

THIS IS THE MAIN EVENT



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RETURN TO YOUR LIFE

When I was young, I thought I could tell the future. I didn't understand déjà vu back then—I still don't, really—but I know I had moments where I felt I was experiencing a scene I had lived before. There were even a few instances where I quietly predicted what would happen next, a sense of what someone might say or do, and that's exactly how it played out, at least it appeared that way to me at the time.

I even confided in my sister, speaking in hushed tones, telling her I could see the future and offering her the “evidence.” She insisted I tell Mum, but I don't think I ever did. From that naive vantage of childhood innocence, I conceived whatever future I felt most compelled to create, rarely, if ever, considering the obstacles I would face in the pursuit of it. Perhaps this is what every child does in unhindered imagination, but much of my youth was spent casting paint upon the canvas of my future. I would spend hours playing football on my own, visualizing a stadium of fans erupting in cheers as I scored the winning goal. I could hear them—I could actually hear them. I'm a nineties kid, so I'd sprint around

the field like Alan Shearer or Michael Owen, celebrating, running my hands against the bushes as if they were the fingertips of fans.

When I was a little older, I made beats on my dad's MIDI sequencer and imagined a life of musical stardom. I paced the edges of my basement room, music blaring behind me, staring toward the wall only inches from my face, envisioning a sea of fans looking back at me.

As long as I can remember, I have carried a sense that life is headed somewhere, leading toward an event or an experience that will make sense of everything that has come before it. Only, it wasn't long before I realized those visions were always void of the contradictions, cruelties, and confusing plot twists that life inevitably brings. We all have a moment when we realize life isn't as safe or straightforward as we first thought, and for some, that tragically happens before they even have a chance to breathe in the air of its goodness.

We moved from London to Pakistan when I was young. My parents worked there as medical missionaries, and for all the beauty and vibrancy I remember of our time there, the images of poverty are etched in my mind. The sound of gunshots ringing out from beyond my bedroom window still reverberates, and a deep sense of the world's sorrow became clear to me early on. My mind often finds its way back to those memories when I'm reminded that not everything is as it should be.

One spring we returned to London for respite, and my Uncle Tony and Auntie Carol took my sister and me to the zoo. I know how much we must have loved it; I have kids of my own now at the age we would have been. My dad tells me Tony

bought us an elephant balloon filled with helium that floated in the air on a string, and I cried with horror when I lost my grip. We watched it drift from my little hands into the vastness of the sky, and Tony consoled me with the thought that the balloon had floated toward heaven and was now in a better place.

Only a week later, in the early hours of the morning, a nurse in intensive care called my dad. There had been a devastating accident, and he would shortly arrive at the hospital to find his little brother, Tony, lying there.

Tony had recently married and was about to become a father, and I can't imagine the sorrow and despair his death created in our family. There are many stories of that time and within the years that followed that are not mine to tell; I was too young to fully understand the gravity of what had just happened. All I have are blurry, knee-high memories and the memories of others from older souls that have been gifted along the way. All I have is the absence of his presence, which, over enough gatherings and years, became a presence of its own. It left a mark on me—an undeniable awareness of life's tragic ability to break your heart, leaving a shock and a shattering that even the purest thought of Tony ascending above the Earth, like a balloon loosed from mortality, could not console.

Five years ago, we gathered for my grandfather's funeral, and when my dad got up to speak, I saw him cry for the first time in my life. That's a moving moment for a child of any age, and I couldn't help but think that falling on his face were tears for his brother and for all the suffering he had witnessed along the way. Later that day, we buried my grandfather next to Tony, where his body lies at the church, a stone's throw from the house where

he grew up, where he played, where he climbed trees and kicked a football in the garden and, perhaps like me, imagined a future with endless possibilities.

For all of us, at some point or another, the walls of our life begin to narrow, the limitations start to overshadow our expectations, and the temptation to escape—to forsake the reality of our lives for a fantasy without inconvenience and painful plot twists—becomes all too inviting. We return to the idea we once had as children, that at some point an event would arise which could make sense of all we have lived through; only now it is born of denial rather than the naivety and innocence we once carried. We begin living half-lives, shadowed versions of ourselves, suppressing our suffering as well as muting the potential for joy—a life braced for wounding, which is a fantasy of its own.

But there is an invitation to another way awaiting all of us—an invitation to embrace all of life's potential for both heartbreak and hope, to feel it all, and to look ahead not with childish ignorance but with childlike expectation; not with hardened cynicism but with hopeful surrender; to see even our limitations as invitations. Like a monk within his cell—one who has stripped life to its bare bones and found there the fullness of joy, who has discovered within the confines of his life a mysterious fulfillment, where the very impediments themselves become the ingredients for abundance.

I have had the opportunity to spend time in a few different monastic communities over the past several years. I stayed with the Benedictine brothers at Downside Abbey in the southwest of England; arriving before dawn, I was serenaded by their songs and chanting of the Psalms. I joined them later for a *Lectio Divina* and

porridge with urns of instant coffee for breakfast. At Holy Cross Abbey in County Down, we attended their Eucharist service and toured the workshops where they make candles shipped around the world to help sustain the life of their community. More recently, I spent some time with brothers of the Dominican order at the monastery of Sainte Marie de la Tourette, located in the hill country near Lyon. We stayed for a few nights, sleeping in the cells the monks call home. Each cell was around fifty square feet, a little smaller than the average UK prison cell, and featured nothing more than a narrow bed, a desk, and a cupboard that could fit a few days' worth of clothes. During our stay, I was reminded of a passage from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* translated by Benedicta Ward. I had recently read that book, and though it had inspired and challenged me, contemplating the following passage in that room, where I could stretch my arms out and touch both walls, brought the words to life.

A brother came to visit Abba Moses and asked him for advice. The old man said to him, "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."¹

For the desert fathers, those early Christian monks who withdrew from the cities to commune with God in the wilderness, the *cell* was their small, isolated home, usually nothing more than a hut or a cave, a humble abode which became a significant spiritual symbol. The cell was a refuge from distraction, a sanctuary of silence and solitude, place of encounter, where the monks and hermits would meet with God, wrestle with inner demons, and receive revelation, as well as a place of creative and spiritual work, where

they would read scripture and pray, weave baskets for trade, and labor with prayerful attention. Ultimately, the cell was a “mirror for the heart,” a place where the monks *could not escape themselves* and therefore became an arena for transformation, where fear and longing were faced and their actual lives were revealed.

My wife and I had a night not so long ago when both kids were awake continually. It was a constant cycle of changing nappies, dispensing medicine, cradling, and trying to comfort those cries that bounced off the walls without mercy. It was brutal, and I’m not going to attempt to romanticize it, but there’s something about that night that screams to me, “*This is your actual life*,” and I have to listen.

Becoming a father has taught me (among many humbling things) that true liberation is found in embracing our life’s limitations because there is no way to love a person without acknowledging and embracing the constraints and sacrifices that loving them requires, unless you only love on your terms, which isn’t love at all. Limitation is baked into the human experience; if you have yet to find that out, you soon will. You overcome the financial burden you once had and transcend your vocational restrictions; you sail into the sunset, thinking yourself free, only to pick up the phone and find out your friend is sick. It is a narrow path, Jesus said, that leads to eternal life, and that notion overturns the tables on so much of our thinking about success and fulfillment. We want space, options, and opportunities and assume that without them, our lives are less or somehow deferred, but this is it; this is your life, and *this is the main event*.

Your life is not waiting somewhere out there to start. We’re

so easily tempted to unshackle ourselves from the *here*, imagining freedom is always found in the *there*. But when we arrive, it is simply another here.

Somedays I feel lost, I feel unmoored and loosened from the ground of my being, on certain days food tastes blander, my thirst is unquenchable and even a great joy like my children's laughter fails to wake me. My eyes wander and I feel the temptation to escape my life. Those Desert Fathers named this experience acedia, or sloth—one of the lesser-known passions, what we have come to call the “deadly sins.”

Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth-century monk who charted the hidden battles of the heart, called it the noonday demon.² He wrote that it makes the sun appear to stall in the sky, as if the day were fifty hours long. It breeds a hatred for one's place, a restlessness with one's calling and a subtle resentment of ordinary work. He said the afflicted person keeps glancing toward the window, longing to be *elsewhere*. A century later John Cassian, who studied under the desert fathers, warned that once this sickness takes hold, the mind grows weak and unable to resist the other passions like lust and anger, gluttony and greed.³ Centuries pass, but the diagnosis remains familiar. In *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield writes, “Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance.”⁴ Between us and the life we long for there is a force that pulls us from our center, Pope Francis described acedia as the destruction of the simple joy of the *here and now*, the grateful wonder of reality and the remedy, he said, is courage, simply the courage to remain, to welcome God in the present moment as it is.⁵

My lostness and lethargy are not merely passing moods, they are

symptoms of an ancient spiritual battle that tempts me to abandon the ground beneath my feet and the life I actually have, a battle that pulls me from the truth of my being and from the grace of this ordinary day. The lostness gives way to dullness and dullness gives way to indifference and on days like that, we need a way back into our lives.

This is the main event. Those words have become a mantra in our house, or better put, *a sacred phrase*. Those early monastics developed the idea of a sacred phrase—as they pursued lives of prayer and contemplation, they practiced *hesychasm*, a form of inner stillness and continual prayer, often anchored by a few words that would remind them to think of God, consent to His will, and remember his promises. These phrases were brief, accessible, and easy to call upon and attach to the breath with one or two words spoken on the inhale, the rest on the exhale. A sacred phrase was one way of praying without ceasing and meeting God in the limitations and inconveniences of actual life.

My wife and I say this household sacred phrase of ours when the walls are closing in. We said it when we missed the call from the creditor, and we whisper it into the night as we rise, blurry-eyed, our children calling our names. We prayed it when our friend told us she found a lump, and when we feel so wound up and become so brittle, the jam jar smashing could break us into as many pieces. We say it when we want to run away, toward denial and fantasy, indifference and rage, we say aloud the invitation to re-enter our actual life. We say it as a prayer, earnestly reminding ourselves that God is present in the inconveniences and contradictions; and more often than not, he comes to us dressed in them. It's said when the disappointment comes and despair rattles his gritty knuckles on the door of

our hearts. It's spoken as an invitation to feel and not forget that life is made up of many parts, and if any of it matters, then all of it does.

It's a simple phrase, but it calls us to attention because it's so easy to imagine there's something else that all this is leading to, but what if this is it? What if we're standing at the top of a mountain asking when we'll reach the summit?

The life we long for is hidden in the life we have. I believe that. It grates me and frustrates me, but I think that it's true. I think the more we can see the trap door underneath the woven rug, the door upon the floor of our ordinary and contradictory lives, the deeper we live, the more fulfilled we are and able to be a gift of grace to others. Our invitation is to go downward, to consider what is the below the surface of a moment or a feeling, to pray with the Psalmist.

Probe me, God, know my heart; try me, know my thoughts.⁶

We all know something of the cell of which Abba Moses spoke. Especially on the days when, if we stretched our arms out to either side, we could touch the walls around us, and the wisdom here leads us to lean into the areas that most confine and restrict us, as a pathway to lasting liberation.

He tells us, as he did the young monk in search of wisdom, to "return to your life." This is no easy feat; many of us face heart-wrenching and seemingly unchangeable situations. Yet, it is here, in the wake of the breakup, the financial ruin, and the relapse, that we are invited to embrace the pathway that sages and spiritual greats have trodden before us.

I must admit from the outset that I struggle with this sentiment. I am like the magpie, easily distracted by that which shimmers; I dive toward instant gratification and the myriad of offerings that promise to affirm my fleeting passions. But when the babe in my arms is screaming, thrashing around, and I feel my body begin to stiffen, my muscles tense, my mind beginning to numb, and I am being swallowed into the abyss of frustration and rage, it is precisely at that moment I am invited to look down at the child in my embrace and recite the following phrase: *This is the main event*. That simple sequence of words reminds me, as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it, that “All actual life is an encounter.”⁷ When we pay close attention to the reality of our actual life—not the theater of fantasy that runs its morning, matinee, and evening shows in our mind, not the creeping envy stirred by the lives beside us or the ones paraded online—when we lean into our own life and embrace it for what it is, we open ourselves, like Jacob, to an encounter with the Divine.

It can happen in the most ordinary of moments: walking the supermarket aisle, counting the cost of every item you place in your basket, praying you’ll have enough for the basics. Rushing home to cook dinner before the school run, returning to wrestle your children into bed so you can finally catch up on work emails, and somewhere in the midst of it all whispering beneath your breath, “This is the main event.” In that hidden act you join your life to the monastic thread of those who discovered God in the cell.

So, woe to the influencers who peddle the illusion that a last-minute trip to Bali could offer you something more fulfilling than attending to an aging parent, salvaging a failing business, or changing your child’s wet sheets for the third time in a week. Woe to the

charlatans who hawk, with deception, the belief that you could earn your worth through hustle and achievement—that you are anything less than a child of God, filled with beloved breath.

And most of all, woe to me, in my own tendency to believe the good life is anywhere but here—in the cracked soil of my actual life, with a body I am still learning to love, with its folds and aches, with doubts I have yet to reconcile, with relationships that demand work and ordinary devotion, with a marriage that doesn't always feel like the honeymoon did but has become a daily pursuit: a turning toward another in the midst of bills that need paying and children that need soothing and playing with, and a vocation that requires sacrifice and dedication. This is it: the masterpiece God is crafting from the raw materials of my actual life.

The life you long for is hidden in the life you have. If you seek enlightenment and the liberated self, you must return to the life of commitments with dirty dishes and oil changes, relational complexities and budgets. A life without limits only leads us to miss out on the only one we're actually living—it is a body without bones. Abba Moses calls us to pay attention to the inconvenience, the moments we'd rather miss entirely, and to "listen to our lives and see them for the fathomless mystery they are," as Frederick Buechner said.⁸

This life, in all its limitations and inconveniences, is the main event.

Yes, the repetition of such a phrase *is* needed when our fragile souls are bombarded with the highlight reels of people we scarcely know. The most punk rock thing you could do in today's cultural frenzy is to be like Nehemiah and build the wall before you, love your person with all their imperfections, and live with intention

the life that you have. Continue to have tough conversations that lead to at least a bit of understanding. Show up to work and stack T-shirts at the mall for the glory of God. Do the weekly shop with open eyes, and you'll run into angels on aisle five next to the cereal and receive for yourself the benediction offered at the end of our recovery meeting each week, "keep on coming back." Friedrich Nietzsche said it wonderfully when he mused, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is . . . that there should be long obedience in the same direction; thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."⁹

I just performed on a stage in front of sixty thousand people, but it was the family I saw at the airport playing Uno—laughing together, with bags beneath their table and beneath their eyes—that won heaven's standing ovation. I think it's the stages without lights that draw divine attention: the consistent, sacrificial, often hidden life that receives its own quiet applause.

My journey toward discovering the life I long for, hidden in the life I have, has been framed by three central movements and practices. They've become like rhythms I keep returning to, not because I've mastered them, but because they seem to name the shape of life with God in the midst of all its beauty and brutality.

LAMENTATION

The first is lamentation. That word simply means a passionate expression of grief or sorrow; and as a practice (which we'll come to explore) it has become the central expression of honesty in my life. I grew up in the faith, in the story of Jesus, and yet it

has only been in recent years that I have truly discovered how to speak to God in my actual voice, offering my actual life before Him. Before that, I only knew how to reframe, how to find the positive; I learned to let out my praise before I learned to let out my pain, and so this hasn't come as naturally to me as to others. But over time, lamentation has led me there. It is my resistance against indifference; it is my decision to feel instead of to go numb, which I am so often tempted to do. It is the expression of scorching doubt and stubborn faith, my refusal to let go of God even when—or especially when—His silence is deafening.

I was waiting for a train the other day, and as the one before mine left, a man sprinted to the doors shutting just before he could slip through. He banged upon them, pleading they would open, crying out, “please open, please open, please open.” I could hear so much sorrow in his voice. Sometimes it's the paper cuts, the small splinters, that make the deeper, more penetrating sorrow impossible to avoid. Those train doors sounded like more than a train was leaving; they sounded like life closing in on him. And I think everyone on the platform felt at least something of what he was expressing in lament.

We were living in Pakistan when Princess Diana died, and we watched the nation's shock and outpouring of grief from our small TV in the mountains. It's estimated around sixty million flowers were laid at the gates of Buckingham Palace in response to her death—that's nearly enough for every person in the country at the time. People traveled from all around the nation to show their respects, to lament the loss of Diana. I wonder if we were less a nation grieving the death of one woman, and perhaps

more a nation that had been through two world wars with mantras like “stiff upper lip” and “keep calm and carry on” finally releasing its ungrieved grief.

Anne Lamott put it like this: “My mother almost never cried—her parents were English . . . and she had drowned in those uncried tears.”¹⁰

The practice of lament is what leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. Though painful, it refuses to allow us to remain in the shadows and calls us to pursue the life upon the other side.

CONSECRATION

The second act is consecration. If lamentation names what is broken, consecration is the act of offering those pieces—our hearts, our lives, whatever is left—to God. It’s learning to bless our “not-enoughness,” to hold out what often feels like insufficiency, the loaves and fishes of our ordinary lives, and to trust that God could do something with it beyond what we could do. Consecration is the daily turning, the offering up of our lives not as we wish they were but as they are.

More than anywhere else, this has been personified in my journey of recovery, which I’ll share more of along the way: being introduced to a fellowship and a way of being in the world that postures your entire life as an offering to God. Consecration is the marking and making of something holy, but whatever that is, it must first be surrendered. We cannot give our lives to God with our fingers still prized around them. In the Big Book, as

it's called, we're reminded that "half measures availed us nothing," and it's in step 3 we really practice this belief in "making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God."

Where others may look upon recovery as a path for the failures and faint of heart, I have found it to be a sacred space of surrender and devotion. Recovery strips consecration down to its smallest unit: the day. Not tomorrow, not forever—just today. Choosing to see our life as incremental moments worth paying attention to, leaning toward, and receiving as mercy. After all, that's how the main event happens—day by day.

ADORATION

The third act is adoration. If lamentation leads us to honesty and consecration to surrender, then adoration takes us to reverence. It's the moment you look up through your tear-stained eyes, with hands held up in offering, and see the face of Jesus looking back at you. It's beholding the holiness of God in the midst of your actual life, stretching across the canvas of creation.

To find the life we long for, hidden in the life we have, we must make space for our souls to get caught up in awe—to adore the God who has formed us and the world He offers us as a gift. Adoration is the fruit that grows from the soil of honesty (lament) and surrender (consecration), then blossoms into awe.

I think of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, saying his "feet were praying" as he walked for justice.¹¹ I think of Brother Lawrence, finding God not in the mass but in the daily task.¹² We begin to live an embodied life, where gratitude is no longer a

superficial self-help practice but, as Thomas Merton put it, “the act of recognising the Love of God in everything He has given us—and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love.”¹³

To get caught up in adoration is to get caught in the truest sense of who you are: a beloved child adored by God, offering back to Him your thanks.

These three movements—lamentation, consecration, adoration—aren’t steps to master or boxes to tick. Together, they are the posture of a life lived awake to God: the life I long for, hidden in the life I have.

So this is what we’ll do: instead of escaping into the shallow lands of doomscrolling and denial, wishing we were somewhere *else*, we’ll begin to feel it all right where we are, even though that might scare us half to death. We’ll move through the terrain of lamentation, consecration, and adoration, words that I hope will become familiar companions to you, essential landmarks on the journey toward the life we long for. We’ll travel deeper into who we are and where we are, and we’ll begin to see that, as one priest (Brennan Manning) said, it’s better to “live naked in truth than clothed in fantasy.”¹⁴ We’ll choose to bring the meager offering of our lives, like loaves and fishes, before the God who loves us, and trust that something beautiful can come of it all.

Return to your life; it will teach you everything you need.