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A DARE TO LIVE FULLY

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ANN VOSKAMP

A DARE TO LIVE FULLY
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*For the Farmer,
who tended and grew my soul*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

CHAPTER 1 *an emptier, fuller life*

CHAPTER 2 *a word to live ... and die by*

CHAPTER 3 *first flight*

CHAPTER 4 *a sanctuary of time*

CHAPTER 5 *what in the world, in all this world, is grace?*

CHAPTER 6 *what do you want? the place of seeing God*

CHAPTER 7 *seeing through the glass*

CHAPTER 8 *how will he not also?*

CHAPTER 9 *go lower*

CHAPTER 10 *empty to fill*

CHAPTER 11 *the joy of intimacy*

afterword

notes

acknowledgments

Bible translations

Praise

Copyright

About the Publisher

Share Your Thoughts

CHAPTER 1

an emptier, fuller life

Every sin is an attempt to fly from emptiness.

Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

A glowing sun-orb fills an August sky the day this story begins, the day I am born, the day I begin to live.

And I fill my mother's tearing ring of fire with my body emerging, virgin lungs searing with air of this earth and I enter the world like every person born enters the world: with clenched fists.

From the diameter of her fullness, I empty her out—and she bleeds. Vernix-creased and squalling, I am held to the light.

Then they name me.

Could a name be any shorter? Three letters without even the flourish of an e. Ann, a trio of curves and lines.

It means "full of grace."

I haven't been.

What does it mean to live full of grace? *To live fully alive?*

They wash my pasty skin and I breathe and I flail. I flail.

For decades, a life, I continue to flail and strive and come up so seemingly ... *empty*. I haven't lived up to my christening.

Maybe in those first few years my life slowly opened, curled like cupped hands, a receptacle open to the gifts God gives.

But of those years, I have no memories. They say memory jolts awake with trauma's electricity. That would be the year I turned four. The year when blood pooled and my sister died and I, all of us, snapped shut to grace.

Standing at the side porch window, watching my parents' stunned bending, I wonder if my mother had held me in those natal moments of naming like she held my sister in death.

In November light, I see my mother and father sitting on the back porch step rocking her swaddled body in their arms. I press my face to the kitchen window, the cold glass, and watch them, watch their lips move, not with sleep prayers, but with pleas for waking, whole and miraculous. It does not come. The police do. They fill out reports. Blood seeps through that blanket bound. I see that too, even now.

Memory's surge burns deep.

That staining of her blood scorches me, but less than the blister of seeing her uncovered, lying there. She had only toddled into the farm lane, wandering after a cat, and I can see the delivery truck driver sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, and I remember how he sobbed that he had never seen her. But I still see her, and I cannot forget. Her body, fragile and small, crushed by a truck's load in our farmyard, blood soaking into the thirsty, track-beaten earth. That's the moment the cosmos shifted, shattering any cupping of hands. I can still hear my mother's witnessing-scream, see my father's eyes shot white through.

My parents don't press charges and they are farmers and they keep trying to breathe, keep the body moving to keep the soul from atrophying. Mama cries when she strings out the laundry. She holds my youngest baby sister, a mere three weeks old, to the breast, and I can't imagine how a woman only weeks fragile from the birth of her fourth child witnesses the blood-on-gravel death of her third child and she leaks milk for the babe and she leaks grief for the buried daughter. Dad tells us a thousand times the story after dinner, how her eyes were water-clear and without shores, how she held his neck when she hugged him and held on for dear life. We accept the day of her death as an accident. But an act allowed by God?

For years, my sister flashes through my nights, her body crumpled on gravel. Sometimes in dreams, I cradle her in the quilt Mama made for her, pale green with the hand-embroidered Humpty Dumpty and Little Bo Peep, and she's safely cocooned. I await her unfurling and the rebirth. Instead the earth opens wide and swallows her up.

At the grave's precipice, our feet scuff dirt, and chunks of the firmament fall away. A clod of dirt hits the casket, shatters. Shatters over my little sister with the white-blond hair, the little sister who teased me and laughed; and the way she'd throw her head back and laugh, her milk-white cheeks dimpled right through with happiness, and I'd scoop close all her belly-giggling life. They lay her gravestone flat into the earth, a black granite slab engraved with no dates, only the five letters of her name. Aimee. It means "loved one." How she was. We had loved her. And with the laying of her gravestone, the closing up of her deathbed, so closed our lives.

Closed to any notion of grace.

Really, when you bury a child—or when you just simply get up every day and live life raw—you murmur the question soundlessly. No one hears. *Can there be a good God?* A God who graces with good gifts when a crib lies empty through long nights, and bugs burrow through coffins? Where is God, *really?* How can He be good when babies die, and marriages implode, and dreams blow away, dust in the wind? Where is grace bestowed when cancer gnaws and loneliness aches and nameless places in us soundlessly die, break off without reason, erode away. Where hides this joy of the Lord, this God who fills the earth with good things, and how do I fully live when life is full of hurt? How do I wake up to joy and grace and beauty and all that is the fullest life when I must stay numb to losses and crushed dreams and all that empties me out?

My family—my dad, my mama, my brother and youngest sister—for years, we all silently ask these questions. For years, we come up empty. And over the years, we fill again—with estrangement. We live with our hands clenched tight. What God once gave us on a day in November slashed deep. Who risks again?

Years later, I sit at one end of our brown plaid couch, my dad stretched out along its length. Worn from a day driving tractor, the sun beating and the wind blowing, he asks me to stroke his hair. I stroke from that cowlick of his and back, his hair ringed from the line of his cap. He closes his eyes. I ask questions that I never would if looking into them.

“Did you ever used to go to church? Like a long time ago, Dad?” Two neighboring families take turns picking me up, a Bible in hand and a dress ironed straight, for church services on Sunday mornings. Dad works.

“Yeah, as a kid I went. Your grandmother had us go every Sunday, after milking was done. That was important to her.”

I keep my eyes on his dark strands of hair running through my fingers. I knead out tangles.

“But it’s not important to you now?” The words barely whispered, hang.

He pushes up his plaid sleeves, shifts his head, his eyes still closed. “Oh ...”

I wait, hands combing, waiting for him to find the words for those feelings that don’t fit neatly into the stiff ties, the starched collars, of sentences.

“No, I guess not anymore. When Aimee died, I was done with all of that.”

Scenes blast. I close my eyes; reel.

“And, if there really is anybody up there, they sure were asleep at the wheel that day.”

I don’t say anything. The lump in my throat burns, this ember. I just stroke his hair. I try to sooth his pain. He finds more feelings. He stuffs them into words.

“Why let a beautiful little girl die such a senseless, needless death? And she didn’t just die. She was *killed*.”

That word twists his face. I want to hold him till it doesn’t hurt, make it all go away. His eyes remain closed, but he’s shaking his head now, remembering all there was to say no to that hideous November day that branded our lives.

Dad says nothing more. That shake of the head says it all, expresses our closed hands, our bruised, shaking fists. No. No benevolent Being, no grace, no meaning to it all. My dad, a good farmer who loved his daughter the way only eyes can rightly express, he rarely said all that; only sometimes, when he'd close his eyes and ask me to stroke away the day between the fingers. But these aren't things you need to say anyways. Like all beliefs, you simply live them.

We did.

No, God.

No God.

Is this the toxic air of the world, this atmosphere we inhale, burning into our lungs, this *No, God? No, God, we won't take what You give. No, God, Your plans are a gutted, bleeding mess and I didn't sign up for this and You really thought I'd go for this? No, God, this is ugly and this is a mess and can't You get anything right and just haul all this pain out of here and I'll take it from here, thanks. And God? Thanks for nothing.* Isn't this the human inheritance, the legacy of the Garden?

I wake and put the feet to the plank floors, and I believe the Serpent's hissing lie, the repeating refrain of his campaign through the ages: God isn't good. It's the cornerstone of his movement. That God withholds good from His children, that God does not genuinely, fully, love us.

Doubting God's goodness, distrusting His intent, discontented with what He's given, we desire ... *I have desired ... more.* The fullest life.

I look across farm fields. The rest of the garden simply isn't enough. It will never be enough. God said humanity was not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And I moan that God has ripped away what I wanted. No, what I *needed*. Though I can hardly whisper it, I live as though He stole what I consider rightly mine: happiest children, marriage of unending bliss, long, content, death-defying days. I look in the mirror, and if I'm fearlessly blunt—what I have, who I am, where I am, how I am, what I've got—this simply isn't enough. That forked tongue darts and daily I live the doubt, look at my reflection, and ask: Does God really love me? If He truly, deeply loves me, why does He withhold that which I believe will fully

nourish me? Why do I live in this sense of rejection, of less than, of pain? Does He not want me to be *happy*?

From all of our beginnings, we keep reliving the Garden story.

Satan, he wanted more. More power, more glory. Ultimately, in his essence, Satan is an ingrate. And he sinks his venom into the heart of Eden. Satan's sin becomes the first sin of all humanity: *the sin of ingratitude*. Adam and Eve are, simply, painfully, ungrateful for what God gave.

Isn't that the catalyst of all my sins?

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other.

Standing before that tree, laden with fruit withheld, we listen to Evil's murmur, "In the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened ..." (Genesis 3:5 NASB). But in the beginning, our eyes were already open. Our sight was perfect. Our vision let us see a world spilling with goodness. Our eyes fell on nothing but the glory of God. We saw God as He truly is: good. But we were lured by the deception that there was more to a full life, there was more to see. And, true, there was more to see: the ugliness we hadn't beheld, the sinfulness we hadn't witnessed, the loss we hadn't known.

We eat. And, in an instant, we are blind. No longer do we see God as one we can trust. No longer do we perceive Him as wholly good. No longer do we observe all of the remaining paradise.

We eat. And, in an instant, we see. Everywhere we look, we see a world of lack, a universe of loss, a cosmos of scarcity and injustice.

We are hungry. We eat. We are filled ... and emptied.

And still, we look at the fruit and see only the material means to fill our emptiness. We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: *as the means to communion with God*.

We look and swell with the ache of a broken, battered planet, what we ascribe as the negligent work of an indifferent Creator (if we even think there is one). Do we ever think of this busted-up place as the result of us ingrates, unsatisfied, we who punctured it all with a bite? The fruit's poison has infected the whole of humanity. *Me*. I say no to what He's given. I thirst

for some roborant, some elixir, to relieve the anguish of what I've believed: God isn't good. God doesn't love me.

If I'm ruthlessly honest, I may have said yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the no. I have. Infected by that Eden mouthful, the retina of my soul develops macular holes of blackness. From my own beginning, my sister's death tears a hole in the canvas of the world.

Losses do that. One life-loss can infect the whole of a life. Like a rash that wears through our days, our sight becomes peppered with black voids. Now everywhere we look, we only see all that isn't: holes, lack, deficiency.

In our plain country church on the edge of that hayfield enclosed by an old cedar split-rail fence, once a week on Sunday, my soul's macular holes spontaneously heal. In that church with the wooden cross nailed to the wall facing the country road, there God seems obvious. Close. Bibles lie open. The sanctuary fills with the worship of wives with babies in arms, farmers done with chores early, their hair slicked down. The Communion table spread with the emblems, that singular cup and loaf, that table that restores relationship. I remember. Here I remember Love and the Cross and a Body, and I am grafted in and held and made whole. All's upright. There, alongside Claude Martin and Ann Van den Boogaard and John Weiler and Marion Schefter and genteel Mrs. Leary, even the likes of me can see.

But the rest of the week, the days I live in the glaring harshness of an abrasive world? Complete loss of central vision. Everywhere, a world pocked with scarcity.

I hunger for filling in a world that is starved.

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since He bent low and breathed His life into the dust of our lungs, since He kissed us into being, has never been to slyly orchestrate our ruin. And yet, I have found it: He does have surprising, secret purposes. I open a Bible, and His plans, startling, lie there barefaced. It's hard to believe it, when I read it, and I have to come back to it many times, feel long across those words, make sure they are real. His love letter forever silences any doubts: "His secret purpose framed from the very beginning [is] to bring us to our full glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7 NEB). He means to rename us—to return us to our true names, our truest selves. He means to

heal our soul holes. From the very beginning, that Eden beginning, that has always been and always is, to this day, His secret purpose—our return to *our full glory*. *Appalling*—that He would! Us, unworthy. And yet since we took a bite out of the fruit and tore into our own souls, that drain hole where joy seeps away, God's had this wild secretive plan. *He means to fill us with glory again*. With glory and grace.

Grace, it means “favor,” from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes a free readiness. A free and ready favor. That's grace. It is one thing to choose to take the grace offered at the cross. But to choose to live as one *filling* with His grace? Choosing to *fill* with *all* that He freely gives and fully live—with glory and grace and God?

I know it but I don't want to: it is a choice. Living with losses, I may choose to still say yes. Choose to say yes to what He freely gives. Could I *live* that—the choice to open the hands to freely receive whatever God gives? If I don't, I am still making a choice.

The choice not to.

The day I met my brother-in-law at the back door, looking for his brother, looking like his brother, is the day I see it clear as a full moon rising bright over January snow, that choice, saying yes or no to God's graces, is the linchpin of it all, of everything.

My brother-in-law, he's just marking time, since Farmer Husband's made a quick run to the hardware store. He's talking about soil temperature and weather forecasts. I lean up against the door frame. The dog lies down at my feet.

John shrugs his shoulders, looks out across our wheat field. “Farmers, we think we control so much, do so much right to make a crop. And when you are farming,” he turns back toward me, “you are faced with it every day. You control so little. Really. It's God who decides it all. Not us.” He slips his big Dutch hands into frayed pockets, smiles easily. “It's all good.”

I nod, almost say something about him just leaving that new water tank in the back shed for now instead of waiting any longer for Farmer Husband to show up. But I catch his eyes and I know I have to ask. Tentatively, eyes fixed on his, I venture back into that place I rarely go.

“How do you know that, John? Deep down, how do you *know* that it really is all good? That *God* is good? That you can say yes—to whatever He gives?” I know the story of the man I am asking, and he knows mine. His eyes linger. I know he’s remembering the story too.

New Year’s Day. He asks us to come. Only if we want. I don’t want to think why, but we know. “Already?” I search my husband’s face. “Today?” He takes my hand and doesn’t let go. Not when we slide into the truck, not when we drive the back roads, not when we climb the empty stairwell to the hospital room lit only by a dim lamp. John meets us at the door. He nods. His eyes smile brave. The singular tear that slips down his cheek carves something out of me.

“Tiff just noticed Dietrich had started breathing a bit heavier this afternoon. And yeah, when we brought him in, they said his lung had collapsed. It will just be a matter of hours. Like it was at the end for Austin.” His firstborn, Austin, had died of the same genetic disease only eighteen months prior. He was about to bury his second son in less than two years.

I can’t look into that sadness wearing a smile anymore. I look at the floor, polished tiles blurring, running. It had only been a year and six months before that. The peonies had been in full bloom when we had stood in a country cemetery watching a cloud of balloons float up and into clear blue over pastures. All the bobbing, buoyant hopes for Austin—floating away. Austin had hardly been four months old. I had been there on that muggy June afternoon. I had stood by the fan humming in their farm kitchen. The fan stirred a happy-face balloon over Austin’s placid body. I remember the blue of his eyes, mirrors of heaven. He never moved. His eyes moved me. I had caressed my nephew’s bare little tummy. His chest had heaved for the air. And heaved less ... and less.

How do you keep breathing when the lungs under your fingers are slowly atrophying?

I had stumbled out their back steps, laid down on the grass. I had cried at the sky. It was our wedding anniversary. I always remember the date, his eyes.

And now, New Year's Day, again with John, Tiffany, but now with their second-born son, Dietrich. He's only five months old. He was born to hope and prayers—and the exact same terminal diagnosis as his brother, Austin.

John hands me a Kleenex, and I try to wipe away all this gut-wrenching pain. He tries too, with words soft and steady, “We’re just blessed. Up until today Dietrich’s had no pain. We have good memories of a happy Christmas. That’s more than we had with Austin.” All the tiles on the floor run fluid. My chest hurts. “Tiffany’s got lots and lots of pictures. And we had five months with him.”

I shouldn't, but I do. I look up. Into all his hardly tamed grief. I feel wild. His eyes shimmer tears, this dazed bewilderment, and his stoic smile cuts me right through. I see his chin quiver. In that moment I forget the rules of this Dutch family of reserved emotion. I grab him by the shoulders and I look straight into those eyes, brimming. And in this scratchy half whisper, these ragged words choke—*wail*. “If it were up to me ...” and then the words pound, desperate and hard, “*I’d write this story differently.*”

I regret the words as soon as they leave me. They seem so un-Christian, so unaccepting—so *No, God!* I wish I could take them back, comb out their tangled madness, dress them in their calm Sunday best. But there they are, released and naked, raw and real, stripped of any theological cliché, my exposed, serrated howl to the throne room.

“You know ...” John’s voice breaks into my memory and his gaze lingers, then turns again toward the waving wheat field. “Well, even with our boys ... I don’t know why that all happened.” He shrugs again. “But do I have to? ... Who knows? I don’t mention it often, but sometimes I think of that story in the Old Testament. Can’t remember what book, but you know—when God gave King Hezekiah fifteen more years of life? Because he prayed for it? But if Hezekiah had died when God first intended, Manasseh would never have been born. And what does the Bible say about Manasseh? Something to the effect that Manasseh had led the Israelites to do even more evil than all the heathen nations around Israel. Think of all the evil that would have been avoided if Hezekiah had died earlier, before Manasseh was born. I am not saying anything, either way, about anything.”

He's watching that sea of green rolling in winds. Then it comes slow, in a low, quiet voice that I have to strain to hear.

“Just that maybe ... maybe you don't want to change the story, because you don't know what a different ending holds.”

The words I choked out that dying, ending day, echo. Pierce. There's a reason I am not writing the story and God is. He knows how it all works out, where it all leads, what it all means.

I don't.

His eyes return, knowing the past I've lived, a bit of my nightmares. “Maybe ... I guess ... it's accepting there are things we simply don't understand. But He does.”

And I see. At least a bit more. When we find ourselves groping along, famished for more, we can choose. When we are despairing, we can choose to live as Israelites gathering manna. For forty long years, God's people daily eat manna—a substance whose name literally means “What is it?” Hungry, they choose to gather up that which is baffling. They fill on that which has no meaning. More than 14,600 days they take their daily nourishment from that which they don't comprehend. They find soul-filling in the inexplicable.

They eat the mystery.

They eat the mystery.

And the mystery, that which made no sense, is “like wafers of honey” on the lips.

A pickup drives into the lane. I watch from the window, two brothers meeting, talking, then hand gestures mirroring each other. I think of buried babies and broken, weeping fathers over graves, and a world pocked with pain, and all the mysteries I have refused, *refused*, to let nourish me. If it were my daughter, my son? Would I really choose the manna? I only tremble, wonder. With memories of gravestones, of combing fingers through tangled hair, I wonder too ... if the rent in the canvas of our life backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own emptiness, might actually become places to see.

To see through to God.

That that which tears open our souls, those holes that splatter our sight, may actually become the thin, open places to see through the mess of this place to the heart-aching beauty beyond. To Him. To the God whom we endlessly crave.

Maybe so.

But how? How do we choose to allow the holes to become seeing-through-to-God places? To more-God places?

How do I give up resentment for gratitude, gnawing anger for spilling joy? Self-focus for God-communion.

To fully live—to live full of grace and joy and all that is beauty eternal. It is possible, wildly. I now see and testify. So this story—my story. A dare to an emptier, fuller life.