress-report.pdf>.

I had much to be happy about . . . but too often I sniped at my husband. . . . I felt dejected after even a minor professional setback. I drifted out of touch with old friends, I lost my temper easily, I suffered bouts of melancholy, insecurity, listlessness, and free-floating.³

The data also suggests that Ms. Rubin's being a woman and a mother made her particularly susceptible to experiencing higher incidence of stress. Compared to men, women report higher levels of stress, and compared to their childless peers, parents report higher levels of stress as well. For some, the data is even more unsettling. If you happen to be a woman, a mother, and part of the Millennial generation, your vulnerability to stress is even greater. It appears that the carefree days of youth are no longer carefree. Whether it's the struggle to find stable employment or finally having to face the realities of the world apart from hovering parents, young adults report higher rates of stress and depression than older adults do.

Truthfully, we don't need a report to tell us how much anxiety is creeping into the corners of our lives. When I run into a friend in our small community, we inevitably end up commiserating about how busy we are and how we can't get things done and we'll have to get together soon but of course we won't. At church, the conversations are the same: "I'd love to help, but I just can't right now."

So when I see these statistics, I don't see numbers; I see people. I see moms and dads and grandmas and grandpas who stand in the pick-up line with me every Monday through Friday at 2:20 waiting to shuttle our kids to the next scheduled event. I see my younger friends who are trying to sort out where they belong in this

3. Gretchen Rubin, *The Happiness Project: Or Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun* (New York: Harper, 2009), 1–2.

world while the world taps its toes, demanding that they hurry up and figure it out. I see peers in ministry, freely giving of their time and energy but privately wondering whether their efforts amount to anything. I see women and men whose social media feeds flood with image after perfect image, but who never see the less than perfect backdrops behind them.

I see all of us: blessed beyond measure, but exhausted, anxious, and uncertain nonetheless.

The Lilies of the Field

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” —Jesus of Nazareth

One February, several years ago, I unexpectedly found myself sitting on a hillside in the southern Golan Heights, near the Sea of Galilee. It wasn't entirely unexpected, of course. Nathan and I had planned the trip, bought tickets, boarded a plane in Philadelphia, and were subsequently welcomed by friends in Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport. For the next week, we wandered the ancient alleyways of Jaffa, got caught in a rare storm in the En Gedi, jostled through Jerusalem's stalls and shrines, and eventually made it to the more peaceful environs of Galilee. Still, finding myself sitting on that hillside was unexpected in the sense that I'd never known to dream of the possibility.

But there I was. And at my feet lay a silvery lake, rimmed by neat olive groves and vineyards, rectangular fields of the kibbutzim, and clusters of small towns. Oddly enough, from my vantage point 450 meters above the sea's northeastern border, the view reminded me of home. The kibbutzim could have easily been dairy farms or small family homesteads; the olive trees and vineyards, exotic

counterparts to mountaintop orchards and grape arbors; and if I squinted just right, the rolling hills could have been the hills that surrounded our house. The small towns, too, would be full of hard-working, salt-of-the-earth folks, each community doggedly proud of its own identity.

There were differences, of course. At home, the hillsides were currently encrusted in mud and ice while a Mediterranean climate ensured that the temperatures in Galilee rarely fell below freezing. Instead of slippery roads and snowstorms, here winter brought the rains that made the hillsides blossom with small wild red anemone (*Anemone coronaria*).

The lilies of the field? I wondered, inspecting the velvety red petals and black center. *The ones that don't toil and don't spin and don't worry about tomorrow but let tomorrow worry about itself?*

Scholars suggest that Jesus may have actually delivered these words, along with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, in the hills west of the Sea of Galilee, closer to the first-century towns of Capernaum and Bethsaida. Still, the landscape where I sat was similar enough that I could picture farmers and fishermen, mothers and fathers, grandparents and grandchildren, leaving their work to gather at His feet. I could hear Him blessing them—the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful. I could see Him stretching out His hand, motioning to the birds in the air and the flowers growing at their feet.

“Do not be anxious about your life . . .” Jesus tells them. “Look at the birds of the air . . . consider the lilies of the field.”⁴ It was all so peaceful. So serene. Exactly the kind of place you could leave your troubles and burdens. Exactly the kind of place you could escape the turmoil and pressures of life. Exactly the kind of place you could believe that peace—both internal and external—was possible.

4. Matthew 6:25–28.

Exactly the last place I expected to stumble across a Soviet anti-tank gun.

The large rusted-out weapon sat just yards from where I'd been considering the lilies of the field; the left wheel had broken off years ago, giving it a slightly cockeyed lean, but its turret still pointed faithfully down toward the towns surrounding the Sea of Galilee. My friends told me that the hillside where we sat had once been part of the disputed border between Israel and Syria. During the 1960s, Syrian guerillas, backed by the Soviet Union, had shelled the kibbutzim and towns at its base. Eventually Israel pushed Syria back past her own border and then annexed the land they had occupied. Years later, this particular area of the Golan was quiet enough for tourists and picnickers, even while the remnants of war still littered the hillsides.

Weapons of war surrounded by carefree wild red anemones.

The juxtaposition was startling at first, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Galilee had always had its share of conflict, whether it was neighboring armies in the mid-twentieth century or invading Romans in the first. The people of those towns—Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum—knew difficulty. But even in times of relative peace, they were real people. People who carried the burdens of relationships, work, family life, and personal frustration. People who knew stress. People who, like me, struggled to sleep at night.

As much as I wanted to create this idyllic vision of a place where I could escape the difficulties of the world, it simply wasn't possible. No place is immune to care or worry. No place untouched by the violence and burdens of this life. Seeing that antitank gun reminded me of this and put Jesus' call to consider the lilies into an entirely different perspective. *If Jesus isn't calling us to escape the cares of this world, what is He calling us to?*

The Peace of Wild Things

*“When despair for the world grows in me /and I wake
in the night at the least sound . . . I come into the peace
of wild things.” —Wendell Berry*

As I lay awake at night thinking about all the things that I should have done and all the things I shouldn't have done, I could never escape the fact that most of them were trivial. An unreturned email, forgetting to move the clothes from the washer to the dryer, the conversation I kept putting off, the growing pile of invoices that needed to be submitted. It felt ridiculous. Why do all these “little” things amount to so much? Why do small burdens feel so heavy?

I wonder if I wasn't worrying about these little things themselves so much as what these little things revealed about larger things—about what they revealed about my larger helplessness. I shouldn't have to worry about small things because I should be able to handle small things. I *should* be able to return emails on time. I *should* be able to sleep at night. *But if I can't handle little things, what can I handle?* Failure at small things reminds us of how helpless we are in this great, wide world. When little things spiral out of control, they remind us that even they were never within our control in the first place.

And this is terrifying.

Jesus understood this. He understood that small things can unsettle us more than large things; so when He called the people of Galilee to leave their anxiety—when He calls us to do the same—He does so in context of very mundane, very ordinary concerns.

“Do not be anxious about your life,” He assures them, “what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.”⁵

5. Matthew 6:25.

It's striking, really. Here, in the middle of arguably the greatest sermon ever, Jesus talks about our daily worries, whatever they may be. He talks about how we stress over food and clothing and how we obsess over our physical bodies. At the same time, He doesn't shame us for worrying about them. He doesn't tell us to just be grateful, to remember how much better we have it than other people. He doesn't tell us that we simply need to be more productive or to work harder. Instead, He asks whether our worry is actually accomplishing anything.

“And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing?”⁶

Does fretting over meals and laundry produce more food or clean clothes? Does lying awake at night do anything to change situations that are completely outside your control in the first place? No. All your anxiety, all your worry, all your sleeplessness can't change a thing. And suddenly you come face to face with your limitations. Suddenly you realize how little you control your life. Suddenly you begin to understand why you feel like you're withering on the vine—why you feel so weak and wilting and unable to produce lasting fruit.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. Instead, He draws our attention to the natural world, the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. He tells us to learn what they already know, to enter into “the peace of wild things.” He calls us outside our current perception of reality to remember who *really* cares for us.

“But if God so clothes the grass of the field . . . will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”⁷

We may be unable to cope with the most basic realities of existence; but He isn't. In fact, He's already providing food for the birds

6. Matthew 6:27–28.

7. Matthew 6:30.

and luxurious garments for the flowers. They don't worry because they know that their Creator cares for them. They don't worry because they know the One who keeps this world running.

And so, the bright red anemone can dance beside the gun's turret because she knows that the words of Isaiah the prophet ring true:

Thus says God, the LORD,
 who created the heavens and
 stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what
 comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
 and spirit to those who walk in it:
“I am the LORD; I have called you in
 righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and
 keep you.”⁸

When we believe that we are responsible for our own existence, when we trust our ability to care for ourselves, we will have nothing but stress because we are unequal to the task. You know this. Deep inside, you know your limits even as you fight against them. You know your helplessness even as you press forward by sheer determination. But at some point, the world becomes too much, and the largeness of life threatens to overwhelm you. And when it does, you must stop. And you must do what Jesus told His friends and followers to do on that flowered hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

8. Isaiah 42:5–6.

Your heavenly Father knows what you need. He knows your heart is troubled. He also knows, better than you do, that all these things are beyond you. And so, this is what you must do, all that you must do: You must seek Him. And let Him take care of the rest.