



Following Jesus Through the Eye of the Needle: Living Fully, Loving Dangerously
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“This wonderful book is as much about faith and commitment and service and love and love of service as it is about the author and about Haiti. Please read it. You will be uplifted and you will be inspired, but most of all you will enjoy it.”

—Edwidge Danticat, author of *Brother, I’m Dying*, *Breath, Eyes Memory* and two time National Book Award finalist.



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Desire

I want a Burger King bacon double cheeseburger. I want U2’s *Achtung Baby* blasting my eardrums. I want to drive—as fast as I want, no potholes, windows down, turning where I please. I want to rent two new releases, grab some chips and salsa and a pint of Ben & Jerry’s to fritter the night away. I want to pick up the phone and talk with my sister or brother. I want lightning-speed Internet. I want to nap on an ergonomically designed pillow with the air conditioner blasting frigid relief over me. I want to wander down to the bookstore to pick up the latest hardback by my favorite novelist. I want to listen to *Mike and the Mad Dog* on New York City sports talk radio. I want an SUV, four-by-four. I want five hundred channels beaming through my satellite. I want to meander along paved streets lined with gorgeous cherry blossoms. I want a job that I’m good at and recognized for. I want to eat dinner at our friends’ place, afterward moving to the living room to have another glass of wine and talk till midnight. I want to lose myself in competition, basketball or racquetball or chess or anything. I want. I want. I want.

We’ve been living in Woshdlo for four months. Yesterday afternoon that occasional hollow, palpable ache opened in my chest—the ache that isn’t healed by anything in the above paragraph but is certainly soothed by all of it.

I felt kind of helpless and impotent, a little lonely. I didn’t know what to do or why it should be done, even if I should find something to do. Moving across cultures this thoroughly means leaving behind many legitimate pillars of support, like relationships and language. It also means leaving behind the culture and convenient escapes that are so reliably useful to numb the mysterious ache that, for me at least, points toward God via the reality that life is disappointing and painful and incomplete.

Things on the above list aren’t all bad. But part of why I looked forward to moving to Haiti is because I hate how easy it is to satiate my hunger for God and for good and for love by stuffing my appetites with food, with entertainment, with ambition, with stuff. How easy it is to fill the echo chamber that calls me toward God and good and love with other clanging noises. The absence in Haiti of choices to feed this profound hunger is unpleasant . . . but I need it. I’m too often too weak to hunger for good (or, to be more biblical, to seek the kingdom of God) and to pull away from the dancing lights that have embarrassing power over me, like over a mindless, fluttering moth.

. . . Before we left the United States, I listened to NPR, avoided most TV and drove a Honda CRX with more than 200,000 miles on it. But desires are easily tossed by the winds of consumption. Before the flight to Haiti, a small part of my brain was occupied with when and how to see Leo DiCaprio’s two new Christmas movies. I was disappointed about not

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CUT

BOOK EXCERPT



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getting a promotion—and would have welcomed the accompanying (albeit minimal) recognition and raise. I awaited each new episode of *The Sopranos* and didn't mind appearances of Adriana, with those legs, those skirts. I drank sixteen ounces of Dr. Pepper at two o'clock every afternoon.

Now I'm eating beans and rice or plantains every day. I don't own a bike—let alone a car—and though I'm still rich by Haitian standards, I'm earning a tenth of my previous salary. Neither super-sizing nor upgrading nor celebrity nor promotions have flitted across my brain.

Economic deprivation, as faced by the majority of Haitians, is not, of course, an alternative to consumer culture that I would choose for anybody. Coaxing enough food for your family from a small plot of depleted soil in Woshdlo, let alone slum dwelling, is not a romantic return to the Garden of Eden or "simplicity." But as an expatriate here, I have breathed more deeply since escaping the cynical, distracting pull of marketing. Stepping out of the dizzying whirlwind of false needs and false promises is, of course, possible in New York, Minneapolis, Vancouver or Austin. People are doing it. But it's harder there—hard to even realize the sheer force of what you're caught in—than here.

. . . Being pushed to my limits in every way brings back Jesus' question to the rich young man. I've answered in part but still feel like I'm being asked, "What are you willing to give up?"

So you gain everything by losing everything. What does that mean in real life?

There are plenty of people peddling definitive theoretical, self-help and theological answers. It's the personal answers that are more interesting—and demanding—though. Really personal. What am *I* willing to give up to follow Jesus and to help others? Things that make life comfortable. The little and big lies (mostly to self and some to others) that make getting through the day easier. There's money, of course, and all it buys. There's being successful, being hip, being right, being good, being respected. There are ambitions and lust.

These days, whether living around the corner from a Burger King or living here, where the nearest bacon double cheeseburger seems a million miles away, I think part of the answer is another pair of questions: What is in the way of my loving more? And what am I *going to do now* to starve this desire—so I can hunger for something better?

—Taken from chapter three, "Giving Up and Finding"



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