

“People say that what we are all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think this is what we’re really seeking. I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive.” –Joseph Campbell

You are supposed to get to the last page of a book with just a hint of something and then decide what the point was for yourself. I am not supposed to tell you. People like to make their own discoveries, but I am bad at keeping secrets.

Secrets are for sinners. For those too scared to live with the truth. Then I was blasted by secrets, full in the face. It hurt and I couldn't understand them. They weren't mine—but it was my pain too. That is not fair. Now I hold secrets in many relationships. Most are not mine to tell. Some of them still ache.

Fear comes from pain. Children who have not yet experienced deep pain are fearless. Only after burning their fingers on the oven do they start to fear it. Adults, after years of pain, fear everything, building walls because they cannot control pain entering our lives. Pain festers in their hearts, making its memory bigger than it was in the first place. Suddenly, life is not lived—it is protected. It is not explored, it is feared.

Martyrs are powerful because they put their minds to face anything regardless of the pain—to the death. They open themselves up to pain, they invite it. To live and accomplish in life is to lay aside fears and walls and invite the pain again. To be open to the beauty, the reward, the adventure. Love is making the choice to be open. Love ends when you close yourself off in attempt to not be hurt again.

I will keep secrets to guard from pain. I don’t want to be found out because then people ask questions. When people ask questions they have no time for answers and you have to sit there listening. Or do you? Your brain is free to fly to all the places the person in front of you is telling you not to go.

I will let some secrets slip. Be too busy flying to your own places to catch them. For there is nothing more original to write. Are there even combinations of words that have never been used? Maybe I don't have to be brilliant—I just need an audience. Will you slip away if I am silent? Please stay until I have learned to stop pretending I can entertain you.

Bombarded by brilliance, I am dazed and daunted. No longer imagining that I have anything worthwhile to offer the world. I just wish for one little spot—a corner of creativity. But I cannot reinvent the wheel. Where is the box? I want to smash it, but I can't find it. I hid it in my subconscious the day I was scared.

“He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” –Albert Einstein

The content of the conversation is not of consequence--they were words I loved, I believed. I spoke of how the world should be, how life should work, and how I was determined to live. Releasing slowly, I had power. My soul was alive, my eyes sparkled, my face glowed. I was pink. I had something beautiful and it made me beautiful. He looked at me with eyes of wonder.

He wanted those words. He wanted to leave the world that was and join the world that could be. If I looked deep enough: he wanted me. My bright eyes and golden plethoras. But the moment was lost in distraction. When his eyes returned to mine it was gone. And we both knew it. My words could not survive the trip into reality.

I wanted to take him with me, traveling down these words and ideals. I wanted someone else to see them and validate their existence. Someone who believed in them, even more than in me. “You are not enough,” lay unspoken between us. “Live long enough, and you will see your ideals for the fairytales they are.”

I cried, right there in front of him. Embarrassed, he didn't know what to do. He was stirred, but said nothing. I couldn't see him anymore. I saw a road and I was standing on it. The path was made up of all the words I had tried to speak. They were alive, they were real, and I wanted nothing less. So firm, so sure, so true. It was the way of truth. But I was alone.

The little girl that dances in the breeze
The little girl that wants to climb in trees
Little one that looks around with delight
Little one you must protect from her fright

She is so small
But she knows so much
Sitting there waiting
For some magic touch
To open the doors
And let her in
To where her life
Will magically begin

"So live real good, and get beat up real bad. Dance until they kill you, and then we'll dance some more. That's how this thing seems to work." --Shane Claiborne

I ran away. It does me good every once in a while. I fear one day, I won't be able to run anymore and that day, I will die. Most days I don't have to run away, I just have to *think* that I can. Having the idea is enough because I like my life. I have a good life. I have never been able to explain or understand why I should have it so good.

But I ran away today. Today is Monday, but I didn't want to do all that is “Monday.” I ran away because I need to ask the question “Why.” Why is “Monday” the way Monday is? Are there better ways of doing what I am doing? I ran away because if I don't, I will forget how. How to use my brain, to enjoy the part of me that nags and says, “Why are you doing this?” To awaken something inside me that says I am special, unique, and have something to offer those around me—something that isn't already there.

I didn't run away from responsibility, I ran to it. To the responsibility of knowing myself. Being responsible for my actions, and the one life I have to live. To back away from the clutter of the familiar, and seek the face of Jesus and ask Him if He likes how things are. To turn around the situations in my life and look at them from different perspectives. And tomorrow will be "Tuesday."

"Do you suppose you'll be able to keep it up?"

"Making up my mind, you mean? I don't know, but Jo has given me a splendid rule. He says, when I'm perplexed, just to do what I would wish I had done when I shall be eighty." –L. M. Montgomery

"You must stay inside the gates."

"Why?"

"Inside the gates you are safe."

"Safe but not alive."

"Why can't you have your runs for freedom during respectable hours?"

"That would ruin the whole idea."

"What is the whole idea anyway?"

"Something I can only find outside the gates."

I am hiding in the bathroom, curling my feet up so no one can see that I am here. I would do that when I was seven, playing hide and seek at church with the boys. They couldn't come in the girls' restroom, but they would open the door and peek. We would hold our breath until the door squeaked closed again. But no boys are chasing me here now. Just reality. I am holding my breath and waiting for the door to squeak shut again. But it isn't, and my heart keeps pounding.

"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all." –Helen Keller

"I fell out of a tree today."

"And?"

"And it didn't hurt at much as I thought it would."

It was one of those times where you sit and know you are in the right place. Everything fades and one thing is clear—your whole life has led up to this. Everything bad and good and terrible and wonderful blends smooth and sure for this moment, this revelation.

While listening to them speak, you are sure this is it. Not sure you are ready, but sure it doesn't matter because here it is and there you are and that is enough. You are a sieve, letting diamonds drop through your fingers. Your mind so full it turns sluggish. Life fills you and God is here. It will take a lifetime to understand and work through, but You were made for this.

"It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your hearts' longing...I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive...I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,

without moving to hide it or fix it...I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself." –Oriah Mountain Dreamer

Contemporary art is obsessed with being original. Some of it feels preposterous, like random objects stuck on the wall. I love and hate it more than the other kinds of art. Some part of me longs to like it, to understand it, to feel it. Each piece seemed to want to be understood as an emotion: fear, boldness, timidity, adventure, sadness, excitement. Some succeed, some fail.

One piece of art was an empty room. No label, just dim lights on each side, and a large black square...a blank canvas. I stood and felt the space. I felt peace. Like I could breathe after being under water when time moves slower. I continued on to the next room, but my sister made me return. Her experience was different. She entered and felt frightened. It reminded her of eternity, a concept that fills her with uncertainty. Like the ocean, with its vastness, she was timid yet drawn in. She walked up to the blank canvas and reached out to touch it.

Her hand fell through air, fear rushing in like a nightmare. The air thickened around her. As we returned to the room together, we let our eyes adjust and were amazed to see the blank, black canvas was actually a room, much larger than we could reach. Putting our heads inside and feeling nothing was deeper than touching anything tangible.

"Where someone...with a beautiful belief in answers is still asking questions." –Tony Hoagland

Time to simplify. Forget money and future and insurance and the expectations of whoever. Shed these fears that flood my face every time something changes or is unexpected. Safe? No it isn't safe. Now that we know that, can we move on?

Will I run away at the first sign of trouble? I want to fight. I want to understand. But I am so scared. What do I need? What can I live with and what can I not live with? Honesty. And honestly, my doubts eat me alive. Is this really me? Am I just part of who I am when I am here and is it the part I want to stay?

Must I tell you? It sits inside my heart like a frail ornament, ready to drop at any moment. I am afraid it won't be beautiful anymore if I say it. I am afraid I only want to say it because I want to hear it back. I want something to happen, anything. To know I am alive. That my feelings are real.

As soon as the movie ends, the chapter is read, and the music fades, a hollow chasm opens before you. Looking down, down, down, it goes on further and further to the bottom. You see it plain. Yes, there it is. Alone. Claw at the sides of the walls, but they still hold you in.

You have fallen into the bottom of your soul, captivated, surrounded by your thoughts. They fly in your face and you raise your hands to protect yourself. They buzz in your ear, always right above where you can reach, faster and bolder than you. They tell you all that you already know is true: it is nothingness.

Each person lives in a world of their own, that they have created. How they see things, and what they think of them. Every person has their own language. What a word means, its weight and value. Of the 760 million people that speak English, not one of them has the same idea of what the word “love” is. Or “peace” or “happiness” or “fear.” These are concepts that we form and then form us.

Saudades is the melancholy word that will never be rightly, fully translated into English. That is why I love it and claim it for any indescribable emotion pulsing through me. When I feel quiet. When I feel the world swirl around me. When I feel like kissing a stranger on the cheek and then forgetting forever.

Where do my emotions end and I begin? When do I fight, and when do I lay my armor down? When do I surrender all and when do I take my cross and follow? When do I give up and when do I shoulder my responsibility? I want to be the one that proves everyone wrong, seeing the miracles happen because I believed. But sometimes I wonder if all I was supposed to do was let go.

Let me wallow in what I feel a little bit longer. I want to feel it real and close and deep because whether or not it is right--whether or not it is real--whether or not it is written in the sky—it is all I know...and I can't imagine any other.

The battle inside me that I'm scared to make real. Fearful to explain because I don't know where it will take me. Maybe I care about nothing because my heart is aching over so much. You are a fool to believe the smile I give. I sit and listen as the music in my heart drowns out the words. I know nothing, yet am sure I don't agree with anything.

I can't feel anything. It is all gone. I know what is right, and I know every old decision like the back of my hand. I will live off of them until I find myself again. I alternate between thoughts of how can I return and how could I have left. Neither one sticks. They flake off and float down on the floor. Allow me a moment to think only of myself, to be surrounded by the music and tilt my head back.

Music calls out
Feelings I cannot
Express
Stirring them
Agitating emotions
And then leaving me
In silence
To deal with them
Alone

“The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. Lightly men talk of saying what they mean. To say the very thing you mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center

of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us, openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" –C. S. Lewis

Today a star was born
And left us here on earth
To wander in the small light
Of silver mornings
And golden nights
The beauty with a sword
That kills us willingly

I learned to love someone I could not see. I did not know the gender, the intelligence, or ability of this someone. I had learned to love this someone, knowing that it meant leaving the place I loved and being “tied down” with a future unknown that included long nights and drool. It wasn’t just any someone—it was my baby. Though it doesn’t mend the hole in my heart, I know I have a star in heaven. Every time I catch a glimpse of my tattoo, I remember my baby.

Tattoos have an attachment to something. I flirted with the idea of getting a tattoo long before it happened. God and I talked about it a lot. Most people are surprised when they see my tattoo, or ask me if I am Jewish. So how did this good Christian girl get a Star of David behind her ear?

Daisy, 15, was pregnant. When I knocked on her door, the big Doberman barked me away. Daisy came out. Yes, it was true, she was pregnant. Her mom came out to talk as well, spitting threats about the boy and how this was a demon child. Daisy said she was getting an abortion. “Please,” I said, before thinking, “Please let me adopt the baby.”

The words surprised us both, and tears came to our eyes, but only Daisy let them spill. “*I don’t know, Ms. Rachel,*” she said, “*I don’t know.*” I gave her my phone number and left, awkwardly. There was nothing romantic or wonderful about it. I was single and about to leave the country, but the moment the words left my mouth I knew they were true. I wanted that baby. And at that exact moment, that baby had become my baby.

Daisy went back and forth in the next visits I made. I made multiple suggestions, letting her know there were other options. Many friends came to support me in my decision, and her in whatever decision she would make. She was not alone—I was not alone.

Daisy’s mother insisted this baby was going to be aborted. I cried that this baby should get a chance to live. But the response was, “*No, no no. Ms. Rachel! You can talk and beg here all day, but my daughter is not having that baby.*” Daisy said she wasn’t ready to be a mother, but if she had the baby, then she wanted to keep it. “Why?” I asked. “*Because I made it.*” She said, as she wiped her tears. We talked about God and love and hope and forgiveness, while her little brother popped his face through the screen door, talking about his superpowers.

She decided against the abortion. She decided for it. I continued to ride the roller coaster until the day she walked into the abortion clinic and walked out alone. Daisy is older now, has moved to another city, and has a beautiful daughter with a guy she is trying to make things work with. I hope to see her again someday. I wonder if she will ask me about my tattoo. I wonder what I will say.

“When I was just a small child, I believed in God, in love, and in laughter—and then I didn’t. I think love went first, then laughter. Then since God couldn’t help me with the first two, I went ahead and threw him out with everything else you need to get rid of when you are no longer a child...My soul doesn’t crave something from God; my soul craves God. That’s why everything else will leave you unsatisfied in the end. But don’t let this frustrate you; just let it fuel you. All the evidence you need to prove God is waiting within you to be discovered.” –Erwin Raphael McManus

I know my greatest fear
For it eats me alive
It is the fear
Of hurting those I love

I know my second greatest fear
For it strikes when I cannot prepare
It is the fear
Of watching those I love get hurt
And not being able to help
It is a fearful thing to love

*"Are you betrothed? the buyer asked her.
"No, only loved." She answered.
"And do you pay for love?"
"No, but I owe it everything." –Calvin Miller*

How to fall in love:

- Time. be with the person.
- Location. be easy to meet up, get together. be available.
- Similar likes/dislikes...and find them out. Love what they love.
- Admire them--you pursue what you admire.
- Go over reasons WHY you love them in your head. over and over. and then tell them. often.
- Think, obsess about them.
- Plan special things to do with them. And then do them.
- Show up unexpectedly where they are. Call at random times to just say Hello.
- Complement them. You remind yourself why they are great when you tell them so. Spread good gossip about them
- Impress and be kind to their family. Always.
- Become an expert on this person...ask about everything. And then listen. And remember.
- Be cool with their friends. Don't be needy when in a group. Don't be possessive or clingy.

- Play sports with them. If they like sports. Other activities if they don't.
- Put forth effort to impress them.
- Be completely honest with them. Share secrets.
- Talk about the little things that happen. in your life and theirs. Ask questions like "What do you feel about that?"
- Be best friends.
- Take their side.
- Make them top priority. Invest in them.
- Respect them and what they do/have done. Respect what made them who they are

Wife: Why is it do you think that people get married?

Detective: Passion

Wife: No

Detective: That's interesting because I would have taken you for a romantic. Why then?

Wife: Because we need a witness to our lives. There's a billion people on the planet. I mean what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage, you're promising to care about everything. The good things. The bad things. The terrible things. The mundane things. All of it. All the time. Every day. You're saying, "your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go unwitnessed because I will be your witness." –"Shall We Dance."

How to fall OUT of love:

- Stay away from them. be too busy. Ignore them.
- Location. be far away. Inaccessible. Turn off your phone.
- Remember and review all the things that bother you about them. Over and over. And tell them. Often.
- Be disinterested or disgusted at what they love and do.
- Take them for granted.
- Admire something or someone else MORE than them.
- Never do anything out of the ordinary with them..
- Criticize them.
- Fight with their family. Say mean things about them. Spread gossip.
- Don't ask about their day. Don't listen. And forget really fast.
- Complain about their friends. Never hang out with their friends.
- Be jealous. Call into question their motives.
- Lie to them. Keep secrets. Hold back your true emotions or feelings about things.
- Take the opposing side against them.
- Complain about them to others. Who will then *maybe* go tell them.
- Get rid of everything they gave you or that reminds you of them.
- Fill up your life with someone or something else.
- Make big decisions without their impute or advice.

"Love is a harsh and dreadful thing to ask of us, but it is the only answer" –Dorothy Day

My roommate said love was choosing to do the things listed in 1 Corinthians 13...patient, kind...loving her students, for example. It might not have any emotion attached to it—sometimes there was, sometimes it followed. But it was choosing to validate someone else and say they were worth it, worth loving. She also told me to quit asking hard questions. My neighbor said love was sacrifice, trust, and respect.

“Love” and “in love” can be two different words. I am thinking about “love” because I feel “in love.” I once made a list of how I knew I was “in love,” like listening to love songs that told my story. Like wanting him to show up and see what a good job I am doing, or carrying on conversations with him in my head. Wanting to share everything with him, and whenever I am out, subconsciously looking for him.

Five things I have learned about love:

1. Everyone thinks of something different when they hear the word "Love." We are constantly growing into and from our definition of love.
2. You can't kill, force, or control love. You can submit it. give it back or let it go. Love always involves letting go of your expectations. Letting go of the person. Letting go of your personal rights and desires.
3. Love is never wasted. It transforms the average into the best.
4. Love is something that both happens to you and you choose. the mixture of which is which that is changing, fluid, and fluctuates.
5. Love is not attached to actions. I don't love BECAUSE of what you do. If I did, then you could do something I didn't like and I could stop loving you. But at the same time, love will lead to actions, because that is what love is. (This nice little paradox is sort of like faith and works in the book of James.)

As soon as I switch my thoughts from being “in love” to “love” I realize what a selfish beast I am. How I make it all about me. “Life is Beautiful” was the best movie portrayal of love I’ve ever seen. After watching it I realized I’ve never really loved. Not really. I asked another friend what love was and he said “sacrifice and altruism.”

Philosophers like Ayn Rand have an egoism theory—that in reality, all we do is some way related to getting something out of it. That there is no such thing as altruism. Even jumping in a lake and saving someone is egocentric because we would have felt bad if we had let them drown, and we wanted to feel good about saving them. Most of my life is lived that way. I think there are 3 times in my life where I did something self-lessly, and I analyzed them so much that it ruined that. My motives are always infected with me-ness.

“The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more.” –C.S.Lewis

Moving from emotion to action. Love is doing what is best for the other. Not expecting them to fill me or make me feel special. Not putting them in a place that only God should fill. This is a whole new way to live.

How can one be sure it is love? Perhaps it isn't. Perhaps I have never really known love. But if I am wrong, it is only because of ignorance of a greater love. I believe it is love because it is patient. I don't have to tell you about it. And you don't have to love me back. It doesn't have expectations, and it doesn't call attention to itself. It is always present, but it doesn't yell. It doesn't go away, and everything else fades in its presence. It makes other parts of my life beautiful. It is not in a rush--it knows that if this is the real thing, I have a lifetime to discover it. And it doesn't need to be fed. It feeds me and fills me to satisfaction.

"The thing is some girls think they can actually change guys. And what's funny is that if they actually did change them, they'd get bored. They'd have no challenge left. You just have to give girls some time to think of a new way of doing things, that's all."—Stephen Chobosky

I want you to love me enough to let me fall and hurt and choose my own course. Trusting that even if it looks bad you believe that my heart is good, and it will turn out all right in the end. Love that tries to save me is too restrictive. Love that tries to convince me that I'm wrong is killing my heart. Let me go. Let me do what I must, letting it look like the world is falling apart instead of always trying to put back the pieces. Don't make me choose your side or theirs, because that is not fair.

"Us girls—we change for guys. We want to please them and we change for love. Guys—they determinedly don't change. They wait and see if we will love and accept them just as they are. Then, when you aren't looking, they go and change." —Karine Moraes

I thought about you this morning when I put chocolate chips in the cookies. I wondered if I would run into you sometime. I wondered what I would say and if I would leave happy or wish I had never come. But I didn't see you. I passed a man on the corner that was shaking his cup of change. He had a sign that said "Down but not out." I gave him your chocolate chip cookies on a paper plate with plastic wrap. He said "Thank you princess," and I was happy.

I keep waiting for other people to make decisions so I can make mine. Should it be like that? I guess it is when you love someone. Then you affect them and they affect you and plans are changed and things are up in the air. But I thought for sure something would be clear by now. I figured someone would do something and then the road would be clear and I would walk forth, knowing it was the right thing to do. But not yet.

"When it's over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms." --Mary Oliver

There are some words we need to hear daily.

When I say "I love you" it means that is never going to change. I'm never giving up, I'll never leave, and I'll never replace you. When I say "You are enough" it means I accept you as you are, that you please me and thrill my heart, even with seeing all your faults. I will cheer every victory you have, but they are not necessary or a way of earning my love. You already have it.

When I say “You are beautiful” it means there is something I see when I look at you that delights me in a way no one else can. I don’t want to look away, and I don’t compare you to anyone else. I don’t want you to change a thing. When I say “I forgive you” it means I’ve taken the pain you caused and paid the price of your choices. You are free, with the power to forgive yourself and others. I won’t use your past against you to shame you into doing right.

When I say “I am proud of you” it means I boast about you to others because you make me smile. I know you are going to do something amazing each day you open your eyes. When I say “I believe in you” it means that even if it looks like you’ve fallen and won’t get up, I look at you and see a miracle of what will be. I connect my name with yours, and you represent me to others.

Do you understand that when I say “I have a plan for you” it means I not only took the time to know you completely, but I found the thing that will complete you more than any other thing and I planned it for you? I tell you these words because I mean them.

"We Arnolds. Our hearts yearn backward. We long to be found, hoping our searchers have not given up and gone home. But I no longer hope to be found, Leo. Do not follow me! Let's just be where we are and who we are. You be you and I'll be me, today and today and today, and let's trust the future to tomorrow. Let us ride our own orbits and trust that they will meet. May our reunion be not a finding but a sweet collision of destinies."—Jerry Spinelli

You could say she only loved one man her whole life. That she put all her passion into it and there was no one else she could love like that. Or you could say she found one that she fit perfectly with and the key went in the lock but it wasn't meant to turn and there was no one else who felt comfortable.

Or maybe

You could say she was a snob. She felt she was a cut above everyone else and she would be happier on her own, where she could control things better. You could say she was scared of hurting someone else and of hurting herself. So she didn't start anything she wasn't sure if she could finish.

A: You are the only one for me

B: I know you think that now, but...there are things you want—we both want.

A: Everyone wants stuff—we wake up every day with a list of wishes a mile long and we spend our lives trying to make those wishes come true, but—just because we want them doesn't mean we need them to be happy.

B: What do you need to be happy?

A: You. —Pushing Daisies

You are out there in the darkness where I want to be alone, together. I feel you there in front of my fingers—the you I want in stillness, in silence. The you I know I can never have, and the beautiful longing that it creates. It hangs in brilliance by a thread of hope that refuses to die, telling me that dreams are better than half-lived realities.

"We become like the things we love. Love makes lovers equal." St. Francis de Sales

I like things open
Where I can feel it
As I live it
Like pickup trucks
Being one with the journey
And brick roads
Feeling every break and beginning
And oceans
Uncontrollable
And dirt
Where it is undiluted yet
And windows
Letting in sunlight and rain

I don't like
Air conditioning
Caged in and everyone else is locked out
And umbrellas
Trying to hide from what comes down
And headphones
Ending all conversations before they start
And cell phones
Interrupting
As civilization congratulates itself
On forgetting how to enjoy
What cannot be controlled

"You are not at all like my rose. As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are beautiful, but you are empty. One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you--the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose." —The Little Prince

It is a beautiful thing to know whatever I say, he will still love me, accept me, and listen. I may have to go back and apologize and explain and wish I had not said it--but I know it will be okay. That he will understand. That there isn't any deep dark secret that will suddenly come to light that will change things.

There is a chord--a bond, an understanding, and it takes care of itself. I like to care for our relationship and invest in it, but not because I feel the weight on my shoulders--because I delight in it. Because life is better with him. And I don't agree with all he does and sometimes things

happen and I get worried. But he is with me, no matter what. Even if I hurt him. He believes in me--that I won't hurt him on purpose, and that if I do--that is not who I am. He trusts that I, the person I am, am worth it. It is a good friendship.

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.” –C. S. Lewis

I was born on August 26, 1982 at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. My mother's water broke at 10:00 a.m. that morning, but I was not ready to come out until 11:00 p.m. and many complications later. My mother had many health problems and did not work outside the home, so I had her all to myself. At eleven months I said my first words: “Da-da,” soon followed by “Ma-ma.”

My mother says I was an easygoing child. There were only two things I would throw temper tantrums about: drinking powdered milk, and wearing the color brown. My best friend was the family dog, Wendy, who I would dress up in my clothes, and build forts for.

I was homeschooled from day one. One day I felt horrible because I could not Africa to look right in the picture I was drawing. Exasperated, a friend of the family called and told me it was all right as it was. This seemed to solve my perfectionist problem, then and always. Now to solve the rest of life.

My sister was born when I was six. That gave me a permanent playmate whether she wanted it or not. I became self-regulated since with my mom's health problems, I was on my own for many school assignments. I often felt alone, after giving my best friend a “best friend” necklace and having her reply that I was not her best friend.

I was never in the popular group and often wondered if this meant there was something wrong with me. I had glasses but was not self-conscious about them until someone called me “four eyes.” I tried to imitate what was cool, but found that I failed miserably and it took too much work to try to fake.

Style was important to me, at least my own version of it. I would not leave the house without wearing two belts. Another time I had to have elastic at the bottom of my pants. All of them. I tried to do the 80's frizzy hair, but my hair refused to comply, and my pictures show only a slick little lump of bangs instead of the five-inch high ones I desired.

At 13, I began voice lessons. My achievement in those lessons helped me to be more open and outgoing in other areas. If I could do one thing well, then I could do other things. I went bungee jumping with a friend. I found more acceptance with my peers than before. I got contacts, and the change in how others responded to me impacted the idea that I was only pretty if I put more effort into how I looked.

At home, my father made changes in his life, practicing all the things we had learned about in church. We began having family devotions together, and my father took an active role in having a closer relationship with me. I went to Brazil for a short-term mission's trip and came to the conclusion that different was okay. Instead of focusing on trying to fit in with everyone, I began

a deeper relationship with my heavenly Father. I had professed Christianity since I was 7, but it did not become real to me until this time.

My junior year I began working at an alternative school in the inner city. I was in charge of character training for the 4-8 year olds, and tutoring with the 4-13 year olds. The older kids were always wondering about my standards and beliefs. Through answering their questions, I discovered where I really stood on issues like God, dating, clothes, music, and so on. My parents were not there to tell me the right answer; I had to come up with it on my own.

I graduated at 17 not knowing what was coming, but knowing I would enjoy learning it. What came was a car crash as I ran into a parked car. I went to live with my grandparents that fall. The time with them was quiet, as they lived alone on a farm. I had a chance to reflect on life, set my own schedule, and make memories with two people who would soon pass on.

2001 I trained and worked at a home for juvenile delinquents. I gained a sense of what I wanted to do in life: help underprivileged and hurting youth. I saw I had been given so much in life—and a loving home—now it was my time to give to others. I began to work at Good News Ministries Youth Center, an after school program for children 8-18 in inner city Indianapolis. I finished my associate's degree from TELOS and started taking classes at Crossroads Bible College.

Love relationships have always been different for me. When I was younger I was too shy to talk to guys, or only saw them as friends. Growing up, I did not purposefully “fall in love” but found that I would wander into one “emotional attachment” after. I didn't date much. Instead, I had closer friendships where one or both of us were attracted to the other, but nothing came of it for one reason or another.

In 2004 I had an internship in Brazil and began taking classes at Ivy Tech Community College. I continued taking all the classes they offered that sounded interesting, eventually getting another associates degree. I also continued going to Brazil, teaching English as a Foreign Language at an International school and learning Portuguese.

I started college in Brazil, and continued my dream of working with street children through the Living Stones program. 2010 I took a year off to finally graduate from IUPUI with a Bachelor's degree, and to spend time with my family and my new nephew. I am now the coordinator of Living Stones, developing and implementing the curriculum and raising awareness for the program. My goal is to help start/assist 10 Living Stones programs in 10 towns in the next 10 years.

My role will change with marriage, children, and time, but the basic idea of what I plan to do with my life will stay the same. Whether with working in my own family, with my own children and grandchildren, strangers, inner city children, or youth in Brazil; my life purpose is to serve, assist, influence, and encourage seeking young people through writing, teaching, and counseling with the objective of them surrendering their life and each day to all God has for them.

I sincerely hope that this purpose will not change, no matter how old I get. I want to be one of those sweet little old grandmas that can get away with anything because everyone loves her and they know that she loves them. I don't intend on retiring. There are too many people out there to love—and so little time.

“If I can't dance, then it's not my revolution.” –Emma Goldman

I don't like chocolate. To the women in my family, this is cause to question my being switched at birth. I blame my father. As the story goes, mom was off shopping, and when she got home, my dad was feeding me chocolate cake and braunschweiger. I was six months old. I haven't liked either since.

My Dad likes unusual food. Like Limburger cheese. You cannot go near it before realizing it is not supposed to be ingested: the smell is horrible. I don't remember how it got started, but it ended with a bunch of kids hiding in the bathroom, because dad was chasing us with Limburger cheese. Somewhere in the middle was a chase around the neighborhood. From the graphic memories that I have, I think the Limburger cheese won.

My dad grew up on a farm. He decided that Anna and I should have the farm experience, even if we lived in the suburbs. He brought home cute little fluffy chicks. Anna and I took care of them: feeding them, corralling them, catching them when they got loose, and even though we were warned not to—naming them. Six weeks later, dad set up “the block.” It was a thick piece of wood that had two nails in it, with just enough space between them to slide the neck of a chicken.

Mom was chosen to hold the chicken while dad positioned the neck and sliced. Anna and I ran inside and cried, so I didn't get to see what happened next. Mom wasn't much of a country girl herself, screaming and apologizing to the chicken after it went running around headless. As the story goes, when my dad went to reach into the chicken to clean it out, the air suction created a noise and my mom *swore* it was talking.

Every summer my dad sees to it that we have an amazing garden. I used to slip out of my diaper and run striking out the back door to the raspberry patch. Makes sense to me. Raspberries are still my favorite fruit. Anyone who has grown tomatoes knows it is impossible to keep up with them. After awhile, some just get wasted. Well, not our tomato patch. The next door neighbor boy and I had the most fantastic rotten tomato fight. Epic. I think that should be a part of everyone's childhood.

My mom always makes my dad's lunch for him to take to work. I remember “helping” her, standing on a chair to help spread the mustard on the sandwich. But the special part was always the napkin. I would get to help write a secret message on it: a secret like *I love you*. Even now when I return home, I hear mom moving around the kitchen, making dad's lunch. It is just a part of how things work.

We didn't have a lot of money when I was little. It was the best thing ever, except for the instant milk and pulpy orange juice. At the time, it was cheaper, so that is what we got. When I turned

eight, for my birthday I asked my mom for REAL milk, please. Every day, Mom would put a glass of instant milk and pulpy orange juice on the table and tell me to drink it before lunch.

I was sneaky, and mom suffered from health problems, so it wasn't hard to find ways around digesting the horrible liquids. I tried pouring the milk and juice down the kitchen drain, but I was too short. I tried pouring it down the toilet, but it looked suspicious carrying a glass of milk into the bathroom. But then I found it. The heating and cooling duct. Right there in the kitchen floor—a hole where things magically disappeared.

Fast forward 10 years, sitting around the table telling old stories and laughing. Someone brought up instant milk. I brought up how I hated it and found ways around actually drinking it. It was then that two and two were put together: the mysterious sticky duct leak, and Rachel not complaining about drinking her milk and juice anymore. Mystery solved.

Cod liver oil was even worse than Limburger cheese because we weren't allowed to run away from it—we had to drink it. It was an old bottle of green slime and come cold season, my whole family lined up and got a spoonful. No sugar. My father thinks it is educational to try new foods. Liver, tongue, and sauerkraut were my worst memories, trying to chew without breathing and thinking, “Why can't I just be in a normal family?”

“I eat merely to put food out of my mind.” –N. F. Simpson

Ramadan, the great Wikipedia says, “is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and indulging in anything that is in excess or ill-natured; from dawn until sunset.” They have five pillars of faith, and this is one of them. I wonder how many Christians have given up things for God like that. I wonder if I can. I need this, and I have a fresh new journal to fill with a new project.

No more eating (and other things) from 5:05am on. until 5:53pm. It comes down to the minute. The sun goes down and food, glorious food. At 5:30pm Alyssa asked me to help with the cookies. Cookie dough on my fingers, with the warm, gooey smell taking over the kitchen. But 5:53pm it was.

Part of this is, and always will be, a set up: figuring out how to get around things. Waking up at 4:30am to eat breakfast. But it isn't about food; it is about using that time in prayer. About remembering why your stomach is growling and connecting it to the thought of “oh yeah, it isn't about me.” Muslims stop five times a day to physically bow down and pray. That is harder than it seems.

It is difficult sitting at the table while they eat and I drink water. Even if I wasn't hungry, would still feel left out by not eating with them. The other choice is isolation: ignore the food altogether—but then you ignore the people as well.

I choose life, and it fills me. Life is doing the dishes. It is sitting on the cool white tile floor at 10:42pm eating fried cheese and molasses with best friends, laughing as it drips down your chin.

Life is sitting in the middle of 40 children who have one set of clothes but are playing like they owned the world.

I stood at the door of the church and hugged my kids goodbye. We had to send them into the streets to find some food to fill empty bellies. No food arrived for the program this week. I chose to be hungry—they did not. It feels like food is everything, as if life has no pleasure without it. I find myself back with Maslow, on the bottom level of the hierarchy of needs. Food. Food. Food. It pulses in my brain and clouds out everything else. No wonder hungry kids find it hard to concentrate.

Amazing how your body can adjust to a schedule, even one like Ramadan. It feels almost normal to not be eating. My stomach is shrinking. When I finally eat, I try to stuff in as much as I can until I fill up, then sit around, waiting to get unfull, so I can eat some more.

Ramadan reveals hoarders. I dream all day of what I will eat, but it often disappears during the day from those who are allowed to eat during the daylight hours. Water and I have become close. Really close. Because all day, every day, it is all I get. What do I do when I am done with Ramadan? Options rush me, but all I want to do is walk in the sunshine with a popsicle. Coconut popsicle. Life is better with popsicle dripping down your hand.

“I’ll have what she’s having.” –When Harry Met Sally

Apple pie is on my shoulder. Why is there apple pie on my shoulder? I look at my sister next to me. Apple pie is on her window. The plate and fork are in her hands, but the apple pie is everywhere. She gasps for air, the seat belt burnt into her skin.

Panic. But not yet. Maybe no one will notice if I drive off. But the car won’t start. With a sigh of resignation, I check the damage. Distractedly jumping out of the car, I slam my finger in the door. Visions of the police showing up to arrest me with my finger stuck haunt me enough to yank it out.

No, the car isn’t going anywhere. Neither is the little blue Geo Metro, fatally parked in the spot my car now possessed. Luck is not on my side, even if apple pie is. Lights go on in houses. People come running. My forehead’s bleeding—sit down on the curb, they motion. Word is sent two blocks down, where our little white church sits full of people eating their apple pie.

My sister is still breathing hard. “No,” she says indignantly, “I did not throw up apple pie.” Emergency room or jail, I am not sure where they will take me. I am the one stupid enough to look down while driving, turning the steering wheel in the process. Do they take you to jail for that?

Bright lights and an ambulance. No, I am not getting in there: I am going home. But Sister Parran will have her way, as she drives me to the hospital. Sister Parran always gets her way—that is how the world works, I think sullenly. But she does make good apple pie.

“Families are like fudge... mostly sweet with a few nuts.” - Author Unknown

Sitting in a Chinese buffet restaurant. That is when it happened. Between sauce covered broccoli and fortune cookies I stepped back from the table talk around me and realized it. I had the family I had always wanted.

When you grow up, you have this idea in your head—the idea of the perfect family. I thought I'd met them when I was eight, but then I spent the night at their house and we had to go to bed at 7:00pm. That was NOT the perfect family. In fact, the more I got to know other families, the more I realized mine wasn't as bad as I thought.

And then I became an adult. I grew up and left home. Fortunately, it wasn't permanent and I keep coming back, so a Chinese buffet it was. We have issues. We have problems—I actually wrote a letter to my first boyfriend telling him to run away, very, very fast. But we are a family and we love each other.

And sitting there together, not caring about if we laugh too loud or eat too many noodles, I knew those people would always be there for me, and I for them. And if I could choose anyone, it would be them. Bonus points for being fun, too.

“You tell me where my suit is woman, we are talking about the greater good!”

“Greater good—I am your wife, I'm the greatest good you are ever gonna get!” –The Incredibles

My mother's hair shined in long, deep brown waves. It stuck to her forehead in thick chunks when she spent 30 hours delivering me. When I was little, I wrapped it around my finger, stroking it like a teddy bear, and claimed it as my security blanket. She cut her hair when I learned to walk, after I grew accustomed to latching onto her hair, pulling myself up like the prince trying to reach Rapunzel.

As I grew, so did my mother's muscle problems. Her hair was one part of her I could touch without causing her pain. I added barrettes, covering her with multicolored plastic animals facing every direction. I saw her curly hair surrounding her like thick thunderclouds, as she lay in bed, too sick to finish our home schooling classes. I closed the door, took my books to the next room, and watched my own straight hair fall forward as I leaned over to finish my lesson as she slept.

I peeking over the crib, my short six-year old legs on tiptoe could just see her. My little sister was an angel, with golden ringlets framing her chubby face. I gave her a lollypop while she sat on my mother's lap, to make her stop crying. It was always a fight to get a comb through her hair. I held her hand tight, as strangers in the supermarket stopped to tell me how cute she was. I know it, I said as I thrust out my chin.

At 11, I was still short enough to have to stand on my tiptoes to see into the mirror at my grandparent's butterfly brown bathroom. With one long, cold snip, the hairs slipped to the carpeted floor and I stooped to pick them up before anyone saw them. But they noticed well enough when I rolled back the door—my bangs were only a half inch long. It would grow back, along with the tingling hope that one time I would cut it and my reflection would look just like one of those girls in the magazine.

I tentatively reached out to touch one perfect white curl, but couldn't do it. I returned to my seat next to the rest of my grieving family as they closed the casket. I would never again see my laughing grandmother's eyes, or feel her soft hair as she leaned in to give me a hug. Hair grows even after you're dead, or at least it looks like it does.

He sat on the couch with scissors next to him. His lower lip protruding in defiance and his face hard. "I want my hair this way." He said, as I stared at him and the random patches of hair were missing. At six, he knew what he wanted. I wish I did. When my brother was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he said a daddy, because they take care of things. I told him that was a very admirable goal, and then I buzzed the rest of his hair off.

It didn't help that I was pasty white, with skin that rejected melanin. That I liked boy's flip-flops instead of high heels, and my basketball shorts and t-shirts yelled "I am American." Short hair seemed sensible for a summer in the tropics. I woke up drowsy from layovers to find many eyes staring at me in a new country. Eyes that belonged to girls with bronze skin, revealing tank tops, and stunning shoes. Girls that tossed their long hair and walked away before I could see their condemnation. My hair was not long enough to hide behind.

I heard him before I saw him. All grown up, I hadn't been home in months, but my father's voice still made me laugh and come running. Stopping in mid-step, I controlled my expression, asking, "What happened to your face?" Months of scraggly whiskers moved to reply, "I was waiting for you to come home and trim my beard." I had become the family hair-cutter, after a weekend of training years ago. I quickly stepped back into my responsibilities.

"A family is a unit composed not only of children but of men, women, an occasional animal, and the common cold." –Ogden Nash

There are ten of us Winzeler kids, really. Seven of us just didn't make it all the way here. I was first, then three miscarriages, Anna, four more miscarriages, and John. I was young when they happened, so all I knew was I would spend the night at the Jones's while my mom was gone. I can't imagine what my mom must have gone through. We were three miracles, really, with my mother's health issues and two (and one later removed) blocked fallopian tubes. It is just hard to understand why. Why there weren't ten miracles.

Where did you come from?
Where did you go?
What happens when you don't make it through?

I like to imagine
You think about me
I want to think
I get to meet you someday

Was it easy to trust God when you had to go?
Are you happy where you are?

Can you see me walk through life?
Did you ever wonder what it would have been like
If you had become part of our family?
Because I do.

What would you have looked like?
What would you have liked to do?
What would have been your favorite color?
What would life have meant for you?

I wish you were here
I wish I could hold you
Will I get to someday?
Will you know me then?

It is hard to know and to trust
There was a reason you could not stay
But please tell Jesus
I am trying

I remember Grandpa Coombs (my mother's father) the least because he died of an abdominal aneurysm when I was little. John Aaron Coombs was born July 20, 1913 in Hardinsburg, Indiana. His father died when he was 2, and so his mother and his two unmarried aunts raised him. Grandpa's mother came from the Cravens line, which had many famous and rich people. His two aunts were related to the Hardens and the Lanier's of Madison, and also related to (the cousins of)President Benjamin Harrison and William Henry Harrison.

Grandpa did not ever know his father, and I know that was hard on him. He was Scottish, and there is a clan known as the "McCombs" who have their own tartan. Grandpa had a great love of knowledge. He graduated in engineering at Purdue, but had many skin problems and so took a job traveling around inspecting places for insurance feasibility for Royal Globe Insurance.

He moved to Cleveland in hopes for the hospitals to treat his skin problems, but liked the diversity and stayed there. He had five daughters (the youngest being my mother) that he worked hard to put through college. He has passed on to me a great desire to know more and to be involved with what is going on.

Grandma Coombs was Janie Hutton Mertz before she got married. She was born January 5, 1918 in New Albany, Indiana. She was given her mother's maiden name for her middle name, as was often the custom. Janie's grandparents (from her father) were first generation immigrants from Germany who never learned English, and worked as butchers.

Grandma had two brothers and a sister, and grew up with other various relatives around the house, including her favorite, Uncle Darcy. Their house always seemed to be alive and busy with cards and drinking, while Janie's mother was a great praying woman. Grandma was very beautiful—Grandpa fell in love with her when she was only 13. Her life was characterized by a

gentle sweetness and peace that I have found in very few people. “Prayer” would be her champion word.

Grandma’s special tradition was the Saturday after Thanksgiving. We would gather together to celebrate birthdays, births, anniversaries, graduations, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years all at once. There would always be the Christmas story and stockings, supplied with attic relics from my mother’s childhood.

Grandma died December 2, 2003 in hospice care with her daughters around her. She has passed on to me a joy of growing old as I see how beautifully it can be done when you spend your life loving each person with every ounce of yourself. She also passed on the tradition of family gathering together and a great love for a big house bustling with people from floor to ceiling. She is one of my heroes.

Raymond Herman Winzeler (my father’s father) was born on October 15, 1914 in Tremont, Illinois. Grandpa’s great-grandfather was born in Switzerland (very close to the German boarder). When he was 29 he came to the US and settled in New York and the family slowly migrated west to Illinois. They were always hard working, and mostly as farmers. In Switzerland (and sometimes Germany), the Winzeler’s were “Wine Sellers.” Our family crest has grape clusters on it.

Grandpa also passed on a long history of religion. Most of Grandpa’s family was in the apostolic church—beliefs that went back to Switzerland and into the Anabaptist movement in Europe. They were a strong, proud people, ready to give their lives for what they believed. This sometimes carried over into the extreme, edging to legalism if not carefully protected. Their hard working ethic and strong religious beliefs formed who they were.

Grandpa devoted his life to the farm, and it was not until he was in the hospital for gall bladder surgery that he really stopped and examined his life and began to serve the Lord with his whole heart. After this time, he devoted his time to sharing the gospel and giving generously to others. Whatever Grandpa did, it was with everything he had. Grandpa died in April of 2002.

My father’s mother, Pearl Lucille Troxel, was born in Wolcott, Indiana on December 23, 1914. Of all the families, except for closer family, the Troxel reunion is the only yearly one still in practice. Every August I hear about more names and dates (which still do not mean much) and I try to listen, knowing that someday I will appreciate it.

Grandma was always nice, soft, and smelled good. She was the complete “farmers wife” with the huge Thanksgiving turkey just like Betty Crocker. Grandma was known for her love as she taught Sunday school almost all her life long. Grandma’s great grandparents on one side came from Alsace-Lorraine, France, as children. They, like my grandfather’s family, were hard working farmers and deeply dedicated to their religion.

Grandma had a series of strokes when I was younger and it affected her mind. She could not remember a lot of things, including the love of her family and of God. I had the opportunity to help take care of her, and sometimes it felt like she was a little child looking up to me. She left a

legacy of serving others, teaching children, and playing “Jesus Loves Me” on the piano. She died in November 2002.

“I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store and he asked for my autograph.” –Shirley Temple

I never believed in Santa Claus, but I never missed out. When I was little, my mother sat me down and explained that Santa Claus was not real, but Grandma was. And Grandma always filled up my stocking and made sure there were presents under the tree. I listened closely and decided that this worked for me.

I was a bit of a “know it all” as a child already, but made sure to hold my tongue around other children about Santa. I didn’t want to ruin it for them—and besides, they might not have a Grandma, and how sad would that be? But with adults, I sure to let them know I knew what was up: Grandma’s are where it’s at.

“They say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they’d make up their minds.” –Wilt Chamberlain

I lost 7 teeth due to playing ball. The first one was actually a kickball—we were playing pass at church and the ball missed my hands and landed on my face. I didn’t realize the tooth fell out until the blood was everywhere. It took a while to find the tooth, but I had to figure out the whole tooth fairy thing, so it was important.

The other 6 teeth were due to basketball. I was my father’s first son. From our kitchen window, you can see two houses over to where the Jones’ basketball court is. If you look hard enough, you can see when someone is playing ball. As soon as I saw signs of activity, I would run down the alley to their house. The Jones’ had five children: heaven when you are an only child (which I was until I was six years old, and even then she was just a baby, so didn’t count).

There was always someone to play with: Cathy, the oldest—just enough older than me to be VERY cool, Josh and David, like older brothers to me, except for the phase where David would chase me around the swing set, threatening to kiss me (he never caught me. I was fast), Becky, who was (and still is) one of my bestest friends, and Rachel, who we called “Little Rachel” to differentiate from me (who was “Big Rachel,” even though I was small for my age).

Josh and David were typical Hoosier boys, who grow up playing basketball. I joined them. Sometimes I could convince Cathy or Becky to join me, but most often I was on my own, hence the 6 teeth I lost. I still remember finally being big enough to shoot correctly, instead of doing the “granny shot” (heaving the ball up underhand and hoping it would get somewhere near the hoop).

When we were lucky, Mr. Jones and my dad would come and join us, and we’d get a real game going. I still remember the resentment growing in me during the games they wanted to get “serious” and play two on two (with Josh and David). I would sit on the sidelines, grumpily thinking it wasn’t fair to be a girl, and a miniature one at that.

During the long summer days, we would walk to the park—a big group of us, making our way down the alley and through the little trail that led to the “Red Barn” park (the red barn was torn down years ago, but name stuck for a long time). There, most of the time only the boys got to play and the girls were told to go swing on the swings. But every once in awhile they would be one short—and I would gladly jump in.

After a couple of “fun” games, the younger boys would get kicked out, and we would all sit on the ground, watching the big boys play. I watched my father dislocate every one of his fingers over the summers we spent at the park. He would come home and my mom would breathe in sharply and say, “*Again??*”

When I was 12, I decided that enough was enough, and rounded up all the girls in the neighborhood. We created a girl’s basketball team called the “Pacer-ettes.” It didn’t last too long, and mostly just consisted of making matching shirts and hair ribbons. After that, the other’s lost interest, and we didn’t have anyone to play against anyways. The boys just laughed at the hair ribbons.

At 14, all the playing with boys paid off, and I practiced with a school team where Mr. Jones was coaching. My daily outfit was a tee-shirt, basketball shorts, white socks up to my knees, and slide sandals. I was never far from my backpack with my Nike’s. While I never got to play in an official game because I was homeschooled, I practiced every day, and did stats for all of the team’s games.

After that life happened, and basketball moved to a back burner. Dad and I would go out and “shoot some hoops,” but it became less and less frequent. My skills were put to good use at the youth center, where I could do a nice lay-up in a skirt, but I was mostly needed off court. Somewhere in my 20s I realized that it wasn’t basketball that I liked as much as the memories and the time I had with my father. Basketball was a bond between us. It was summer memories of simple times where I lost another tooth and held it up proudly. It was walking home, hand in hand, from the park with my dad.

In Brazil, futebol (soccer) reigns in the place of basketball. Not many hoops are available, and girls do not wear basketball shorts. Ever. But every once in awhile...I still get a chance. Every once in awhile when I am back in Indiana, I get a game going with some of the kids from the youth center. And they laugh that a white girl can jump.

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.” Mother Teresa

Does Christianity work in the ghetto? God works in the ghetto, that is all. Give all you want, they say they deserve it. Teach all you want, they say you are crazy. The only thing that that works is God in their heart. Seeing God through you. Seeing Christianity alive. Go ask if turning the other cheek works: get smacked in both of yours, and they will respond according to the answer you give them. They want Christianity to work, begging without words for you to show them that there is hope in all this talk. They know talk is just a cover up, and that is all they think Christianity is until they see God.

A bus picked up 75 kids from the streets of Indianapolis and took them to a two week camp. No one had a clue what we were in for. I remember bed wetting, airing out sleeping bags, death threats, cold pool water with weave floating in it, and duckweed. That was how it began for me in 2002 at Good News Ministries Youth Center.

After camp, Carrie, the female staff, pulled me aside and said, *“If you are just looking for a short term job, then this isn’t for you. These kids are used to everyone coming and going in their lives, and if you are just going to be one more, then don’t even try.”*

It took a year before I finally formed a friendship—a relationship that would last. A year is a long time of investing before you see any results. Especially with the older girls. Younger kids will sell you their soul for a game of tag, and guys will joke around in a game of basketball, but those girls? They scared the heck out of me.

I broke up my first fight. I got hit in the jaw for it. Time passed quickly as the “Girls director,” and I was happy to roll around the hood in my station wagon, affectionately known as the “pimp-mobile.” I had to earn the right to hear their stories, to ask “So how are you and God?”

The friendships grew, but I watched some of my closest girls walk away: choosing drugs or bad relationships over the center—over me. My first experiences counseling pregnant girls and boys who would be daddies. The first time I received a death threat—and many apologies afterwards. Visiting my boys in boy’s school. Going to family funerals.

Something changed in 2005. I call it the three year mark. After three years, something was different. Not that I was “one of the gang,” but...I was welcome. When I dropped kids off, they said, “Lock the doors, be safe Mz. Rachel!” They asked if I wanted to come in. Their parents knew me, and called me Mz. Rachel as well, to my surprise. They came to me with problems, instead of me prying it out of them. They even replied back with, *“Well, how are you and God doing?”* I put in the time, and was reaping the rewards.

Brazil happened. The kids and I got used to Brazil being a part of my life, asking, *“How long this time?”* each time I came or went. I kept coming and going. I’d visit the center a couple days after I got into the country, volunteering when I could. In 2009, it was a huge blow on everyone when Daniel, 15, was shot and killed. I watched the faces of my kids as they walked past his casket and realized it had happened—they were not kids anymore.

Last year gave me a new chance with new kids, but I always held on to my original kids—and their kids. I held babies and went to baby showers. I found out some of our 12-year-old kids were drug runners. I busted my knee trying to break up five guys as they jumped a kid—inside the youth center. I filed a police report for a black eye and strangulation. Complete with pictures.

I earned the title “Educational director,” running the tutorial program. I was called a thug and a beast. I was told I must be mixed, because I talk too black to be white. I was loved and hated, by the same kids, on the same days.

While Brazil has officially taken over my focus, the youth center and the friendships I have made will last forever. For nine years I have seen kids come, get saved, really try, laugh and play hard turn into girls who get knocked up, boys who get drugged up, and many who fall out of the dreams/goals that they had for themselves. I have watched most of them become their parents.

Did the youth center make a difference? Was it worth the hours, days, years I invested? Yes. Even if the only result I see is me. I am a better person for my time at the center. They taught me tough love. How to say something and stand on it, though hell tries to blow me over. I have learned that there is always more to the story than I know, and that love wins more than rules. I have some of the best memories and friends to take with me through the rest of my life because of it.

The point was that we were there. Those kids, and those who are now adults, know we are there, and that we care. Sometimes I still get a phone call. Or someone walking through those purple doors. They know what the center represents. And when they walk through those doors, it means they are open and looking: even if they are not aware of it themselves. It is a picture of something bigger. Of Christ's pierced hands always open, always reaching, always there. No matter what.

No, I haven't seen all the successful lives and changes that I would have liked to have seen. There are some bright stars that inspire me over and over again, but I have seen so many fall and fall again. I have seen things so ugly that I wanted to heave. I have heard words so hateful that I have crawled inside myself and not come out for a long time. Statistics are bleak.

I asked my friend how he was going to change the world for Christ. He said he wasn't. He was going to live life with God in his own little world—the one God had placed him in with people, places, situations—and when the time was right, when something happened and someone found that how they were doing things didn't work, he would step inside that small doorway of opportunity and share the answer he had found: God. That is what it is to work at the youth center.

"My little one--come--come--carry Me into the holes of the poor. Come be My light. I cannot go alone. They don't know Me, so they don't want me. You come, go amongst them, carry Me with you into them. How I long to enter their holes, their dark unhappy homes. Come be their victim. In your immolation--in your love for ME, they will see Me, know Me, want Me...you are afraid. How your fear hurts Me. Fear not. it is I who am asking you to do this for Me. Fear not. Even if the whole world is against you--it is I in you, with you, for you. You will suffer--suffer very much--but remember I am with you." --God to Mother Teresa

I am going to miss this psycho version of what is called the ghetto. I'll probably have weird dreams about driving a van "butt fulla kids," someone getting shot, or getting a new nickname. I got called "Steve Nash with a hair cut" the other day. Maybe I'll dream about life and love and tears and sharing and "How are you and God?" Maybe I'll hear about people leaving and coming and changing and growing and running away.

Sometimes I won't miss the ghetto. The "I deserve this and more," the "Give me something free," the "No, that isn't good enough," instead of a thank you. I won't miss the stuck-ness: "I want to do the right thing, but I just can't" or the meanness—just plain lack of kindness. Being nice or kind is weak. Those whispers of *"Everyone hates you Ms. Rachel, why don't you go home"* replay a thousand times over. They dig my soul. They take away something soft and innocent that I value.

I won't miss the chip on their shoulder. They know what is right and wrong, but don't you dare say it—it is always someone else's fault: *"yeah, I just picked up that girl and slammed her—but you play favorites and never did nothing when she..."* and then the unspoken: *"yeah, I will feel bad about this tomorrow, but I don't know how to apologize so I never will...and for now, I will disrespect you and make you feel like the most insignificant person on the planet."*

And then there are the hugs and the *"Ms. Rachel, watch me!"* As if when I am watching I give them superpowers—they can fly only if they are noticed. There are the *"How was your day?"* and genuine *"You look like you are going to cry--I got your back--tell me a name and I will beat them up for you."* Older kids stop by every once in awhile to show us they are alive and remember that at least one thing in their childhood was real and it is still true. It is the best of life: laughing and playing hard and not hiding, and the worst of it: pain and ugliness and protecting yourself by destroying another. I love it. I hate it.

"Don't choose issues; choose people. Fall in love with a group of people who are marginalized and suffering, and then you won't have to worry about which cause you need to protest. Then the issues will choose you." --Shane Claiborne.

Black eye number one was in Mississippi. At the pool, a little kid kicked me in the eye on accident. I told everyone I was just trying my best to blend in, because I was the whitest thing south of Kentucky. Black eyes number two and three were from running into a parked car. Yep. Totaled both cars; got two black eyes.

"Where's my daughter?" Asked a worried mother. I stopped what I was doing with the other children at the youth center and responded, "I believe she is playing outside, we were just about to take her home..." Looking around, we could not find her daughter, who had decided to walk home that day, even though I had asked her to stay. Panicking, the mother starts yelling, *"Where is my daughter?"*

She lost control and lashed out: I was the last one to see her daughter, this is my fault--she comes closer. I try to calm her down. Where is this girl? The mother's hands are around my throat, and a good punch to my eye by the time my co-worker gets her off of me. Two or three others hold her down.

She is fighting to get loose. I am trying to find the contact lens that is somewhere in my eye. I go into the center, into the office, and close the door. I hope she finds her daughter. She is long gone when the police come, and I feel like the guilty one, writing down my name and social security number. They take pictures of my neck scratches and the pretty shiner that I am icing down with two freeze pops in a brown paper bag. I smiled. Then I remembered that I probably shouldn't be

smiling for those pictures. So I laughed for the next two pictures instead, with my black eye number four.

"I reminded him that some people lived in the kinds of conditions where survival was a daily struggle. others, at their best, could barely hope to pay the bills. Those who have the privilege of a healthy upbringing and a great education have to embrace more responsibility than simply paying their bills. if it were within his reach to produce great wealth, to create jobs for the unemployed, to provide income so that meals could be put on a table, if he had been entrusted by God with the skills and capacity to improve the quality of life for hundreds, if not thousands, it would be sin for him to do anything less."—Erwin McManus

I bought band-aids and visa photos at the pharmacy. My idea of first aid (after my mother's high hopes of me becoming a doctor) is antibiotic ointment and band-aids. I brought my band-aids to Brazil, South America, where I was learning about Living Stones, a church community center for street and working children. I would fix boo-boos. The first casualty came quickly--Anderson's thumb. I brought out the band-aids and out popped all the eyeballs. The kids had ever seen band-aids before.

"What is that? What does it do?" And the big question for the antibiotic ointment: *"Does it sting?"* The crowd asked for their own band-aid as well. I told them I had to see blood first. bad choice of words. I was worried they would get hurt just to receive one.

It hits you in the little things. It makes you ask what kind of life they must live—a life without band-aids. Without beds, dressers, toilet paper, showers, food. Patricia wonders why I am surprised at these things: "Didn't you know about *pobreza* before?" I did. I thought I did. I've been working in the inner city since high school. I wanted to save the world. I've read books, studied poverty, lived with the ghetto. But it is different *being* here. It is another country—it is another world.

I am here to meet these children. To play with them and love them. To learn about this program and help raise funds. I think I am the first one to ask them their favorite color, animal and food. They sit and contemplate it like they've never thought about it before. Pink? No...Green. Most everyone likes dogs. They've seen dogs. And food? They shrug and look blankly. Favorites don't matter when you have nothing. This is day to day survival. We laugh hard and play dodge ball all afternoon, and I forget that I will go home to a meal, a refrigerator, a computer, a bed. They will return to a cement square with a dirt floor.

Of course these children can't afford a luxury like band-aids. I just had never followed the thought through that far. You don't normally travel your thoughts down to reality until you see it. You see it on faces that have never seen band-aids.

"Once, there was a small group of kids who decided to go to a park in the middle of the city, and dance and play, laugh and twirl. As they played in the park, they thought that maybe another child would pass by and see them. Maybe that child would think it looked fun and even decide to join them. Then maybe another one would. Then maybe a businessman would hear them from his skyscraper. Maybe he would look out the window. Maybe he would see them playing and lay

down his papers and come down. Maybe they could teach him to dance. Then maybe another businessman would walk by, a nostalgic man, and he would take off his tie and toss aside his briefcase and dance and play. Maybe the whole city would join the dance. Maybe even the world. Maybe...Regardless, they decided to enjoy the dance." –Shane Claiborne

Life is too short to spend it fighting *against* things. I don't want to survive, I want to thrive. I want the life more abundantly than Jesus died to give me. Life is too big for me if I only know what I am not—I want to know what I am. I am not anti-poverty. I am pro-abundance. I am not working to end scarcity, I am dancing to prove beauty and plenty.

The poor will always be with us, so let's introduce ourselves and pull up a chair to listen. Because stories are going to be told and no one will go home the same. For everyone who needs a piece of bread, there is someone who needs to be able to give that piece of bread to them. There is a great big God out there, and He is reflected in a thousand different ways by the thousand different people. Let me see His image in you.

"We can be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies." –Bono

Poverty Experiment: one month, \$2.50 a day, and me.

Fact #1: One billion people live off of the buying power of \$1.25 a day

Fact #2: Three billion people (roughly half the population) live off of the buying power of \$2.50 a day

These are statistics on paper. I shouldn't call it the poverty experiment, I should call it the reality experiment, because half the world lives like this. If the 27,000 children who die every day because of poverty--preventable causes--are important, then I need to do something about it.

The experiment became real when I was riding my bike with a backpack load of food and a box of oats balanced on the handlebars. Bike--no car--how could I afford a car on \$2.50 a day? I made a list and carefully calculated, and it still was \$19.21--so that food needs to last for 8 days. Eggs and cheese, rice and beans, some vegetables, oats and tortillas, and peanuts. That's what I got. And only that.

It takes 30 minutes to ride my bike to work, but then 15 minutes to change into the right clothes, and 15 more to stop sweating. Suddenly, the weather is really important. It makes the difference of a happy Rachel, or a wet, sappy Rachel who has mud splatters up her back and has to wash her legs in the sink of the employee bathroom. Everything takes longer without the money we pay for convenience. I have to know what I need to do for the day, and plan backwards to make sure I have time to do it.

Things I take for granted and make this experiment unrealistic (but not invalid): Free lodging and accessories: all that \$2.50 goes to food. Ideal situations: I picked a month of (hopefully) good weather, where biking is possible. Opportunities: I am already established and have a great education and training for life. Community: I have a family, and great friends who support me,

and would never let me starve. Choice: I have the choice to do this...and when to stop—choices that those living on \$2.50 a day do not have.

Many people I know in Brazil live off of minimum wage, which is \$300 a month; \$10 a day. If a guy works and has a wife and two kids at home, they are living like this...\$2.50 a day. They are the statistic. In the United States I make in one hour what they make in a day. It was \$14.74 for groceries my second week. Besides having some leftover food from last week, I was able to get applesauce, sour cream, and noodles.

"In order to contribute, I would have to know myself better and be clearer about my goals. I would have to be ready to take (Africa) on its own terms, not mine, and learn my limits and present myself not as a do-gooder with a big heart, but as someone with something to give and gain by being there. Compassion wasn't enough." --"The Blue Sweater"

Top 10 reasons why NOT to listen when Jesus says "Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor." (By Ash Barker in "Make Poverty Personal")

1. But then who would support the missionaries?
2. God has called me to minister to the rich.
3. It is on my to do list...I just have to finish (fill in the blank)...
4. Jesus only asked him because he had a problem with possessions.
5. Jesus only asked him because he didn't have a family.
6. Actually, you can get the camel through the gate--if he gets on his knees.
7. But Jesus wants me to have the best.
8. I would do it, if Jesus made it clear He WANTED me to.
9. I give 10%...He wants MORE?
10. Giving money to the poor is bad stewardship--they would use it for booze.

\$16.69 for week three groceries. In addition to what I needed, I was able to get apples and kiwi. I slept outside last night, trying to imagine what it would be like to do that every night. I was able to make lunch for my family. I was so happy to have enough extra this week to be able to share. Sharing made me feel...empowered. I could give something after all.

The novelty wears off. The extra pushes of the pedal on my bike makes my legs ache. I get home after work and see all this beautiful food on the table and I want to eat it. I don't WANT rice and beans anymore. And I don't feel like cooking anything else. It grates against you. "Why can't you just be normal?" and "What's the point of giving up all these things?" and "It is not like you will ever really feel what it's like to be impoverished." Because I won't. My family will never let me starve. This little doing without things is like gnats. They don't hurt, they just irritate you.

Bitter. Seeing everyone else HAVE while I HAVE NOT. Why? Is this fair? I put myself in their shoes: I work as hard for my \$2 a day as they are working for their \$20 an hour. In fact, HARDER than most of them. All of this--just because of where I was born? Because of who my parents are? What does that have to do with me?

"Money won't solve the problem." My friend said, when I read that it would take 13 billion dollars a year to end hunger for the world's poorest: and over 18 billion a year is spent in pet

food. But if money won't, what will? Tell me *what will* solve it. Each person doing their part? What is their part? I believe God wrote a calling/way of helping on the heart of each person. One thing that *gets* them--it grabs their heart and won't let go. It is the job of each person to find this thing and then go after it.

12 Steps to solving poverty (By Paul Polack "Out of Poverty")

1. Go where the action is (stop pitying poor people)
2. Talk to the people who have the problem and listen to what they say
3. Learn everything you can about the problem's specific content (learn about the poor around you, as well as global poverty and what can be done)
4. Think big and act big
5. Think like a child
6. See and do the obvious (when you know the people, you know the problem, and sometimes a solution)
7. If somebody already invented it, you don't need to do it again (help whatever is already going on)
8. Make sure it has positive measurable impact that can be brought to scale, reaching a million people and make their lives measurably better.
9. Design to specific cost and price targets
10. Follow practical three year plans
11. Continue to learn from your customers
12. Stay positive: don't be distracted by what others think

30 days = \$60.39. I found out that sometimes you just want SOMETHING ELSE, ANYTHING ELSE to eat. Drinking another glass of water doesn't cut it. I found a lot of books of a lot of great people doing a lot of great things in the world. I received a lot of encouragement from a lot of good people and had conversations with strangers and friends and family that would have never come up otherwise. I found that I take more time to do the little things, and the little things bring me more happiness than whatever else I used to be doing. I found time to enjoy sunsets. I found that my choices were more limited, but my ideas became unlimited.

I found that I felt strangled when I had nothing to give or share with others. When you are able to give, you feel empowered. I found that I will never really know the hopelessness and helplessness that those in true poverty feel. That this is just a little baby step toward something I am not sure of yet.

"It is poverty to decide that a child must die so that you may live as you wish." --Mother Teresa

"Two guys talking to each other, and one of them says he has questions for God. He wants to ask why God allows all of this poverty and war and suffering to exist in the world. And his friend says, "Well, why don't you ask Him?" The fellow shakes his head and says he is scared. When his friend asks why, he mutters, "I am scared God will ask me the same question."--Shane Claiborne

It doesn't seem right to be able to change environments and life and situations so quickly. My body hasn't caught up yet. I gaze out the window and try to wrap my brain around what I am

seeing. but I can't manage, not before everything changes and I have to start all over again. The idea of OWNING land just seems silly, at least when you are on a road in the middle of all that land staring back at you. Because there is so much world, and you can only love so many things without being splintered into a million pieces.

When you travel you see how other people live. See how many other ways--besides yours--that there are to live. Sometimes you smile. Sometimes you frown--quietly. Sometimes you are awed by brilliance, and sometimes you just wish you could shake the bloomin' daylights out of them to make them do something, anything.

It started at my grandparents' farm. Or maybe earlier. I would walk down the railroad tracks and keep walking. West. The sun would set and I knew I had to turn back--but I didn't want to. It hurt. Something in me ached so badly I felt like I was killing it when I turned around. Feeling so limited. My body can only run so far before it is out of breath. And I can't fly. That has always been a sore spot with me.

Since then it has gotten worse. Roads call to me with a taunting, "You don't know what's at the end." Every sunrise calls me East to follow the new day, and every sunset I am called West, trying to catch the colors more brilliantly—maybe if I were just a bit closer I could. Whenever it is cold I am called South and whenever it is warm I want to move around until I feel the wind in my hair.

I own the open road. Not the closed road. The road next to the home. The familiar road. The comfortable road. No—the open road. With the feeling of not knowing. A little bit of dizzy heights, a little bit of insecurity with determination of courage, a lot of anticipation, and even more assurance that at the end of the day...it has been a good one.

I own the open road. The road that stretches to the place you must reach or die. West. Always west, into the sun. The road that makes you put away your camera--not take it out. Because capturing it in a small box is beyond impossible. The open road is some place familiar touching unfamiliar, calling you deeper and telling you that one day it will be even better. Even truer. Even realer. The open road is the place you travel to reach rather than use to travel.

I don't understand how I can be comfortable both here and there: the cold, hard silence of the metro speeding to the center of Chicago to the chattered, sweaty breath of a Kombi in the Centro of Carpina. Yet I am equally myself in both.

People ask how I fit. Transition. Acclimate. It is easy: one foot and then the other, a plane, a train, and there you are. You arrive, keep your eyes open, give lots of hugs, and listen to stories. You wait for them to ask the questions, and then you answer. Your body does everything automatically. You fall into habit. Into social order. Into the path of least resistance. And it is good. But every once in awhile I peek out of somewhere and wonder where I am, how I got here, and what happens next.

The sinking feeling of "who are you kidding? This isn't home. You are missing it still. There is more and it is out there." This probably doesn't even have to do with Brazil/USA/Rachel drama.

It is a holy longing. There is a buried me that hasn't adjusted and probably never will. But most of the time it stays buried.

Brazil, you are so far away. Yet I can feel my legs walking underneath me, up the cobblestone hill to your house. It is the 5:00pm sun, warm and soft, telling me to get ready for darkness. The feeling that I'm almost there, and then I can take off my shoes, sit on the cool tile floor, and watch. Watch the world as it should be. The love I have for Brazil feels dangerously close to loving a man. How could I have a love affair with a country? And that is how it is.

Tonight it came out under the porch light, as it lights up the numbers of my house. I shuddered in the car, the radio singing me a lullaby. The hard, stone chimney stood in the shadow, and the banister cast zebra stripes down the lawn. I was other. I wasn't there and wasn't here. I clung to my car as some kind of magic, transporting me from one place to another. Still wearing my seatbelt, keys jingle and tears fall, my questions unanswered. I am other.

I am scared to go because there is so much I want here. I will lose familiarity. I will lose all the rites of passage and comfort of doing things how I am used to them being done. But I want Brazil. I want the simplicity. I want my spot in this world where I can make a difference, and see it. But I want my family as well. I want to have a family. And I feel like to go is to give up my chance. But to stay is to atrophy and turn into everyone else. I am other.

"Who are YOU?" Said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, *"I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."*

"What do you mean by that?" Said the Caterpillar sternly. *"Explain yourself!"*

"I can't explain MYSELF, I'm afraid, sir" said Alice, *"because I'm not myself, you see."* –Lewis Carroll

"Voce quer frutas?" The winkled hand of the elderly woman held a pineapple towards me. I smiled and moved on quickly, as unsure of what I wanted as I was of what she had said. "Smile and nod" I thought to myself, "smile and nod." Finding yourself in a new place can be scary. The anxiety and feelings that you encounter has been labeled "Culture shock," with three phases: honeymoon, negotiation, and adjustment.

Sitting on the cool tile floor eating fresh pineapple, I waved my hands energetically and sprayed pineapple juice on Emanuel: "I just cannot get over the beauty. I can't get over the feeling that each day is an adventure because I have no clue what is going on. I have this idea that I will learn something new every minute if only my brain could contain it."

The honeymoon stage is everything from pre-experience excitement to delight with novelty. Differences are seen in a romantic light, exotic and fascinating. *"You speake Engliss?"* asked a dark, curly haired stranger as he leaned in to kiss me on my left cheek and then my right. "Y-yes" I replied shyly, unsure of what was culturally correct to do next. Some friends I made in Brazil asked me to teach them English. My credentials? I was a native speaker. Thirty people

showed up, most of whom I had never seen before. I cleared my throat, pulled my sweaty palms out of my pockets, and began: “My name is Rachel, what is your name?”

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore” –Dorothy, Wizard of Oz

I sighed, and waited. What could I do? The only one home was the maid, who didn’t speak English. I rested against the tile wall and tried to figure out the best solution. There was no toilet paper, I didn’t know the word for “Toilet paper” in Portuguese, and I needed toilet paper. I could try yelling “papel of toilet!” and hope the maid would get the idea.

In the negotiation stage, things that used to be beautiful are now irritating. All you want is (fill in the blank), and it always stays just out of reach. This stage can have mood swings and can lead to depression or withdrawal from the new culture. The Brazilian wind whipped through my hair as I held down the paper and wrote quickly, “I am so far away from American culture and thinking, surrounded by different everything—it makes me wonder who I am. I have no expectations to live up to. No one here knows who I am, what I stand for, and what I believe. It is like a blank piece of paper, and I have no idea what I want to write on it.”

But I adjusted. “*What was it like?*” Emanuel asked, as we dug into the meat filled pancakes. “It was hard because coming here I was the extra person added to the mix, instead of making up part of the mix. I had to learn to be like icing on the cake: the icing has to form to the mold of the cake, trying to fill in the cracks and help out where it can.”

By the time of adjustment, you have developed new routines, and things, in a different sense, feel “normal.” You begin to either understand the new culture, or understand that you don’t understand it yet, and that is okay. *“Not all who wander are lost” J. R. R. Tolkien*

“It is so weird, Emanuel—it is like nothing is real. Being back, my thoughts flake off and float down to the floor. What is mine? What is me? I am stumbling through life. Not half bad, but not all there. And no one else knows me well enough to know I am not here. Not here really. I am living outside myself.”

Emanuel finished his shake and nodded, understandingly. The same three stages can be seen in returning home after being gone. In some, it is noticed even stronger than while in another country. Reverse culture shock is worse for many people because they are not expecting it. They expect things to be different in a new place, but not where they grew up. All your old “normals” feel strange.

Emanuel stops as I unlock my car door. *“Brazilians have a word for it that you do not: ‘Saudades.’ You can’t explain it—you have to feel it. It is the longing, melancholy feeling that never fully leaves you, even when you are happy. You feel saudades when you want to be with the ones you love, but you can’t. It is when you long for something that is out of your hands, out of your control. This word, saudades, is what you have carried with you back to America.”*

I stare down the row of soy sauces at Kroger, the glass bottles blurring and my head pounding. I sink down to the dingy linoleum floor and rest my back against the aisle of cereal boxes. “Just

pick up some soy sauce. Just pick it up and go.” My brain tells me, but my body refuses to comply. So many choices and so much stuff. I miss the *feira* in Brazil with fresh fruit and vegetables. I miss the two aisles that make up the entire grocery store in the rural town. I am overloaded with everything around me, all the advertisements competing for my attention. “It isn’t fair. It is not right.” I complain to my mom as I hand her the soy sauce. “We have so much, and we don’t even know it.”

“I went a little farther,” he said. “Then still a little farther—till I had gone so far that I don’t know how I’ll ever get back.” –Paul Scott

It is often hard to remember that things have changed while you have been away, or that your ideal of home (while gone) is not reality. Many times people don’t want to hear about your trip—and even if they do, they just don’t seem to “get it.” This can lead to the same kind of frustration as you had in the original negotiation stage. “I returned and felt like everything had changed.” I share with Emanuel. “Before my friends and I were all triangles. While there, I became a square—with even more angles—while my friends were all rounded off into circles. Now I am constantly bumping corners.”

“The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is to at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.” –G.K. Chesterton

I pause as I put on my coat to go to the art museum, and turn Emanuel reflectively, “There are some things that I can only learn in Brazil, and others I can only learn in America.” Having spent three of the past seven years in Brazil, (continuing to teach English, but now focusing on working with street children), I can now talk with Emanuel in Portuguese—but we always return to English.

“When are you coming back to Brazil?” Emanuel asks me. “I am not sure yet,” I tell him truthfully, “But I will go back. I have been through so many times of going back and forth between countries that I feel blurred sometimes, but I would not change anything. I have become my own person, a blend of two lives in two countries. Brazil and America make up who I am and are a part of me, but I am still a whole me on my own. It has taken a long time to be able to say that.”

*“And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.” –T.S. Eliot*

Feira—open market
The cart wheels creak and refuse to turn
Pick up your end and lift to cut corners
Rice, beans, macaroni, crackers
Outside the street lined with streamers
That blow with the saving wind
Tarps rise and fall
In their attempts to give shade

I cannot inhale quickly enough
To capture the smells
Cumin, cinnamon, mango, cilantro
The heat bears down on my shoulders
While sweat gathers on the small of my back
The flies take their share
One Real of this
Two Reis of that
Buy the whole pile for five
Pay the man with the wheelbarrow
To take it to the taxi
My feet stumble over the uneven cobblestones
I grab a hand
And feel at home

Meat market
A corner of red flesh
Hooks hanging and winding
The red and white swaying
Some pieces still have black hair on them
The fat overrules
T-bone steak on a rack
Waiting to be taken to a restaurant
Served with silver silverware
Right next to the potatoes and peas
But now it sits next to the intestines
And cow hooves
And large hunks
That still resemble animals
It is too real
Too alive
To eat yet. let it
Be processed
Until it is just another bite
To put in my mouth
And finish my plate

"My words have not caught up with me--it is as if they are pieces of luggage that the airline misplaced and sent on a later flight--and it is only slowly, day by day, that I come back into focus, until, at last, perhaps a week after, I've returned, I wake up one morning and realize that I am reassembled, intact, here."—Pico Iyer

They have five hammocks. I have taken naps in all of them, but I like the yellow one best. All we do is sleep and read and get called for meals and then sleep and take a swim. Nita is here, and whatever food Nita touches turns to gold. yesterday I burnt my back half so today I will burn the front half. I tried to wash dishes and Nita shooed me out of the kitchen. How delightful. Too bad

for the seaweed. I have this horrible, pathetic fear of things around my feet when I cannot see what it is. So I randomly jump and yell and shiver as the seaweed wraps around my toes like something alive and poisonous. Everyone laughs at me.

I woke up to red tiles with a slit opening that makes the room bright without electricity. We swam out to a boat anchored to the middle of nowhere and sat on it until we could open our eyes without the salt sting blurring our vision. No projects are due, and the clock in the hall is only there to make sure we fit in three meals each day. Nights are spent listening to wind and ocean and palm trees blending into thunderstorms and silence.

There is something beautiful about walking along the beach during twilight that makes everything magical. The sand between your toes, the ocean rolling around my ears, and the last gleam of light that catches the graceful palms. The moon steps into the limelight and I am released to breathe deeply.

Where is home? I am still looking. I find some of it lying about on the path. A rock here, a stick over there. I pick it up and hold it close. And I feel happy. I stop and say I must be home. And then I turn and see the road is still there in front of me.

"It should not be physically possible to get from the banks of the Pepani River, Africa to Wyoming in less than two days, because mentally and emotionally it is impossible. the shock is too much, the contrast too raw. we should sail or swim or walk from Africa, letting bits of her drop out of us, and gradually, in this way, assimilate the excesses and liberties of the States in tiny, incremental sips, maybe touring through South America and Mexico before trying to stomach the land of the Free and the Brave." —Alexandra Fuller

I have finally figured it out. After all the times of people asking me about Brazil and why I go...it is love. I normally list a couple of superficial reasons like palm trees and Maracuja, but I know it isn't that. It is like when you love someone and people ask why. You may say because he makes me smile or because he flosses his teeth, but those aren't really why you love him. You can't explain why you do. It seems unscientific and sometimes very stupid. But you do and that is enough. I love Brazil. I just know, that's why. It is part of me that was made to fit there and nowhere else. It calls me and I go--with the smile of God.

"Missions is less about the transportation of God from one place to another and more about the identification of a God who is already there. it is almost as if being a good missionary means having really good eyesight. Or maybe it means teaching people to use their eyes to see things that have always been there; they just didn't realize it. You see God where others don't, and then you point Him out. Perhaps we ought to replace the word "missionary" with "tour guide" because we cannot show people something we haven't seen...and if you do see yourself as carrying God to places, it can be exhausting. God is really heavy."—Rob Bell

“Please God...what can I do now?”

“The dishes.”

“The dishes? why the dishes?”

“Because that is where you are now.”

“The dishes? forever?”

“No, not forever. today the dishes and tomorrow the world. or maybe the dishes again.”

“Why the dishes?”

“Because you need the dishes.”

“When will I need something else?”

“When you are fine with just the dishes.”

At the quadro the kids start flying kites. They are tissue paper and sticks, with cut up trash bag tails. The problem is there is not enough string. They argue and divide and share the string, wrapped around tin cans. I drop my backpack and join a game of futebol. It starts raining, and our bare feet slip across the slick quadro. After a good game or two the kids give a round of hugs. Some of the little ones call back to us, peering through the crossbars of the bridge with their dirty hands and faces. Their "Tia! Tia! Tia!" cries continue until they are like kitten's meowing for their mother and we walk on.

It feels like home. The belonging feeling. Flying kites with no string. Running with pounding feet, trying to catch a flat, broken ball. Laughing when I fall. Guarding a little kid who shows me up and then grins with a "heh, aren't I amazing?" look. Passing out cookies. Receiving hugs and hands that just want to touch me, just want something that is real. All that I love and miss at the youth center and those summer days at the park...things really are not so different in the world.

I went to Brazil and loved it. Now I wonder if it is really about something bigger. I wonder if love is always like that: you are consumed and it is so beautiful and then you realize...it is just a piece of something bigger. But that doesn't take away from it at all.

You can't go living life with God without soon realizing that there is something very big, very scary and very much more important than you going on. Like "V for Vendetta" there is no such thing as a coincidence. I am filled with a certain dread when I see little decisions I made in the past affect a whole world of people. At the same time, I see little obedience's that add up to a million good things and I bubble over in awe. I am a part of this, and belong--for all the good, bad, ugly, and breathtakingly beautiful.

He calls me forward, to places I cannot see, to a journey of sifting sand where I am promised no companion but an invisible hand. A hand connected to this Power, Force, King--and yet my Lover, Consoler, and Friend. He calls me deeper, to treasure troves of untainted gold, and I am claustrophobic, clawing for the end of the tunnel, and am then led to a place where I see the inside is bigger than the outside. He calls me to Himself, where like a new crush, all I want to do is ask what He thinks about life and toothpaste and women preachers. Where fascination draws me to his eyes and I cannot look away. His words take on new meaning, and monotone is turned into music. Those words aren't for the crowd anymore--they are for me.

"There are things you cannot understand, and you must learn to live with this. Not only must you learn to live with this, you must learn to enjoy this...At the end of the day, when I am lying on my bed and I know the chances of any of our theology being exactly right are a million to one, I need to know that God has things figured out, that if my math is wrong we are still going to be okay. And wonder is that feeling we get when we let go of our silly answers, our mapped out

rules that we want God to follow. I don't think there is any better worship than wonder." – Donald Miller

"Religion is responsibility or it is nothing at all." –Jacques Derrida

"Yale professor Harold Bloom observed that Karl Marx had it only partly right when he said that religion is the opiate of the people. More broadly speaking, it is the poetry of the people, both the good and the bad, for better and worse. According to Bloom, trying to attack or conquer such a massive target is almost as useless as blindly celebrating it. But religion can, and should be, objected to, questioned, and talked about. Devastating criticism of religion is always part of religion. The religiously faithful aren't just permitted to critique and complain and reform; they're bound to do it by religion. Without it, there is no faithfulness. When religion won't tolerate questions...it has an unfortunate habit of producing some of the most hateful people ever to walk the earth." –David Dark

In my quest to understand religion I will begin with myself, since I know none quite so well: I grew up in a Christian home. Conjure up stereotypical ideas or memories of "that Christian family" you knew. It may be close to my life. I accepted the existence of God as firmly as the peas on my plate, and the Bible as His revealed will for us was as real as my running bath water.

It took a long time to realize that not everyone believed the same thing. That was confusing. God and religion were a set of rules that I felt happy when I followed and guilty when I didn't. They made me a moral person, but not a good person. Somewhere along the way something changed. I met God. I found something bigger than myself to live for, and I am in for the long haul. *"In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."* –Thomas Merton

Church—denominations? I still haven't figured that out. Community church, Baptist church...they felt the same, and that was what was important to me. They felt like home. There was doctrine, but I don't remember spending a lot of time arguing about it. You believed it or you didn't. You got out of it what you were ready to receive.

At the Missionary Baptist church, to keep from politically correct or incorrect terms, we simply referred to race as food: I was a "strawberry," while my best friend Deandra was "chocolate." I was the whitest thing there, next to the choir robes. I can still hear the music—tight harmonies, rhythm, and passion. There was an overabundance of generosity, personal involvement, and food—no one had a better BBQ. I wasn't just home, I was family.

To continue my over-simplistic generalizations of different denominations, my uncle is a Lutheran pastor, which seems to involve a lot of tradition, but then again, my aunt is a pastor as well which isn't so traditional. One set of grandparents were Methodists, and I remember services in a big, old building that seemed stuffy, even with the high ceiling, but perfect for the bell choir. The other set were Apostolic Christian, meaning the men sat on one side and the women sat on the other. They sang acapella, and I found something refreshing in the simplicity.

I had a friend who told me he was Presbyterian. I asked him what that meant and he said it meant that doctrine was important and that he needed to study it more. I visited Pentecostal churches,

which were very emotional. I kept looking around, wondering if they were for real, or just faking it. I kept waiting to see if I would “get” whatever they had. I didn’t. Church in Brazil is charismatic and colorful, as are the Brazilians themselves. They sit for longer sermons, often dance, and begin and end whatever hour the people are there. Brazil is Catholic like America is Christian, but Evangelicalism is growing.

Why Christianity? He chose me. We pattern our choice of religion after what we admire. Many of my friends grew up Christian but then saw only hypocrites and nothing to admire, and left. That is the power we have on one another. I admired God himself and a personal relationship. The rest got thrown in and like family—“love ‘em and hate ‘em and can’t get away from ‘em.” *“There’s a whisper of revolution whenever people really speak to one another and really listen.”* –David Dark

“Baha’i are people who believe in God,” A friend told me, *“Who believe they have a soul that needs nourishment and care, and that other people in the world also need that. It teaches that religion is progressive, that it goes in a cycle, and Baha’u’llah (which means Glory of God) is the latest messenger in the successive line of Messengers from God. We believe in all the major prophets like Moses, Buddha, Christ, Krishna, Zoroaster, Mohammed, etc. These messengers have brought a lot of the same teachings, and at their cores, they all basically teach the same things, only they got more progressive as time went on.”*

I told him I thought this was the easy way out—accepting everything. That Baha’i was a religion of knowledge—all the religious books are sacred and have things we need and must use in our lives. My friend pointed out that this was not easier, but harder, in that he felt so small in the vastness of all that needed to be learned. We agreed on many things, like seeking God, knowing God, and walking in His presence. We disagreed about Jesus being God’s only way to heaven. We agreed to cheer the other on in their search.

“If I am a good listener, I don’t interrupt the other or plan my own next speech while pretending to be listening. I am not in a hurry, for there is no pre-appointed destination for the conversation. There is no need to get there, for we are already here; if I am a good listener, what we have in common will be more than what we have in conflict.” –Merold Westphal

“Aunt” Brenda had short curly red hair, a dog named Moppet, and diabetes. She used a scooter and let me honk the horn. Aunt Brenda was Jewish, and like everything else about Aunt Brenda, it was very pronounced. I remember going to a Jewish community center for Purim, my favorite celebration with poppy seed triangle cookies, where I got to dress up like Esther. Esther was in my Bible too, so I didn’t think we were different at all. But Aunt Brenda seemed to think so.

My mom said it would be better for me not to talk about certain things around Aunt Brenda. Certain things like Jesus. Aunt Brenda liked me just fine, so we got along. I was in slight awe of her, being from a place talked about in the Old Testament. I wondered if she was any closer to God, since she was one of God’s chosen people. But Aunt Brenda didn’t seem to think she was very chosen.

My mother enjoyed saying “Chutzpah” and using a Jewish accent now and then, but mostly she loved Passover. We read books about the symbolism of Jesus foretold in the Jewish traditions. We had an old record of Jewish music that I would dance to as a little girl, but the best part was Matza, the unleavened bread. If you want to make me happy, give me Matza. During the Passover, they would take three Matzos, break the middle one, and hide half of it. All the children would hunt, and the finder would receive a prize.

The Jewish people are still waiting for their Messiah, while I believe that he has already come. I am awed at the price paid for this difference of belief. I read a book called “Girl Meets God” by Lauren Winner. She converted to orthodox Jewish, but became a Christian after college. She relates changing religions to getting a divorce and remarriage. Not easy. By the end she was able to not just look at the differences and what she left behind, but in the similarities, and what she brought with her.

Catholics went to big buildings that had stain glass windows, lots of pictures of a bleeding Jesus, and prayed to Mary. They had a pope and fish on Friday. That was all I knew. When I was little, I went to a nursing home and talked with an old man who told me he was Catholic. I decided to convert him. I asked if he believed that Jesus died for his sins, and he said yes. That Jesus was God’s Son and yet God as well? Yes, he believed that too. I went through every doctrine my young brain could explain and he agreed with all of it. I pronounced him a Christian and went on with my life, a little more confused about what it meant to be Catholic.

History was full of Catholics and Protestants killing each other. That couldn’t all be about praying to Mary, could it? As I got to know some people who were Catholic, I learned that they came in all different shapes and sizes. Some seemed to be following a religion of symbols, statues, and traditions—while others seemed to be on the same page as I was—we both loved Jesus. I find it difficult to keep grudges with someone who really loves Jesus.

I have been challenged by Henri Nouwen, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, and a nameless girl who blogs about her life and Catholic faith. But in Brazil Catholicism seems to be a different breed. Being 85% Catholic, each town has a saint and they celebrate its holiday with fervor. The Brazilian Catholics I have met feel empty. The big, old, beautiful buildings make me ache, cry, and want to fill them with something: relationship. For so many, all of the things meant to bring them closer to God have just become relics that stand between them and God.

I mix up Buddhism and Hinduism. My way of differentiating was that Buddha was the fat god who wasn’t really a god, and the Hindus had all the gods with arms. Hinduism was the religion of so many gods you could not remember them all, a caste system, and Gandhi. Buddhism had no god, nothingness (nirvana), and the Dali Lama.

If age gets brownie points, Hinduism wins as the world’s oldest religion. It is the uniting of a lot of thoughts over a lot of time, but most often comes together under the Vedas, their sacred writings. They have 33 million gods, but really it is one god, with many names, and all is god (pantheism). There are four castes, and then there are the untouchables. You are born, live, and die in your caste: that is your lot in life. There are four ends of life with the main one being

Dharma, the pursuit of the doctrine and duty of each caste system. Dharma reminds me of the TV show “Lost.”

Buddhism began when Buddha broke off from Hinduism, and decided that no god was needed—you need to follow your own path to enlightenment. His Dharma is based on the four noble truths: there is suffering in life, suffering always has causes, the end to suffering is possible by ending the causes, and the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to end suffering. You should look up the Eightfold path for yourself. You do all this to become free from desiring anything. That is your goal. But *“Having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting. This is not logical, but it is often true.”* –Spock from *Star Trek*

“Islam” means “surrender.” There is one God, and Muhammad was his prophet. The five pillars of Islam are declaration of faith, prayer, fasting (Ramadan), almsgiving, and pilgrimage. The Qur’an is their holy book, where Jesus was a prophet, but Muhammad was the last one, and more important. When I was young, I learned that Muhammad had multiple wives, including one that was nine years old. I never forgave him for it. You can’t have Islam without Muhammad, and I don’t like him. I know there are many great men with many personal problems who do many great things...but this is my bias, and I admit it.

Religion: of strangers, friends, family, and myself. I have found things I agree and disagree with. I have asked myself why I feel that way about it, and sometimes I have answers and sometimes I don’t. I have asked what I am supposed to DO about what I know, and sometimes I have answers and sometimes I don’t.

“God is not made angry and insecure by an archaeological dig, a scientific discovery...or by people with honest doubts concerning His existence. God is not counting on us to keep ourselves stupid, closed off to the complexity of the world we’re in...I’m not required to cut off my questions or try to uncritically place my faith in particular doctrines. The call to worshipfulness is a call to employ my imagination and therefore the whole of my practice—a mindfulness that requires an engagement.” –David Dark

I wonder if I only want to know what is right and what I believe so I can go out and start yelling it. I can be sure of it. I can protest and do something and dare them to say I am wrong. Instead, I find that the center of religion, belief, and myself is relationship with God. And what flows from that relationship is love to all people. Those with the same beliefs and those with different beliefs. And that is what I needed to know.

“Reality, Philip K. Dick reminds us, “is that which, when you stop believing it, doesn’t go away.” It is the work of the prophet—the poet, the songwriter, the teacher, the preacher—to seek out reality and to never stop questioning it.” –David Dark

There are three types of fearing God: doing right out the fear of punishment, out of the fear of losing reward, and out of the fear of broken relationship. The closer you are to God, the less you will do right out of the motivation of the fear punishment or of loss of reward. When what you value most is the relationship, the more you will seek to do right out of the fear of breaking that relationship because of sin.

Fear of Punishment: “Dear God, don’t let me go there. Amen.”

Fire insurance. That is what being a Christian was for me at age 8. I liked Jesus, God, and all of the stories, but the push over the edge was hell. I will be honest: I lay in bed, scared out of my wits that I didn’t do it right. I re-prayed the sinner’s prayer every night, just in case I didn’t wake up. Because it didn’t hurt to make sure. And it would hurt if I’d messed up.

“No one likes the idea of hell.” My pastor said, “I mean, who sits around going ‘hell—yeah, that is my kind of idea!’ Maybe some sickos, but that is something else. If it were about picking and choosing what we wanted from the Bible, we wouldn’t throw out “God loves you” and keep the idea of hell. I wouldn’t.”

Most of my theological discussions, including those about hell, involve references to the *Narnia* book series or something C.S. Lewis wrote, like “The Great Divorce.” He doesn’t say it is truth, he just says it is a story of how it might be. Of how he is trying to wrap his head around things. And I want it. I want it to be right so badly. *“I don’t think it is true.”* My sister told me, *“They are beautiful ideas and it made me, for the first time, stop and really think that maybe everything could be ok. But I don’t think that is what the Bible is talking about.”*

To which I politely thought “Shit.” And I don’t think dirty words often. I don’t like them. Out loud I said “That is really honest. I don’t think I am ready to be that honest yet.” I didn’t want to travel my thoughts about hell down the rabbit hole. Because it is dark down there. I like forgetting how much I don’t know about everything. Because once I think about it I come to some conclusion and you are accountable for your conclusions.

A current theological hot spot is what you think about hell, and how that fits in with a loving God. Rob Bell brought the discussion out of the closet with his book “Love Wins.” I don’t think he got everything right. I don’t think C. S. Lewis did either. And I know I don’t have it all right. But we are looking. I can’t explain away all the references to hell the way Rob Bell did, just like I couldn’t with homosexuality. Trust me, I tried. And while I think very differently about homosexuality today than I did in the past, I still know that it is wrong. I just don’t have all the answers. And that doesn’t make me happy.

Fear of Loss of Reward: Is it worth it?

Growing up, I realized if Christianity was just about heaven and hell it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t feeling suicidal, so I still had this life to deal with. If Christianity didn’t work now, I wasn’t ready to step out and believe it would work after death. On the garage, A friend and I graffited the question “Is there life before death?” I am a child of my generation with an uncanny ability to piece together what makes sense into a web of semi-solid information that I feel comfortable living with, but is that enough when it comes to eternity?

“Our eschatology shapes our ethics. Eschatology is about last things. Ethics are about how you live. What you believe about the future shapes, informs, and determines how you live now...so when people ask: “What will we do in heaven?” one possible answer is to simply ask: “What do

you love to do now that will go on in the world to come?” What makes you think “I could do this forever?” What is it that makes you think, “I was made for this?” Imagine being a racist in heaven-on-earth, sitting down at the great feast and realizing that you’re sitting next to THEM. THOSE people. The ones you’ve despised for years. Your racist attitude would simply not survive...Paul makes it very clear that we will have our true selves revealed and that once the sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies are prohibited and removed, for some there simply won’t be much left. Jesus is interested in our hearts being transformed, so that we can actually handle heaven.” –Rob Bell

Some people use hell to scare people. They must not think church is worth it without the fire and brimstone. Some people use the idea of no hell to think they can do whatever they want. That is no better. Trying to evade responsibility isn’t going to help you in this life or the next, whether you add the label “Christian” or not. I know life is better with Jesus, now and forever. I know this because of my own life. So I want everyone I love to know Jesus. Because I want them to have a better life, with a hope and a future. Not because of hell.

Fear of Breaking Relationship: *“Your love is better than life.”* Psalm 63:3

Rob Bell discusses when someone commented that Gandhi was in hell: *“Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?”* Were his questions. Is Gandhi in hell? I don’t know. I don’t know Gandhi. What sends someone to hell? What sends someone to heaven? Are there certain words that need to be prayed to be saved? How do you know they meant it for real? That they believed it?

What about a chance to accept Jesus after people die? Like in *The Last Battle* and they enter through the door and look Aslan in the face? Great idea, I think. True? I don’t know. It doesn’t say it in the Bible. What about more than one chance? Like in *The Great Divorce* where they could go at any time to heaven from hell, riding a bus? Great idea, I think. True? I don’t know. It doesn’t say it in the Bible.

Once I asked God why he wouldn’t show me more than six months of my life at a time. He said because then I wouldn’t have to trust him. He is right. I wouldn’t. I would get started on my life like a “To do” post-it note list. Maybe all of these things about the afterlife aren’t written in the Bible because God knew that then we wouldn’t find how great He was while we were here on earth. I don’t know. For some reason, He left out A LOT of stuff. Stuff that worries me. Stuff that makes me trust Him instead of being able to write out my beliefs in bullet point form.

“Religions should not surprise us. We crave meaning and order and explanation. We’re desperate for connection with something or somebody greater than ourselves. This has not caught Jesus off guard. Jesus insisted in the midst of this massive array of belief and practice that God was doing something new in human history, something through him, something that involved everybody (John 14:6).” --Rob Bell

Christendom has given me a vague but general outline of what it means to be saved. Believing in Jesus, accepting Christ, giving God your life...those are some of the words I try to describe it as. But really—most of it I have never found words for. In the end I mostly shrug my shoulders and

say it is a personal relationship with Jesus. Which, when you think about it, sounds absolutely ridiculous. You know Jesus? God? Creator? HIM? How? When did you talk to Him? What did he sound like? What did He say? Do you laugh together? Argue? I give another shrug, and a “yes.”

Boil down the issue of hell and you come face to face with God. Who is He? Do I have the right God? Have I warped my image of Him with the same manipulation that I do in other areas of my life? Is my Jesus just an idol hodge-podge of what is convenient to me? Of what sounds right? Of what feels right? Can I trust Him?

Yes. God is big enough not to let me screw it all up. I’ll keep learning. And probably rewrite this in ten years. When I finally got up the courage to question God, I hurled all my questions to a big black starless sky. I yelled really loudly. I scared the neighbors. He didn’t answer a single one. But at the end of the night, I knew He loved me.

I sat inside my bedroom, curled up behind the door with tears falling. A close friend had just committed suicide. Why? I asked God. No answer, but I knew He was crying too. He loved her more than I did. And from those and other experiences, I figured I didn’t know the answers, but if God loved me, and if He loved everyone else as much as He loved me, then the rest could be figured out later.

I believe there is a hell. I wish I didn’t. I believe there is a lot about hell I don’t know. I also know that God is just. And each person will be judged, punished, and rewarded. Justly. Perfectly. The exact right amount. The exact right amount of time. Yeah, that is scary. And not just for people who don’t call themselves Christians. For all of us. I want the people I love—and that should be everyone—to be happy. It is my default position. And I know the way they can be happiest is with Jesus. So I tell them about Jesus. Because it works. Now. Later. In between.

"Jesus invites everyone to jump. And saying yes to the invitation doesn't mean we have to have it all figured out...I can jump and still have questions and doubts. I often meet people who are waiting to follow God until they have all their questions answered. They will be waiting a long time, because if we knew everything, we'd be...God. A Christian doesn't avoid the questions, a Christian embraces them. In fact, to truly pursue the living God, we have to see the need for questions. Questions are not scary. What is scary is when people don't have any. What is tragic is faith that has no room for them...a question by its very nature acknowledges that the person asking the question does not have all the answers...they are looking outside themselves for guidance. Questions, no matter how shocking or blasphemous or arrogant or ignorant or raw, are rooted in humility. Questions bring freedom. Freedom that I don't have to be God and I don't have to pretend that I have it all figured out. I can let God be God."—Rob Bell

God: “The flower is for you.”

Me: “Thank you. I don’t want to pick it. I want to let it live.”

“It is going to die.”

“Then why did it live?”

“To be beautiful to you.”

“I am going to die--why do I live?”

“To be beautiful to me.”

I walked out the door. No sane thought in my mind except the desire for solitude. Pain was pulsing, screaming for release. I wanted to hit something to destroy it, to hurt physically in hopes of bleeding the inward pain dry. Nature mocked my pain, saying I was too weak to contain my rage. That I would let it go, walk in, and sit back down to the zombie life of doing what I was told, feeling some resemblance of happiness, and calling it a day. I lashed out at the soccer goal, punching it once for every pain, every thought, every fear. I sat down exhausted.

She came out, walking determinedly toward me. I was annoyed. Why couldn't they let me alone? They were too strapped to their fears of safety to let me have a moment of sanity and clear my thoughts. She picked me up and held my arm tight. I was not getting loose and we both knew it. I didn't want to talk, and I certainly didn't want to do it in a different language. I don't remember what she said. I don't remember what I said, but it explained what I was thinking.

She didn't let me go. She walked me around, leading wherever she wanted. My feet moved without me willing them. Tears came. The problems melted to the background and it was just me. Why couldn't I do more? Why couldn't I change things? Why aren't my prayers working? What is wrong with me, am I defective? Is there some problem with me that I am oblivious to? That I don't even realize is holding me back? And worse, if the problem isn't me, then is it God? I'd rather blame myself than doubt Him, because then I feel doubly guilty. So does God care? Does He want me to do penitence until I've been correctly punished? Is He waiting to step in so everyone sees how great He is and until then we can just gasp and writhe in our pain?

We continued walking around until my sobs subsided. I was left with a dull headache and the desire to get my contacts out before they became glued to my eyes. No answers. No solutions. No new knowledge. I told her I felt better. Somehow, without hearing from God, without anything, I knew God was still God and I didn't have to stand up for Him. I didn't have to understand Him. I didn't even have to believe Him. He is who He is and somewhere in my tears I inadvertently took the cares of my heart and threw them, irreverently, at His feet. He took them from me. Now I could sleep.

“There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven, but more often I find myself wondering whether, I our heart of hearts, we have ever desires anything else.” --C. S. Lewis

Somewhere along the way, I began to see that God was God no matter what. That He does not need me to stand up for Him. He does not need me to read my Bible and pray and go to church. He does not need me to make this relationship work. It is not my responsibility to make it work.

I wanted to test it. I put my Bible on the shelf. I hid in my room and did not go to church. I pushed the boundaries and looked at Him with all the rebellion I could muster and said "I dare you to walk away. To punish me with silence. To get mad and say you do not love me anymore. To give up on me."

Something in me was scared He would. I wanted to make it happen fast to get it over with so I could shut down everything and never be hurt again. But God didn't leave. He didn't give me the

silent treatment or make me do penance. During those times were some of the sweetest moments...after I had yelled at God, the words of hate rolling around my tongue. And that made me even more scared because then I loved Him even more and it would hurt even more if He left me someday.

I don't know how I came to see that that day was never going to come. Somewhere, I finally understood that He loves me before I ask. Not because of what I do, but just because He chose me. It is a no-strings attached deal. I cannot pin Him down. I cannot control Him or make things go my way. You can't make bargains with God.

It is the ultimate relationship--I never have to worry about rolling over in bed and finding that He is not there, or that pit stomach feeling when He is struggling or hurting and I cannot help him or do anything to solve it. It is not my responsibility to cheer him up or have an answer. He is mine and I am His and that is a commitment in itself. A commitment bigger than me. A commitment that won't break even if I do.

"You're gonna need a bigger boat" –Jaws

You have a God-hole inside you. This capacity that is so beautiful and deep that it makes me cry to think it isn't being used. I shouldn't play favorites, but I have. And you are mine. Many of my arguments with God have been about you. Why couldn't He touch you and make everything fit? And I was mad at you too. Why can't you just turn and look on His beautiful face? Lay it all down and walk away. Walk away and into the Greatness.

I don't know what is going on in your life. But I know that when things click with you and God, everyone will see it. The blast will shoot out in all directions and people will stop and look at the light and wonder. And I will see you glow in His brilliance and in His glory. I will see His face shine out from your eyes. I don't know how this will happen, but I know it won't be because of me. And though I would gladly spend my whole life trying, there are some places that only you and God can tread, and I am left behind.

I made many deals with God...that I would never question Him as long as He promised that one day you see. But God doesn't make deals. Sometimes He is the most silent on the things that are closest to our hearts. But I know that one day, I will hear from a friend of a friend a story about you. And I will know it has happened. And I will be happy.

I asked God how He could let me love you so deeply, when He knew we couldn't be together. He said that love was never wasted. Maybe all of my love for you was nothing more than to show you a little bit of how much God loves you. I haven't been a very faithful reflection of God's love, but I know you have seen pieces of Him through me, and I pray you will see more and more of Him until the memory of me is shattered and all that is left is Him and His consuming love for you.

"Do not follow where the path may lead. Go, instead, where there is no path and leave a trail." –
Ralph Waldo Emerson

I was 12 years old, sitting in the back of the church van when I overheard the conversation: *”Well, you know they are gay—and I don’t mean happy.”* Something hit my heart and I realized there was a world that I didn’t know existed. My knowledge of homosexuality grew over the next couple of years, mostly through conversations overheard, and mean-spirited jokes. Then the rumor that a neighbor was gay. A friend of a friend. Then my friend.

I was thrown into confusion. What should I do? What was my responsibility? How could I help? I just wanted to give him a hug and let him let it out. While I listened to a friend share her struggle, thoughts scrambled around my head: “How could this be? How did she allow this to get like it is? It is wrong—I need to say it is wrong! But she know, she knows.” But as I sat and listened, those thoughts got more distant.

I struggled in myself. I saw the pain so strongly. I saw the attempts to do better and the condemning failure and guilt that permanently crippled. I wrestled with questions like “When does the person go from being tempted with homosexual thoughts, to being gay? When does the liar stop being a liar? When he stops lying? So do you stop being gay when you stop gay-ing? Or what about the prostitute? Is she no longer a prostitute when her shift ends? Or when she gets a new job?”

I studied all the Bible verses. I tried to explain them away. I fought with God. In the people I knew, homosexuality was not something they chose. They did not sit down and say “I want to be attracted to the same sex.” On the contrary. It was something they constantly fought and tried to get away from. One friend finally stopped fighting. Then I had more questions “If you say you are gay, does that mean you have given up? You are not going to struggle anymore? You are embracing your sin and saying that that is who you are? Your identity?”

That friend looked me in the eye and said *“Do you think I want this? This...thing that that makes me hide who I am from those I love the most? Do you think I would choose something everyone hates—for the heck of it? No, I am doing the best I can with what I have been given.”*

It came down to the question of do I believe that God permits temptations/sins that cannot be overcome? Can I look someone in the face, someone who says they are gay and has gone through more pain and trouble and confusion and struggle than I can imagine, and say that God won't allow sin that cannot be defeated? I don't know. But I can tell them they can be forgiven and made new. Clean. And for that moment, that is enough.

Really, I was asking God “Who are you?” I wanted to know Him and I wanted to know that He was good. And that no one is doomed. That somewhere, there is always a chance. That there is always an option not to sin. Somewhere. At one church service I finally heard something that helped. And the pastor didn't quote Judges. Or Exodus, or 1 Corinthians. He simply said *“Jesus wasn't afraid to forgive the prostitute. He also wasn't afraid to tell her to go and sin no more.”* That's where it's at.

My friends know what is right and wrong. It doesn't need to be stated again. But what needs to be remembered is that hope is there, because forgiveness is always there, and is always beautiful.

And Someone willing to forgive all the time also gains the power to say what is wrong and needs to be forgiven.

And it doesn't make the struggle go away. Maybe one day it will, but maybe it won't. And maybe one day I will understand it more, and maybe I won't. But I am learning. And I love my friends—gay and straight. All of them. I have my struggles and they have theirs. And we still love each other. Because the Bible tells me so.

I don't want my little brother to learn about homosexuality through crass jokes made by the boys behind the church. I don't want him to be one of those making the jokes. I want him to be the one who reaches out to the new boy with the pink shirt. And the one who reaches out to the one with the blue shirt. I want him to know that God forgives, and God loves. I want him to know that *“Jesus wasn't afraid to forgive the prostitute. He also wasn't afraid to tell her to go and sin no more.”*

I want him to know that it is okay to not have all the answers and to not understand everything, but to trust that God is still good. I want him to have gay friends and straight friends and lying friends and stealing friends and friends that sleep around—because that is life, and you cannot hide from it. But I also want him to know God and be broken by the sin and the pain, in his own life and in those around him and desire to be clean and forgiven and to be transformed into the image of Christ. I want him to know that Jesus is the only answer for him, those struggling with homosexuality, and for the world.

““What do you want?” It's all I ever asked, and the only thing she never knew.” –Anna Winzeler

How often do I sit still with myself? 16 minutes a day. On a good day. Less, if you count distractions. If you count where I look to find whatever is buzzing, or remember that I didn't call so and so back. In 16 minutes I might be able to be quiet enough to let the door open and the fresh air to come in. On a good day.

The door. The escape. The thoughts that go down the rabbit hole and explode into colors. Where I take off the filters and don't care about naughty words or hidden meanings. I stare at it full on, until my eyes water. Blunt honesty. I am scared of what might be there. Scared of myself. I spend so much time trying to be strong and sure. I can hide from those 16 minutes, but I can't hide from myself. So there is the loving gift of technology: distraction. I am resourceful enough to keep busy so I don't have to look at what is going on inside me.

Like any good road, there is a ditch on either side. The fear of the discovery that all the horrible stuff I thought I had the ability to do is reality, and the fear of the discovery that all the dreams and desires I wished I had the ability to do are true. That second fear may be stronger and worse than the first.

“It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us. Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate—our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... We were born to make

manifest the glory of God that is within us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.” —Marianne Williamson

Any time I feel glow-y it scares me because I never know when it will run out. And I don't know how to bring it back. And what if I am never glow-y again? Will I still be special? Will I be able to help anyone? Will I still be me? If I don't know who I am, who will tell me? If they tell me, are they really telling the truth? The world too busy with bigger problems than to pamper my continual search for self.

And then I find it in someone else: the glow. The magic. The inspiration of candles in the bottom of beer bottles or homemade coloring books. The dance of elegance or the words misaligned to perfect disarray: I want it. I was captivated by the Capoeira dancer: the hours he put into learning, perfecting, molding, and being. He created beauty in movement. But it wasn't Capoeira I wanted—it was the beauty. The skill. To be uniquely good at something.

My nitch. The corner where I am queen. I haven't found it yet. I majored in general studies: a whole lot of a little bit of everything. And I want it all. A mile long and an inch deep. Yuck. I study something with all the energy of a new crush, fawning over it—my marvelous new idea. Then it gets more complicated, requiring more than I am willing to invest, and I drop it into the recycle pile that goes out tomorrow.

“If I traded it all, if I gave it all away for one thing--just for one thing. If I sorted it out, if I knew all about this one thing, wouldn't that be something.” –Finger Eleven. But that would be putting all my eggs in one basket. And we all know that bread falls butter side down. Nothing will stick. Am I old enough now to need to just hunker down and make it work? I never want to hunker down.

It is easier to call on one of many distractions, and ask them to idly chat through my 16 minutes, than to actually listen. Than to risk the complication of what I might find if I took the time to look inward and see what is ticking. I don't want to find that I am only just pretending.

"When you are desperate or even angry, there is at least a shred of hope that things might be different. a holy discontent. But despair is what happens when you are tired of being desperate."
--The New Friars by Scott Bessenecker

I am learning the power of a dream. Not the sleeping dream, but the life-calling, deep desire kind of dream. When I came to Brazil I had a general idea of what God had for my life. Something to do with helping people, counseling, teaching...That is what I love--to see people change, to see results, to see progress.

Coming to Brazil has taught me that there is more than one way to use time wisely. Sometimes it is not about counseling two people a day and writing a paper. Here I could not do that. I found myself in a world where I had no talents. I mean, even making macaroni and cheese scared me because the ovens are different, the milk is different, the butter is different...my cooking skills were reduced to nada along with everything else.

Now I was the extra person added to the mix, instead of me making up the mix. This meant that my version of using time wisely was not applicable, because it was worthless here. To tell the truth, I sat around a lot. I waited. Plans changed and I would be gone and have nothing to do or I would think I would do something and wouldn't, or it was delayed. I found myself not being busy—and feeling guilty and wasteful.

It was the dream of Brazil that brought me back. When I say dream, I mean the reason why God made me. The dream He dreamed for me. It is this dream that makes me see life in a new light. It is this dream that made me realize that I am different. It is this dream that helps me think before I act, that helps me remember my life is not my own. It is the dream that refuses to let me settle for normal or second best. It keeps me from being lost in the moment and remember eternity.

There is something about knowing that I am not just a bump in time, and that my life is not going to be wasted, that thrills my soul. Knowing that God and all He is took the time to KNOW me, and then to create a beautiful purpose for me, is the best, most fulfilling thing ever.

"It is the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting." –Paulo Coelho

I am going to have to forget, aren't I? I had a dream somewhere between when I woke up and when my alarm was supposed to go off. I went to a wonderful place within a place, and felt things and learned things and overcame my fear of murky water. Everyone else was asleep, and would not remember this place when they woke up. I knew I had to go to sleep too. So I looked at my friends and said "I am going to have to forget, aren't I." And then a nod and a dream and I wake up in a cold room, trying not to move because I know as soon as I do it will all fade away. Why do I always have to forget? Why can't I stay awake?

"I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairytales but has since been ratified by the mere facts." --Chesterton

I present the good me on my blog. Darn it. Because my parents read it. And relatives. Older, wiser people who look at me and say "You know Rachel, that might not be appropriate." I go and hide somewhere familiar when that happens. Like when I complain about having to do things or sink into impressing people or write egotistical "Please look at me" things. Or worse: when people really think I have it all together.

I want to close my eyes and make all the problems go away. I want to tell everyone that now is just not the time—am too full of issues to deal with more—maybe they should take a number and wait in line. They are hurting, smile while draining, wondering how to get through the day. I have my own problems and feel bad I even notice them with so many more serious problems around.

I just want to know I am irreplaceable. That I am special enough to have a space just for me that no one else can fill. That it is worth getting up in the morning. That sweating and running and grinning and looking people in the eye and going the extra mile and doing things right when no one is looking...adds up to something. I long for someone I respect to stop and notice me,

putting their hand on my shoulder and say, “you did well. I saw that. It made a difference. Keep going.”

I want the feeling of my wet tears sliding out of my eyes and gathering on the rim of my glasses to last. Of being tangled up in two blankets and my brother and still being cold as he wiggles around and jumps up every time the movie gets exciting. Of watching the “Little Prince” and my heart hurting and pounding out for someone to tame me. Of hugging the little boy beside me and being glad I can hold him for just a little bit longer.

My God, I know nothing. Must I experience every little thing before I understand anything? And then, is it just waiting to be proved wrong again? I feel bad about singing songs that are not called Christian or liking books by Anne Lamott who enjoys writing bad words. I feel bad about wanting things I know I shouldn't have or spending \$20 on a journal when there are so many starving kids. I feel bad about being inspired by the movie “Fight Club” and being bewildered at the great big world. About getting along people who are bad more than people who are good, or thinking they make more sense.

I don't want to be stuck here, in a set of rules. But I am scared. I don't want to fall into the other side of the ditch either: tattooing is so permanent. I don't want to do something just because I have the opportunity. I want to see what is there before me, make a choice and go after it with no regrets. I want to make the opportunity. To hear the voice of God and never falter until I have reached it.

“All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.” Ernest Hemingway

“You are 67% normal” says the Facebook test. Apparently, not everyone agrees with me that life as we know it would be better with ice cream. I laugh when I say this now, but it wasn't always like that. I used to want to score 100. There was a way that things were supposed to be done, and I was going to follow that plan. And then God laughed.

Most of us have heard of “the plan:” Go to school. Get good grades. Turn 18. Go to college and four years later graduate and feel really good about it being over. It didn't work that way for me. In fact, it didn't work that way for most of us. Life happens. You learn things. The plan changes. Whoopi Goldberg said, *“Normal is nothing more than a cycle on the washing machine.”*

After nine years, five different colleges in two different countries, with various credits in various subjects all over the board, I went to IUPUI to finish. To write a new definition of normal that fit me. A finisher. An achiever of my objectives. A definition that says it is normal for me to attain my goals and celebrate a job well done.

Like all good lessons in life, they are meant to be applied liberally and eaten with ice cream. My journey required learning that being 67% normal was just a number, and that I was in charge of writing my own definition of normal. The challenge for us all is to take the definitions we have written about ourselves, about what our normal is, and bring it into the world with us.

Someone told me that if it is worth doing, it is worth celebrating. We have done it, and so now let us celebrate. Life doesn't always give us opportunities to stop and enjoy what we have done—it is a decision we have to make to take the time to do. But right now we have our moment with Pomp and Circumstance. Remember it, treasure it, repeat it. Often.

"I did not ask for success. I asked for wonder." --Abraham Joshua Heschel